Summary

15 years after the events of RotS, Darth Vader discovers a way to time travel backwards through the Force, to the moment in his past he most regrets. This creates an alternate timeline where he has the opportunity to change his and Padmé’s tragic fate. But reliving the past and making a new future will prove to be no easy task, and the sins of the father will have lasting effects on the next generation. (AU from Mustafar onward. Ensemble PoV featuring Anakin, Padmé, Obi-Wan, Luke, Leia, and Mara Jade. Skywalker family focus with mild Anidala and LukeMara elements. Background Barrissoka. Rated T for violence and dark themes.)
I have seen what the darkness does.
Say goodbye to who I was. [x]

He half expected to die. He was willing to take the risk. But he didn’t know just how violent and disorienting it would feel and how impossible it would be to stop once it began.

He only knew that he was being ripped apart and put back together again over and over and that it was terrible, nearly impossible to endure, something that would have caused a lesser man to succumb to the darkness and become one with oblivion.

It was dreaming. It was waking. It was endless pitch black. It was the harsh light of a thousand suns.

It was nothing he could have prepared himself for and nothing he could have described if someone had asked him to recount it later. It was something—and nothing—like traveling through hyperspace without a spaceship. Violent and disorientating and surely, supremely fatal.

It was death. It was life. It was the self coming undone.

And then…

He was in hell, fire all around him, the air a choking hotness that burned his suddenly unprotected hair and skin and lungs.

It was over. It had just begun.

Was he alive?

Had tampering with the Force in such an unnatural way killed him? Was he, after all, just a lesser man?

The shock of breathing through his own lungs… a long forgotten sensation… was almost enough to convince him that he was indeed dead. It took a few confused gasps to understand that his respirator was no longer there, was no longer feeding him oxygen—that he was doing this all on his own.

He was not dead. He wasn’t in hell—no, he was on Mustafar.

And Padmé was standing before him.

Was she real? He had seen her face so many times in dreams, cursed dreams he could not avoid no matter how many different ways of suppressing them he tried. He could hardly believe that this mad attempt had worked and he was looking at the real Padmé, not just another fever induced dream.
Many different things were converging on him all at once. The sight of his long dead wife. The oppressive heat of Mustafar, its volcanic atmosphere churning around him and the hot air touching his skin. (His skin!) The feeling of being in a different and foreign body – no, not a foreign body. HIS body. The one he had lost all those years ago. Blood flowed through his limbs instead of electrical charges and he could feel the light touch of his Jedi tunic rather than the suffocating seal of his life support suit.

The Force seemed to have all but deserted him.

He found himself struggling just to remain standing. His legs felt so different, so wrong, after teaching himself to balance on prosthetics for so many years. Intense exhaustion hit him like a hammer to the heart and he staggered a little before tenaciously holding onto his equilibrium. Was this really his younger body? He didn’t remember it being so… weak?

Padmé was speaking to him but couldn’t hear what she was saying. Couldn’t focus. Blood was rushing through his head like a thousand beating hearts churning up a maelstrom inside his veins.

The Force was most definitely gone, though. Had he depleted it with his attempt to revisit the past? It was true that he had called upon every ounce of Dark Side power he could muster to himself in order to accomplish the feat. The last thing he could remember before hurtling through the pseudo-hyperspace was a feeling of immense power assaulting him. The last thing he could remember was the realization that he had no control over what would happen next.

Padmé’s voice finally broke through his tumultuous consciousness.

“Stop! Stop now, come back! I love you!”

That’s what she was saying. And he’d heard it so many times, over and over, tormenting him. That’s what she almost always said in his dreams. Come back. Come back to me. So this was a dream, then, wasn’t it? He had failed. He was dreaming of that moment again, dreaming of that horrible sickening moment when everything had finally toppled in upon him and he had realized that he was going to lose Padmé. Not to death. It was that she had turned against him. That she didn’t love him anymore because of what he had done (for her!) and that she had sided with Obi-Wan against him.

Obi-Wan.

Anakin looked past Padmé’s haunting, tearful face and saw Obi-Wan standing in the hatch of the Nubian cruiser. His hands were placed sanctimoniously on his hips as he glowered with all the wrath of the Jedi Council down at his former Padawan.

It had been a long, long time since he’d seen Obi-Wan. The last thing he could remember about his former master was his face, twisted in agony as he screamed, “You were my brother, Anakin! I loved you!” The past tense. Then Obi-Wan had proved how in the past those feelings were and had turned, walking away while the flames consumed Anakin. It was a memory that was seared into his ruined flesh forever.

Or at least, that had been the case with Darth Vader.

Perhaps this was real, after all.

Obi-Wan strode down the gangplank, calling, “Padmé! Get away from him!”
Anakin knew that in the past, in another life, he had snapped and begun to choke his wife. Right now he could barely stand upright and his thoughts were not on silencing Padmé’s lies as she claimed to love him but on the fact that he hadn’t prepared at all for this moment. And he should have. He should have known that this was the moment he would find himself reliving.

For years he had thought about it and wished that he had not killed her. For this was the moment he killed her, according to Palpatine. It was true that he had felt her life force even after that moment, but the violence had been too much for her and she had succumbed to death while he was on the operating table. She had slipped away then and he had felt it, but he knew, and Palpatine knew, that it was this moment right now which had killed her. He had thought oh so wrongly that he was in control and that he had let her go before his grip could have possibly caused her lasting harm, but it had been too late. He had been wrong. It had killed her. It hadn’t been long but it had been long enough.

He understood now. This was what he had come back to stop himself from doing. Not to side with Mace Windu. Not to stay his hand when the younglings asked him what to do. Not to avoid going to Mustafar altogether. Not to redeem himself. But to save Padmé.

And now he was standing there and he was not killing her. He was succeeding purely through inaction. But in all the times he had wished he’d stayed his hand he had never looked beyond that moment and thought about time continuing to spin, Obi-Wan walking towards him, Padmé turning with an incredulous look and a shout of “No!” as Obi-Wan repeated his order that she remove herself from Anakin’s side.

And he hadn’t counted on being so drained of the Force from recently hurtling through time and space from the distant future that he feared toppling over and simply dying at any moment.

In the past he had screamed at Padmé, had accused her of being with Obi-Wan. Even though he had never doubted thereafter that Padmé had indeed come with Obi-Wan, leading him to Anakin in order to avenge the Jedi and her precious Republic, he had no desire to repeat his tirade now. It didn’t matter anymore. It hadn’t mattered for a very long time. He had spent years thinking that he would let Padmé kill him with her own two hands if only he could see her alive and well again.

Now, watching the two of them, he couldn’t quite convince himself that it was real. That they were back here, again, retracing those dance steps that had led to Padmé’s death and his own ruin. And now that he was doing nothing it was all changing, but the dance went on without him. He found himself watching Obi-Wan and Padmé with a curious detachment, as if this was merely a play-act. As if they were actors pantomiming a scene around the fire in the slave quarters on Tatooine. What would happen next?

“Padmé please, for your own safety, step away from him!” Obi-Wan said. He stopped at the bottom of the gangplank and divested himself of his robe, in that way he had always loved to do before a fight. “He is not who you think he is!”

“No! Obi-Wan, please!” Padmé did the opposite of his request, which surprised Anakin. She had been drawing away from him but now she rushed back, placing herself and her pregnant girth between him and Obi-Wan. Was she… protecting him? Anakin stared at her in shock. She had brought Obi-Wan to kill him, he had never doubted that, so why should she protect him now? Had she changed her mind when the moment arrived? Could it be that a part of her still cared for him, despite it all?

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“A sudden surge of irritation brought Anakin out of his stupor. Padmé’s care for him was surprising,
but his former master’s obtuse shouting of orders was not. So like Obi-Wan to tell him to “leave her of out this” when Anakin was literally standing there doing nothing. Truly, his old master was as predictable as he was sanctimonious.

“You shouldn’t have come here, Obi-Wan,” he said. His own voice caught him by surprise. He hadn’t heard it in years. He had almost come to think of the deep rumble of the vocabulator in his helmet as his, because when he tried to speak without it his words only came out in a hoarse whisper from his scorched throat.

He put his arm around Padmé’s slim shoulders. Touching her reinforced that this was real, this was happening, she was alive. He gazed steadily at the Jedi before him. “I don’t want to fight you.”

Obi-Wan looked vaguely surprised, but it was the truth. Of course Anakin did not want to fight – he was too weak. There was no way he could recreate that vicious duel of the past now, when the Force had all but deserted him and he was using every ounce of his strength to stay in the moment. He still didn’t feel at one with this body, his body. His spirit was tethered to it but loosely, like a visitor from another place (another time) and this was no time to tempt a lightsaber duel.

Not to mention, the last time he had fought Obi-Wan without adequate thought behind his actions, he had lost.

Oh, he had dreamed of a rematch with his former master for years. But that was as Darth Vader, with all the power of the Dark Side flowing through him. Whatever he was in this moment, he was feeling distinctly more Anakin Skywalker, weak and human, barely even a Jedi, than fearsome Sith Lord.

Obi-Wan might not give him a chance. This he knew. Kenobi had travelled all this way with the sole purpose of killing him. Last time, in that other lifetime, he had failed out of a sheer miscalculation. He had thought Anakin would burn to death in the lava and he wouldn’t have to strike the final blow. But now they were nowhere near the molten river, and if given half a chance, Anakin was sure Obi-Wan would drive his lightsaber through his heart.

At least I have saved Padmé, he thought. Saved her from myself. How bitter it would be to come all this way only to have Obi-Wan ruin everything (again) but at least Padmé would live. Their child would live. He would die with finality and would not have to live a half-life in a cage. He would never have to live without Padmé again.

Still, he didn’t want to die. Not really. Padmé was in his arms, proclaiming that she loved him, and that gave him a sudden, intense desire to live. Now that she was out of danger, why shouldn’t he live?

"Anakin," said Obi-Wan, crossing his arms. "I cannot let you walk away from here. Even now, Yoda is putting an end to your new master’s reign of terror. The Sith must be destroyed."

"Yoda will fail," Anakin said. "The Emperor will live."

It was a simple fact, one that he knew from having lived through the future. He did not particularly care if the Emperor lived, not anymore. In fact he had often thought that it would have been better if Master Yoda had succeeded. Then there would have been no one to “save” him from death. And now that he had a second chance at life with Padmé, the Emperor could only get in the way. But he had traveled back to this moment, not the one in which he could have ended Palpatine himself, so it didn’t matter. Nothing would change, the Empire would rise, if he were there to help or not. He had already done the worst he could do by helping to exterminate the Jedi. There was no one now who could overthrow Darth Sidious.
Obi-Wan couldn’t know that, of course, and his former master reacted about the way he expected. “You underestimate Master Yoda,” he said. “He will deal with Palpatine. I must deal with you.”

“Please, Obi-Wan,” said Padmé. She was shaking. “Please don’t do this.” She turned back to look up at Anakin. “Don’t fight him, Anakin. Please.”

Did she really think they could talk this out? He had killed so many Jedi. Obi-Wan would never, could never understand why, and so he would try to kill Anakin. Don’t force me to destroy you, Anakin had said to him in a former life. Now saying Please don’t destroy me seemed absurd. (I will do what I must, Obi-Wan would say, just as he had in that past life.)

“I’m sorry,” he said to Padmé, and gave her a gentle push away. So gentle, because he had once been so violent, and he was terrified of causing her death again despite it all. “I don’t have a choice.”

“Of course you do,” she said as he took a few steps away from her, keeping his eyes focused warily on Obi-Wan. “You always have a choice!”

“Stay out of the way, Padmé,” said Obi-Wan, in his kind yet condescending Jedi Master voice. “Go back to the ship.”

Anakin shed his own robe, letting it waft away from him in the stifling Mustafarian breeze, his eyes locked with Obi-Wan’s. But inside he was trembling, because his could barely move his legs. Such exhaustion! Where had it come from? Why did his young body feel ten thousand years older than even his wrecked and burned body had? Had he really been relying too heavily on the Force in those days that he was a weakling without it?

He vaguely recalled that he had not eaten or slept for days leading up to this fateful battle. He hadn’t been able to sleep for the nightmares and he hadn’t been able to keep down food or drink as his stomach roiled with the all the stress of fearing Padmé’s death, the council’s obstinacy, Obi-Wan leaving for Utapau without him, Palpatine’s whispers of the dreaded Dark Side being the only way to solve his problems. What a young fool he had been, in retrospect. Going into battle with nothing but the Force to keep him on his feet! Well now the Force was gone and he was paying for the foolishness of another lifetime.

Obi-Wan was still arguing with Padmé about returning to the ship. “He is a very great threat!” Obi-Wan told Padmé with desperation in his voice. Anakin laughed suddenly, a high and crazed sounding laugh which silenced both of them and made them stare at him.

“Obi-Wan,” he said. “You overestimate my power.”

And with that, he felt incredibly dizzy. He let go of his last vestige of strength. His vision darkened and the world around him became unreal, except for the warm certainty of the landing platform rushing up to embrace him.
Obi-Wan and Padmé watched as Anakin Skywalker laughed with a mad grin that slackened into unconsciousness before he toppled over like a droid which had suddenly been deactivated. Padmé cried out and instinctively rushed over to him, batting away the hand that Obi-Wan put out to discourage her.

She knelt over his inert form, touching his face, calling out his name. Obi-Wan could hardly believe what he had just witnessed. But then he could hardly believe anything he had witnessed over the past few days, from Cody shooting him down on Utapau to the dead younglings and security holograms that shattered his whole world in the Jedi Temple. Every certainty which had tethered him to reality had crumbled in a matter of days, surprisingly like Anakin had just crumbled to the ground.

He approached them cautiously, however, worried that Anakin (no, not Anakin, Vader) was playing at some kind of game. Or setting him a trap. The Sith so loved traps, and that’s what Anakin was now, wasn’t it?

He squatted down next to Padmé and reached out tentatively with the Force. Anakin seemed to be unconscious. Alive and breathing, but definitely unconscious.

“What is the matter with him?” Padmé asked breathlessly.

“I… don’t know,” Obi-Wan admitted. Perhaps the evil that had inexplicably consumed his young Padawan had finally overwhelmed him? But he didn’t think the Dark Side worked like that. After all he’d fought other Sith and Dark Side users many times and he’d never seen Maul, Dooku, or Ventress collapse suddenly and without provocation.

“Don’t hurt him,” Padmé said, covering her lover protectively with her small body. Obi-Wan looked at her mutely, wondering how she could think that he would murder anyone – and Anakin especially – in cold blood while they lay unconscious.

“I don’t want to kill him, Padmé. He is like my brother. But don’t you see? He has sided with the Sith, he has chosen evil over me, over you. I heard you talking with him. You know now that I was speaking the truth. And he didn’t deny it.”

“I know, I know, I know,” Padmé cried, new tears running down the same dried paths of earlier distress on her cheeks. “But I love him, Obi-Wan! He’s my husband, the father of my child, I want to save him. I want him to come back. I can’t let you kill him.”

"I'm not going to kill him," Obi-Wan thought. He knew that he should, but he knew that he wouldn’t. Not unless Anakin gave him absolutely no other choice. Maybe not even then. But she didn’t see that. He might be insulted if he were not so sad. She must believe something of Palpatine’s twisted lies about the Jedi being ruthless traitors seeking to bring down the Republic if she thought he would kill his fallen brother where he lay.

"Padmé," he said as gently as he could. "I won't kill Anakin. But I can't let him return to the
Emperor's side, should Yoda fail. Even if Yoda does manage to defeat Palpatine, Anakin has done a
great many terrible things. And I don’t know if we can imprison a Sith indefinitely.”

He paused, put a hand on her shoulder. “Do you understand?”

“Yes. And no,” she said, stroking Anakin’s face with gentle care. She refused to look at Obi-Wan.
“What do you plan on doing with him?”

Obi-Wan put a hand to his chin and surveyed Anakin thoughtfully. Yoda may have said that his young Padawan was gone, consumed by Darth Vader, but the boy lying on the ground before him looked just like Anakin did when he allowed himself to sleep after a battle with Separatists. Exhausted. Young. Only in sleep would his stubborn insouciance relax into something like the child Obi-Wan had first met.

“It depends on how long he remains unconscious,” Obi-Wan said, forcing himself to assess the boy with as objective a mind as he could. When he focused on Anakin’s current condition, he could do that. “He seems to have passed out but appears uninjured. I don’t know what has caused his sudden collapse.”

“He needs help,” she said with conviction. “You must let me take him to a medcenter. If you don’t he may die, and that would be the same as killing him.” She fixed him with a reproachful, senatorial stare.

He sighed. “Padmé, the Jedi are wanted criminals now. Enemies of the Empire. I can’t show my face in a medcenter.”

“Then help me get him to the ship, and I will take care of the rest,” she said.

“I can’t let Anakin out of my sight. I can’t let you be alone with him. He may harm you.”

“Anakin would never harm me,” Padmé said, balling her hand into a fist. He could tell that he had somehow insulted her.

“Padmé, you don’t know that. A day ago I would have said Anakin could never harm a youngling, but I’ve seen him do it with my own eyes. We are in uncharted territory. You have to come to terms with the fact that Anakin is no longer the man you loved.”

“I still love him,” Padmé said. “I believe you now that he’s done terrible things. He practically admitted it. But I’ve loved him for three years, you can’t expect me to turn my feelings around in one moment. I’m not a Jedi.”

He heaved another sigh. “I’m a Jedi and even I can’t do that,” he thought. But he felt that he must remain resolute in front of Padmé. Her love for Anakin could lead him straight back into the possession of his new master, and that could absolutely not happen.

“We’ll get him on the ship,” Obi-Wan said. He didn’t promise anything more, but Padmé’s eyes shone as she thanked him. He felt ashamed. Did she think he was doing it only for her? Padmé was a dear friend, but if she had argued leniency for anyone else he didn’t think he could have granted her wishes.

Anakin was absurdly heavy, even moreso as deadweight, and so Obi-Wan used the Force to float his inert friend over to the Nubian cruiser. C-3PO came tottering out of the ship, worrying about Master Ani and Padmé and tutting that they must leave this awful place. Anakin’s astromech came rolling along behind them, beeping in what sounded like distress. Obi-Wan had always fought against Anakin’s insistence towards humanizing the little droid, chalk ing it up to Anakin’s pathological need
for attachment, but even he could not hear R2-D2’s mournful sounds as anything other than concern for its master.

Once Anakin was on board, Padmé hovering solicitously over him, Obi-Wan went to the cockpit and thought about their predicament. Whatever was wrong with Anakin might be only temporary, and he would roar to life and try to fight Obi-Wan and escape. Obi-Wan had already confiscated his lightsaber, but Anakin was too powerful in the Force to be considered disarmed. On the other hand, Anakin might be in real danger and in need of medical attention. Where could they take him? If they went anywhere the clones were stationed they would be shot at on sight. They could head somewhere in the Outer Rim and hope the Emperor could not track them down, but finding a decent medcenter would prove difficult. And even in the Outer Rim there would be bounty hunters who would be eager to collect the reward on his head.

His musings were cut short when he received a transmission. It was Bail Organa.

Padmé sat with her husband, holding his hand in one of her own and stroking his forehead with her other hand. His face was sweaty under her fingers, his hair matted down, and there was dried blood in it. Some of the blood was not human.

“Oh, Ani,” she murmured. “What have you done?”

He had destroyed everything she held dear – everything she had thought they both held dear – and she still didn’t know why he had done it. He had told her back at her apartment that the Jedi were traitors, had tried to assassinate Palpatine in a bold power play, but she didn’t believe any of that. Not anymore. She had tried to believe it, because she had wanted to believe Anakin was telling her the truth, no matter how terrible the things he said. But now that she knew Palpatine was a Sith Lord and that Anakin had become one as well, she knew why the Jedi had tried to kill the Chancellor… no, Emperor. She had seen Palpatine seize final and complete control over the Republic, reshaping it into an Empire and had known him to be evil.

But she didn’t see evil when she looked at Anakin. Perhaps she should. But she only saw her husband. A husband who had done evil things, she understood on an intellectual level, but she was having trouble connecting the two facts. Evil deeds and evil doer. She knew that he had killed younglings, like Obi-Wan said, but she hadn’t seen it with her own eyes and still could not even imagine it. She knew Anakin was capable of sudden and frightening violence. He had admitted to killing the Tuskens, after all. But she had allowed herself to forgive that, to look past it, and though it shamed her at times to admit it to even herself, she had allowed herself to think of the Tuskens as not quite… real.

She would have time to think about this later. She did not know what this meant for their marriage. She had told Anakin truthfully that he was going down a path she could not follow, but even now she clung to the hope that she could convince him to leave that path. Repent for killing the Jedi. Come back to her, to their child.

But the future of their relationship seemed a moot point while Anakin was unconscious and Obi-Wan was in control. Despite Obi-Wan’s insistence that he wouldn’t kill Anakin, she worried that his loyalty to the fallen Jedi Order would override his attachment to Anakin and he would decide that executing her husband was the only option. Even if she could no longer remain by Anakin’s side and support his actions, she refused to entertain the notion that killing him was right.

“Padmé,” Obi-Wan’s gentle, accented voice interrupted her thoughts.

She glanced up. “Yes?”
“I have made contact with Bail Organa.”

“And?” Her spirits lifted just at the mention of Bail’s name. He was such a steady presence in her life and Senate career. He was a good friend to have at this trying time.

“I have good news and bad news.”

She waited patiently as he came over and sat down next to her. He eyed Anakin mistrustfully, then turned to her and said, “Yoda has failed to kill Palpatine. But, Yoda has survived. Bail rescued him and took him to Polis Massa. He thinks we should be safe there, and there is a medcenter there with droids who can… see to what is wrong with Anakin.”

“Did you tell him that Anakin… that he…”

“I didn’t mention it. But, Padmé, Yoda knows. You have to prepare yourself—”

“You won’t let Yoda harm him,” Padmé said firmly. She didn’t even want to take Anakin anywhere near the former head of the Jedi Council, because she doubted Yoda had the same affection for Anakin that stayed Obi-Wan’s hand. “Do we have to go there? Please, Obi-Wan, if you will just give me a chance… to… to….”

“To what, Padmé? Change Anakin’s mind? Convince him not to be a Sith?” Obi-Wan’s tone turned uncharacteristically bitter and he looked down at his unconscious Padawan. “It’s a little late for that.”

“It’s never too late. There’s still good in him, Obi-Wan. I know there is.”

Obi-Wan sighed. (It was all he seemed to do lately.) He rested his head in his hands, and Padmé felt guilty for her ungracious thought.

“You called him your husband,” the Jedi Master said after a moment. “I knew… something. I knew you were closer than the code strictly allowed. But I didn’t know you had married. When?”

She thought it was an odd change of subject, but she answered, “Just after the first battle of Geonosis. When he escorted me back to Naboo.”

He looked at her ruefully. “I had no idea,” he said. “I knew at the time that he wanted you to become involved, but I thought… I thought that you were…” he waved his hand helplessly “…I thought you would be more resistant to his advances.”

It was a shockingly open thing for Obi-Wan to say, and she blushed. Was this really the time for him to criticize her virtue, or whatever it was that he was implying?

"I was in love with him,” she said, failing to keep an edge out of her voice. “He was going off to war. I didn’t know when I would see him again. I didn’t know if he would die. I wanted… I wanted to be his wife. And if it came to it, I wanted to be his widow. Even if I was the only one who knew.”

“I’m sorry.” He looked visibly uncomfortable during her proclamation and when she finished he averted his gaze. “I only meant that I didn’t understand the depth of your relationship. Not entirely. Not even when I realized you were pregnant.”

She shook her head. It didn’t matter now. It wasn’t as if they had to hide from the Jedi Order anymore. Except that they did… “Must you take him to Yoda?” she asked.

He nodded. “Yoda will know what to do.”
The Anakin Awakens

I am a question to the world,
Not an answer to be heard
Or a moment that's held in your arms. [x]

He didn’t realize that he had slept without dreaming.

He just knew that as he came slowly back to consciousness, he was in a cool, dry place with the gentle hum of electronics whirring about him.

Anakin opened his eyes. He was in a sterile, white room. Dimly lit. It smelled of bacta and antiseptics. Clearly a medcenter. He had spent enough time in such locations to recognize it immediately. But it took him a few moments to adjust once again to the fact that he was no longer in his life support suit or his personal life support chamber. He was in his old body… his younger self. He was Anakin again….

He tried to sit upright and felt that he was restrained. His limbs were locked to the table where he lay. He lifted his head and looked around. There was a trickling IV above him, the cord running into his body via a needle in the arm. He sniffed suspiciously, wondering what was being pumped into him.

He reached out tentatively towards the Force. He felt a wave of relief wash over him when he felt its presence. It was there. It hadn’t abandoned him. It was still there.

His restraints were of little consequence once he used the Force on them. They fell away easily and he sat up. There was no one in the room with him besides a med-droid, but he had the uncomfortable feeling he was being watched nonetheless. There were large frosted transparisteel expanses in the room and he sensed life forms on the other side. It was probably a one way window; whoever was on the other side could look in at him but he couldn’t look out at them. He sensed Padmé was nearby, but couldn’t be sure if she was one of the life forms watching him.

“Please lay down,” the med-droid said in its robotic, soothing voice.

“Where am I?” he asked, inspecting the tube which was attached to a vein in his arm. He looked up at the bag filled with colorless liquid which dangled above his head.

“Please remain calm,” the droid said dispassionately. “You are suffering from dehydration and malnourishment. You must conserve your strength.”

He surveyed the droid with the sort of “calm” that usually made his subordinates quake in their boots. But the droid merely whirred towards him and said, “I will now assess your vital signs.”

“That won’t be necessary,” he said with a wave of his hand. The Force push sent the droid back a few feet, where it clicked disapprovingly.

“Sir—”

“Where am I?”

“Polis Massa Medcenter. Please do not remove your tube—”
“What is this for?” Anakin asked, holding the tube. He wanted to rip it out but hesitated, since whatever it was did not seem to be poisoning him. He felt much better than he had on Mustafar, though he was still tired and weak when he didn’t rely on the Force to bolster himself.

“You are receiving intravenous rehydration,” said the droid. “Our assessment indicates that you—”

“Alright,” he cut the droid short. He thought its ensuing beep sounded irritated. He pulled the needle from his arm. He didn’t need more rehydration. He needed to get out of there, wherever Polis Massa was. Because the last thing he remembered was Obi-Wan insisting he was a very great threat who needed to be neutralized.

As if on cue, a hologram of his former Jedi master flickered to life, emanating from a projector mounted against the wall. “Hello, Anakin,” he said, sounding deceptively calm, his arms crossed over his chest, hands hidden underneath his Jedi robes.

“Obi-Wan,” Anakin replied, guarded. He swung his legs over the edge of the hovering med-table but remained seated on its edge. The IV dripped onto the floor next to him. The med-droids had apparently removed his clothes and given him a pair of simple white pants. It made him vulnerable in this cold room which he now realized doubled as medbay and prison cell. But he tried not to show his discomfort, staring at the hologram with a mild yet defiant frown. The look he remembered giving Obi-Wan often when his master was questioning his abilities or repeating his favorite phrase that Anakin still had much to learn.

“Where is Padmé?”

(Is she safe? Is she… alright?)

The echo of that memory almost made him lose his composure. He looked down so that Obi-Wan wouldn’t see it.

(It would seem, in your anger, you killed her…)

“Padmé is resting. She is doing fine. Though, it has been a trying time for her.” Obi-Wan paused, then added, “She has been through quite a shock.”

“I want to see her.”

“I’m sure that you would,” said Obi-Wan, with his trademark dry dismissiveness.

Anakin knew that whatever lock they had put on the doors wouldn’t hold if he set his mind to it. Even without a lightsaber to cut through the durasteel (if this medcenter even had reinforced doors that couldn’t be opened with a flick of the wrist and a centered use of the Force) he would find a way. But it probably wouldn’t be wise to antagonize Obi-Wan at this point. Their duel on Mustafar that had now never happened was enough proof that his master was a force to be reckoned with and if it came down to it, they would have to tear apart this Polis Massa place much the same way that alternate Mustafar had been.

But he found himself not wanting to recreate the duel. Anywhere. He had Padmé to worry about again. She was still pregnant and vulnerable. A fight with Obi-Wan wasn’t the right move. He had to figure out a way to leave this place with his wife at his side. Getting into a fight would either result in his defeat or her displeasure. And wasn’t Padmé’s displeasure the same thing as defeat?

Obi-Wan looked to the side, then moved out of the range of the holocamera. In his place, a diminutive green being shuffled into view.
Now there was a being he hadn’t seen (or thought about, if he could help it) in a very long time. He’d known that Yoda survived the duel with Sidious in the senate all those years ago, but he had never found the old Jedi grandmaster. Not years, though, he corrected himself. It was surely only a matter of hours or days since that fight had happened. He would have to start living in this present again, and think of it as such, rather than the past. And that, apparently, meant dealing with Yoda.

He had never cared very much about finding Yoda for his master. Searching down and executing stray Jedi had been his main job in the years soon after the fall of the Order with the execution of Order 66. Well, he wasn’t going to do that again. Lucky Jedi, he thought. There were so many stragglers who had survived the initial purge only to fall by his blade. He didn’t care about them anymore. Unless Sidious found a new Jedi killer to replace him they could hide in peace.

He knew that was a naïve thought. Of course Sidious would find a replacement for him. And hunting down Anakin himself would now be top priority. He couldn’t imagine that Palpatine would take his sudden defection well. But he had no intention of returning to Darth Sidious now that he had Padmé back. The Sith Lord would not help her and she wouldn’t want his help.

Yoda was surveying him silently, he realized, as he had been sitting in thought. How strange. He had expected some rebuke for his behavior.

“Worry about your wife, you should not,” Yoda finally spoke. “More important matters, there are. Darth Vader.”

“Nothing is more important than Padmé,” Anakin said. He hadn’t realized until that moment how good it would feel to say such a thing to Yoda’s face. Well, holo-projection. He had spent so long trying to pretend that duty was everything and knowing that somehow Yoda saw through him and disapproved.

“Hmmmm,” Yoda said, as enigmatic as Anakin remembered him. But also a little puzzled? Perhaps he had expected to get a rise out of Anakin by using his Sith moniker.

“Destroyed your brothers and sisters, you have. Turned to the Dark Side. Joined with the Sith,” Yoda went on. All statements of fact. Was he expecting Anakin to deny it?

All those things had been true. Some still were: the things he could not change, because this time travel feat of his was not something he expected he could do twice.

It was not true that he still considered himself a Sith apprentice. He didn’t. Not anymore. He had willfully chosen to forsake his master when he decided to pursue the esoteric aspects of the Force that legends hinted at being able to manipulate time. He had spent many hours at the feet of his master, learning about the Dark Side, but had also delved into the forbidden Jedi archives that had once been closed to him. He’d known that time travel was useless to Sidious because everything was going so well for his master in the present. He had kept his studies a secret. He had decided that whatever rewards his life of servitude to Sidious could possibly offer were nothing compared to the prospect of regaining what he had lost. And Palpatine was the reason he had lost everything.

He had spent a lot of time blaming Obi-Wan. But it was Palpatine. It had always been Palpatine. The way his master gloated over having his full devotion had proved that to him. If Padmé had lived she could only have gotten in the way of their master/apprentice relationship. Sith apprentices didn’t have wives or children. How could he have thought he’d be the exception?

He didn’t know what had happened to his future self now that he had succeeded in rejoining and
replacing his younger self. Perhaps that Darth Vader had dropped dead on the spot. Perhaps he lived, thought that his attempt to alter reality had failed, and went on with his sad existence, going through the motions of ruling the galaxy with an iron fist in the name of Palpatine. Or perhaps that reality had crumbled upon itself and disappeared. There was no telling. And he didn’t really care. There was nothing about that reality that he was loathe to lose. No one who mattered to him.

When Anakin didn’t respond, Yoda leaned heavily on his gimer stick and shook his head. “Nothing to say for yourself, have you? Darth Vader?”

Drip, drip, drip went the IV solution onto the floor. It was starting to annoy Anakin, so he lifted the tube up and hooked it over the apparatus holding the bag. He did it purposefully, slowly, carefully. He wondered if Yoda was planning on killing him? Executing him that way Mace Windu had tried to kill Palpatine? If so, why allow the med-droid to care for him? He flexed his mechanical hand and marveled that it was the only one of his limbs he could designate as such.

“Palpatine will come looking for me,” he said, side-stepping Yoda’s remarks.

Yoda nodded. “Sure of that, I am.”

“What do you plan to do with me?”

“Do with you, what do you think we should?” Yoda asked. Maddening. Was he trying to provoke Anakin into a rage?

“I want to see Padmé,” he reiterated. “I’ll go find her if I have to. You can’t stop me.”

Yoda shook his head, muttering something that the holoreceiver didn’t quite pick up. The frosted effect on the transparisteel window pane dissipated, revealing four people: Obi-Wan, Yoda, Senator Bail Organa (curious) and Padmé. She put her hand up against the window and something like a smile crossed her face but did not reach her eyes.

He slid off the table and walked up to the window, putting his hand out to rest it opposite hers. “Are you alright?” he asked.

She nodded wordlessly, but tears glistened in her eyes. He could shatter the transparisteel if he wanted to, and even briefly thought about it, but then Padmé turned and walked towards the door.

They probably also realized that he could break out of the room if so determined to do so, because the door hissed open to let Padmé walk in. Anakin decided to play along, for the time being, because provoking a fight with not only Obi-Wan but also Yoda present would be supremely foolish. His younger self might have done it. But that’s how his younger self had ended up with four mechanical limbs.

Padmé came into the room. She had shed the jumpsuit she had been wearing on Mustafar and was now clad in a simple white dress, probably provided by the medcenter. She came to him and allowed him to embrace her, which still surprised him, because hadn’t she said that he had become abhorrent to her? That is how he always remembered things. Her shock and disgust when she realized that he had done all the things Obi-Wan had said, her backing away, telling him she would not remain loyal to him in the face of such transgressions.

“I was so worried about you,” she said now. “You collapsed. I didn’t know… I thought…”

“I’m alright,” he reassured her, as he had so many times during the war. *The Force is with me again.* He thought better of adding that part. She did not seem to react well to reminders of his power. He had thought at one time that reminding her how powerful he was and that he could save both her and
himself (and the whole galaxy) would help her come around to his way of seeing things. But it hadn’t.

They were still being watched. Anakin held Padmé close but looked over her head at the gawkers on the other side of the window. Senator Organa seemed appropriately uncomfortable and turned away. But Obi-Wan just stroked his beard and Yoda leaned on his gimer stick.

“Anakin,” Padmé said, pulling back so she could look up into his face. “I was checked out by the med-droids while you were sleeping…”

“And?”

She glanced over her shoulder quickly then back at him. “Obi-Wan didn’t want me to tell you, but…” she paused when he tensed at the mention of Obi-Wan, but he fought to remain calm, to not grip her arms with sudden force, and she continued “…they say that I’m having twins.”

“Twins?” he repeated incredulously.

She nodded quickly, then tears filled her eyes and spilled over.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, dread filling him. Had the droids told her something bad? Were the twins healthy? Was she alright? Was this the moment she would tell him of some horrible complication that would bring about his old vision of her death after all?

"What’s wrong?” she said, her turn to echo in disbelief. She pushed herself away from him and he let go reluctantly. “I need you now more than ever and you… you did all those terrible things… and I don’t know who you are from one moment to the next. What will happen to us now?”

“I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you safe, Padmé, you know that,” he said, sighing in frustration. If only she knew that he had lost her once. Never again!

“No, Anakin, no. That’s just the problem. I don’t want you do to ‘whatever it takes.’ I haven’t forgotten what you said about becoming powerful to save me,” Padmé said, her tears turning angry. “All that blood is on my head now… on… on our children’s heads! And you put it there!”

"Don’t say that.”

“It’s true, though. And I would rather die than have you kill for me. How could you think otherwise?”

All of this was about the younglings and other Jedi at the temple. The separatists. The things he had done to solidify his loyalty to Palpatine in hopes of learning the secret to immortality supposedly possessed by Darth Plagueis. Yes, it was true, he had done all those things in a desperate attempt to save Padmé from death. He had sacrificed the lives of many innocents at the altar of his nightmares.

He had not allowed himself to think about them for many years. He dreamed of them, still, of the screams of the dying, of the terror he felt from his victims through the Force. But as Darth Vader he had continued to kill yet more innocents and everything had begun to feel unreal. Alive, dead, everyone else felt the same to him. He had not luxuriated in guilt over long dead Jedi younglings for a while now. At one time he had. He had cried as he cut down the children, and also the separatists, because those were the beings who had not fought back. As he was killing armed Jedi such as Cyn Drallig he didn’t think of it as murder, he pretended it was a duel to the death with murderous traitors who would seize control of the Republic if he didn’t stop them. But the Dark Side had grown in him not as he fought Jedi Knights, rather when he felt disgust and horror at his own actions. That had been the Dark Side. The same way he had felt after killing the Tusksens in a rage. When he had killed
the unarmed Count Dooku. The more he had hated himself, the more powerful he had become in the darkness.

He shook his head. What could he do about those crimes now? He had already defied reality and used incredible power in the Force to travel back to the moment of his deepest regret. Obviously she would rather he regretted his other murders more than he had regretted killing her. But that was impossible. In his litany of regret, harming her had stood out from all the rest, and so that was the only moment he was allowed to revisit.

He wished now that he could go back to some earlier point before he had done the things that would turn her against him. She was right, he had smeared blood upon her head by murdering in her name. He couldn’t deny it. But he couldn’t change it, now.

“What do you want from me, Padmé?” he asked. “Are you leaving me?”

She shook her head, but averted her eyes. “I… I don’t know,” she said. “It depends on where you go, Anakin. You know this already.”

“What would I go?”

“Don’t try to go back to Palpatine.”

“What?”

“Don’t go back to him. There’s still time to make things right.”

“I’m not going back to Palpatine,” Anakin said, surprised that she still thought such a thing was under consideration.

Padmé nodded, something like happiness shining from her. “Good,” she said, “good.” She reached up to pet his hair in that way that had used to make him feel both happy and strangely like a dog. Padmé’s puppy. The thought resurfaced from a deeply buried memory, one full of laughter and teasing. “Stop all this talk of… of saving me and… ruling the galaxy. Stop using the Dark Side. I don’t want that. I never wanted that.”

All I want is your love…

Love won’t save you, Padmé. Only my new powers can do that.

“I’ll do anything you want, Padmé.”

Just please don’t leave me.

He looked up and noticed that at some point, the Jedi and senator had left. He wasn’t sure what that meant. Had they sent Padmé to him knowing that she could get him to do whatever she asked? He shook the paranoid thoughts away. Or tried to. Whatever Obi-Wan and Yoda had in mind for him he was beginning to doubt it was simple death. Otherwise they could have, and would have, executed him when he was unconscious and vulnerable. Unless they were planning some sort of trial? A mini-meeting of the Jedi Council, the last two members, putting their heads together for a tiny tribunal?

Seeming to sense his thoughts, Padmé said, “You’ll have to talk to Obi-Wan sometime, Anakin. With everything that’s happened…”

…everything you’ve done…
“I know,” he said. “I know.”

Part of him wanted to escape now that he seemingly had an opening. To run out of the medcenter, commandeer a spaceship, and fly somewhere no one would be able to find them. But he knew that Padmé would not come willingly. She was still on Obi-Wan’s side. It dug deep to know that Obi-Wan had found out he was going to have twins before he did. And had wanted Padmé to keep it a secret! That was telling. Obi-Wan must be hatching some kind of plan to take his children from him, even now. Well it wouldn’t happen. And right now the only way he could think to prevent the Jedi’s plot was to keep Padmé happy. Try to win her back to his side. And to do that he would have to play nice with his former masters.
He had put on a simple white medcenter tunic and draped his Jedi cloak over that, but he still felt cold here on Polis Massa. He had found out that they were actually on an asteroid, part of a field of several asteroids which had at one point been a planet. He was somewhat ashamed to not have known about Polis Massa before, particularly when he was Darth Vader and was hunting down Jedi, because apparently this was a hiding place far in the Outer Rim and he probably could have found a few there.

He had to stop thinking like that. Like Darth Vader, Jedi hunter, apprentice and servant of Darth Sidious. He wasn’t in the business of rooting out fugitives but in becoming one himself. Vader, the cybernetic wreck of a man didn’t exist anymore. He had left Mustafar behind and he would never burn there, never.

He sat down across from Obi-Wan, the man who had, in another life, destroyed him.

Padmé had come in at his side. She sat next to him, holding his hand. He was surprised and touched that she was showing him such support while the others looked on him with mingled distrust and, in the case of Senator Organa, thinly veiled disgust. Apparently the others had filled in the senator about his recent actions. Interesting, in that other life, Organa had been a member of the Imperial senate, and had not been found out as a traitor to the Empire. But here he was, harboring Jedi.

(Stop.)

“An unexpected meeting this is, Darth Vader,” said Yoda. Anakin looked at him, wondering again why he kept putting such emphasis on that name. Every time Yoda said it he had the stubborn impulse to ignore him, pretend that he didn’t know he was being addressed. He’d answered to “Lord Vader” for years but here, with Padmé by his side, Obi-Wan looking down upon him, the future memory of that man felt unreal. But Yoda would not stop reinforcing it, as if trying to convince him (or perhaps Padmé) that he was a dangerous Sith Lord.

Bail Organa cleared his throat.

“There is some concern about the Emperor finding this place,” he said.

Anakin shifted his gaze to the Senator, finding himself impressed that Organa was taking matters into his own hands even though Anakin clearly made him uncomfortable. He had never liked politicians besides Padmé and Palpatine, but he’d known Organa as a good friend of Padmé and many times during the Clone Wars had spoken to the man and been on good terms with him. As Darth Vader (another life) he had thought Organa didn’t know his true identity and so treated him as dismissively as he did other Imperial senators.

By that time the senate merely existed as window dressing and nothing they said affected him in any way. Organa’s daughter, he remembered (if you can remember a person who exists only in the impossible future) was a particularly annoying individual who managed to look down upon even a dark lord of the Sith with impudence and superiority. He had been allowing himself to look forward
to the inevitable dissolution of the Imperial Senate if only to imagine the bratty teenaged Organa being unhappy with being knocked down a peg or two. This at a time in his life when he looked forward to nothing. (But that life was no more, he reminded himself, and Organa’s daughter likely hasn’t even been born yet at this new moment in time.)

Focus! Why was it so hard to focus? Ever since he had come back to this time he kept getting lost in thought, mixing up his timelines and falling into memories that seemed distant but had actually just happened, from a certain point of view.

He squeezed Padmé’s hand to bring himself back into the present.

“Yes,” he said to Organa. Somehow it was easier to give the senator his attention than the Jedi. “He’ll be looking for me. For all of us. It goes without saying. He wants the Jedi dead, and, well, he won’t just sit back and take my desertion willingly.”

“Deserting the Emperor, are you?” Yoda asked. “Darth Vader?”

Anakin turned slowly to the small green Jedi, fighting the mounting wave of irritation which would turn into anger if he let it. The worst thing was that Yoda could no doubt sense his internal struggle no matter how composed he tried to behave. It had been a long time since he’d had to endure the scrutiny of the Jedi, only having to worry about his emotions when in the presence of Darth Sidious. And Palpatine had taken satisfaction in getting a rise out of his apprentice. No doubt Yoda was looking for a rise, as well, but the Sith Lord and Jedi Grandmaster had very different ideas of what Anakin’s anger meant. Or perhaps they didn’t. Both of them read his anger and thought: Sith.

Maybe he would always be Sith regardless of whether he wanted to or not. But Padmé didn’t want him to be Sith. To be Sith was to be without Padmé. It was as simple as that.

“Treachery is what the Sith do best,” Obi-Wan spoke, answering for him. There was weariness in his voice but also a hint of the acerbic tone he remembered his master using when taunting the likes of Count Dooku.

“My loyalty is to my wife,” Anakin said. “It always has been.” He glared at Obi-Wan pointedly. All he could think when he saw his master was Obi-Wan, speaking to Padmé behind his back, telling her everything Anakin didn’t want her to know; Obi-Wan, standing on the hill (You were my brother, Anakin, I loved you) while the flames consumed what was left of his body. Obi-Wan, doing what he must.

“Yes,” Yoda said. He and Obi-Wan exchanged glances. Conspiratorial, Anakin thought. “Many things made clear, have been. Your attachment to the Senator, aware we have been made, Darth Vader.”

Anakin released Padmé’s hand abruptly and stood up. The alarm in Obi-Wan and Bail Organa’s eyes was obvious, but Yoda just tilted his head and surveyed Anakin with that mild, probing gaze.

“That name means nothing to me,” Anakin said. “Please stop calling me that.”

“You new name, it is not? Given to you by your new Master, it was. Sith, you are. Sith, Vader is.”

“No,” Anakin objected. He waved his arm in an angry motion, before turning to pace away from the table. “I… I mean, not anymore. I don’t want to be Sidious’ apprentice. I don’t want to be Sith. I don’t want to be Vader!”

He stood with his back to the room, looking dully at the blinking red lights in the computer terminals mounted in the walls. “I never wanted to be any of those things,” he added quietly.
He had spent over a decade trapped in Darth Vader’s suit, in Darth Vader’s not-life. Kneeling before Sidious like the slave he was.

They couldn’t know that, of course. They couldn’t know or understand how long he had lived in punishment for turning to the Dark Side, killing Padmé, losing everything he had wanted to gain. To them, it had only been a matter of days. The pain he felt when he heard the name Darth Vader… the life that represented… that he had moved time itself to escape… this was not something he could tell them. What he had done to get back to Padmé had been of the Dark Side, just as much as his initial turn. How ironic. If he had never turned in the first place he wouldn’t need to study and learn and use its power to repair what had gone wrong.

“Your decision it is, young Skywalker,” said Yoda. “But cannot undo what Darth Vader has done, can you. Power, the Emperor has. Gave it to him, you did.”

Anakin turned around, forced himself to walk back to the table and sit down. Padmé’s presence was all that was keeping him there. He wanted to run, to never face Obi-Wan or Yoda again.

If only he could have gone back far enough to fix this. Fix all of it.

*You were the chosen one! You were supposed to destroy the Sith, not join them!*

Memories. False memories. Useless.

He wished he could forget the things that had never happened.

“I have done many things, but give the Emperor power is not one of them,” Anakin said. He thought he sounded very calm. “I can’t take credit for that. Palpatine has had the power all along. He’s taken it little by little over the years. And not one of us noticed, not even me.” He took a deep breath. “I *could* have sided with Master Windu, and perhaps we could have beaten him together. But I’m not sure of that. I think he was playing with us, with me. But should I have tried? Yes. I should have fought him and died. I didn’t.”

“Anakin,” said Obi-Wan. “No one knows what happened in the Chancellor’s office. Except that Master Windu and three other Jedi perished. You helped Palpatine fight them?”

“No. Not… exactly. The rest of the Jedi were already dead when I got there. Master Windu wanted me to help him kill Palpatine, but I… refused. I needed Palpatine alive. So yes, I helped him kill Master Windu.”

He looked guiltily at Padmé, but she looked away, fixing her eyes on her lap and fidgeting with both hands clasped there, conspicuously away from the comforting grip she had offered him earlier.

“And then… you went to the Temple,” Obi-Wan said, his voice as thick with emotion as Anakin had ever heard it.

(Except for… except for…

*You were my brother, Anakin, I loved you…*)

“Yes. Then I did everything Palpatine asked of me. I killed everyone in the temple and wiped out the last of the separatist leaders on Mustafar.”

"Why?" Obi-Wan asked incredulously, almost angrily. “Was his offer of power worth it? Anakin? Did he feed your ego the way the Jedi Council would not?” He suddenly broke off and looked away, stroking at his beard and mustache agitatedly. Anakin could tell he was trying to calm himself.
Obi-Wan couldn’t bear to break his training and release his anger on his wayward brother, not here, not now. (In a different life, yes. In a different life, well then you are truly lost…!)

This might be the hardest part, but Anakin forced himself to say it:

“In return for pledging myself to him, he promised he would teach me how to save Padmé from dying.”

Padmé uttered a sob and covered her face with her hands.

“It’s not your fault, Padmé,” said Obi-Wan, leaning over the table. His expression had softened for the first time in… well Anakin couldn’t quite remember. When had his master last been gentle and kind?

(...you’re a far greater Jedi than I could ever hope to be...)

Padmé just shook her head, doubled over her swollen belly, crying in earnest now.

Anakin looked on helplessly. He was still breaking her heart. It hadn’t stopped. Even when he tried to do the right thing, to confess, he was killing her. Not her body this time, but her spirit. He wanted to reach out to comfort her, but he had too much blood on his hands. Blood he had smeared all over his wife and children.

Quietly, Bail Organa stood up, rounded the table, and placed a hand on Padmé’s heaving shoulders. He leaned down and said something in her ear, after giving Anakin an apprehensive look. But when Anakin didn’t do anything, just stared numbly back, Organa helped Padmé up from her chair and led her out of the room.

Their departure cast the room into an uncomfortable silence, punctuated only by the beeping of the computer terminals.

“Come to me, you did,” said Yoda, with something that might have been regret in anyone else’s voice. “Visions, you had. Death, suffering, pain. Remember this, I do. For Padmé, you worried.”

Anakin nodded, eyes still on the corridor Padmé and Organa had disappeared down.

“Promised you life in exchange for death, Sidious did,” Yoda continued, now seeming more to be musing to himself. That was the Yoda Anakin remembered. “Lies. Life, the Dark Side does not bring. Only death.”

“You told me I should rejoice when Padmé died,” Anakin said, turning back to the Jedi. Obi-Wan’s face had fallen into an unreadable mask again. Yoda had slipped from his chair and was pacing thoughtfully.

“Accept one death, it is better to do, than kill many,” Yoda proclaimed. “Know this now, I think you do.”

“I don’t accept Padmé’s death. I can’t,” Anakin said.

“Hmmm. Then changed your mind, what did? Leave Sidious, why? Made your bargain, but still worried you are, still in fear. Not received your reward, still see death in your dreams, you do.” Yoda jabbed his stick at Anakin, which for Yoda seemed to be a tirade.

He was right, of course. Padmé was still pregnant and in danger of dying in childbirth. Just like in his nightmares. And Yoda didn’t even know about her other death, the one he had managed to prevent.
How to explain that he had seen the falsity in Palpatine’s promises only after years of service? How could he explain that he wasn’t turning his back on the Sith lightly, certainly not as quickly as they thought. How could he explain that he owed his very presence here to the Dark Side they abhorred, but would still forsake it now because Padmé had asked him to…?

“She asked me to come back,” he finally said. He left the table, headed for the doorway. He paused just before the corridor and turned around, but one look at Obi-Wan and he didn’t know what he was going to say. “She asked me to come back,” he repeated, “so I came back.”

He had no idea where he was going. The base was built on an asteroid. He couldn’t go outside. He felt stifled wandering down long white corridors and through hissing doors. He thought about flinging himself out a viewport, allowing himself to suffocate and float away into space. He’d done what he’d come here to do. Now his continued presence was just hurting Padmé. Causing her distress when she needed comfort and weakening her when she needed to be strong.

What place did he have in this world? He wasn’t Darth Vader who could crush the pain and remorse with anger and power, or channel it into Dark Side energy to use to further his master’s goals. He wasn’t Anakin Skywalker who had any place by Padmé or Obi-Wan’s side, though. He couldn’t just slide back into his old life. He would do anything for Padmé but using the Dark Side, the only thing he was any good at, was strictly forbidden.

He heard a chirpy burble from behind and broke from his spiraling thoughts to look down at R2-D2. The droid whistled and rocked back on his wheels, spinning his photoreceptor to look up quizzically at his master.

“Buddy,” Anakin said, surprised somehow that R2-D2 should still be here. “I haven’t seen you in a long, long time.”
“Despair, do not, Obi-Wan,” Yoda said. The aged Jedi rubbed his head, and Obi-Wan thought he was trying to convince himself just as much as he was Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan wasn’t sure if they should have let Anakin wander off on his own, but the base on the asteroid was not very large and there were not that many places to go. If Anakin was bent on stealing a ship and flying back to Coruscant he was not sure they could stop him. If he were to abscond with Padmé things would be very dire, yet Obi-Wan had the feeling that whatever Anakin was planning, it would not become apparent so soon. Obi-Wan trusted such feelings, mostly, though he was aware that his instincts and beliefs were not always on point. He had spent the better part of his life trusting Anakin Skywalker to do the right thing when it came down to it.

The ruin of the Jedi was a testament to his mistakes.

“What do we do now, Master Yoda?” Obi-Wan asked. At least he was not alone; that, he supposed, was a reason not to lose hope. Master Yoda remained, even if all the other Jedi had fallen. He didn’t want to think what it would be like to have lost the wisest of them.

Yoda leaned heavily on his gimer stick and hummed. “Clouded, the future remains. Much has been revealed, but much remains hidden.”

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“Do you think Anakin is telling the truth?”

“Much turmoil I sense in him. Truth, yes, but more beneath the surface lies. Telling us there are things he is not. Hmmmmmm.”

“I sense it too,” Obi-Wan agreed. “Do you think he is still working for Palpatine? Could this all be part of the plan?”

“Underestimate Sidious, we should not. Done so for too long we have. But doubt Skywalker’s attachment to his wife, I do not. Choose her over his Master, he will, I think.”

“I heard him tell her that he could overthrow Palpatine,” said Obi-Wan. “He believes himself to be powerful enough to work against the Emperor even as his apprentice. Whatever else has changed about Anakin, I think he still may be foolish enough to believe he can align himself with Palpatine and succeed.” He shook his head as if to clear it of cobwebs. The idea that Anakin was arrogant enough to try to play the Sith’s game was believable in light of recent events, and yet trying to anticipate deception upon deception upon deception left him tired and confused.

Perhaps,” said Yoda. “But wrong I was, Obi-Wan, when told you I did that gone your Padawan was. Glad I am now that you brought him here.”

Obi-Wan was shocked. When he had first arrived on Polis Massa, bearing Anakin’s unconscious body, Yoda had said that the young Sith posed great danger. Obi-Wan had argued that he could not bring himself to kill a fallen enemy and that it would have been foolish to leave him behind and let
him escape. He had left out the part where Padmé would not leave Anakin’s side and that he could not shake his attachment to the man he had once thought of as a brother. But he thought Yoda understood anyway, and judged them both for being unwilling to let the memory of Anakin go and put an end to Darth Vader.

“What should we do?” he repeated his earlier question. They could speculate about Anakin’s true motives for hours, but he didn’t think they had the luxury and could not discern the truth behind everything simply with talk. And Obi-Wan was a man who had always believed in the power of conversation and reflection over rushing into action. He felt even more turned upside down than ever before.

“Hmmmm. Meditate, I must,” said Yoda. He still had not lost his faith in the Force. He had meditated on many things and found no answers over the past decade, but he could not stop trying. To do that would be giving in to despair. Obi-Wan knew this, and so left his Jedi master to commune with the Force.

Bail showed Padmé to a small bunkroom near the medcenter. It was sparse and utilitarian, with rows of narrow bunks going up the wall and a tiny refresher set into the back of the room opposite the entryway. The base had originally been built for a group of archaeologists studying the asteroid field, and it showed in the accommodations. Polis Massa was not a place of solace and serenity, like her senate apartment or Naboo home, but a cold and calculating speck of cerebral civilization out in the far reaches of the Outer Rim.

He sat with her while she composed herself. Padmé felt ashamed, had felt ashamed this entire time, for Bail to bear witness to the terrible truth about her life. She could not think of a worse way for a friend and colleague whom she respected to find out about her double life.

“I am so sorry,” she said, once she felt confident enough to speak. “Please excuse me, Bail, I’m…”

“You have nothing to apologize for,” he said kindly.

She wiped her eyes with a shaky hand and reached within herself to find the poise she used in the senate. She couldn’t find it. “Oh but I do,” she said. “I have been living a lie, and other people have paid the price. I’m surprised you can stand to look at me. I don’t deserve this kindness.”

Bail shook his head. He was awkwardly hunched over as he sat on the side of the bunk next to her, a tall, broad shouldered man folded into a restrictive space. It might have been comical under any other circumstances. “You are not to blame for any of this. You were not the only one deceived, Padmé. We all were.”

“But I played a part in that deceit. I married a Jedi.”

“You are not responsible for your husband’s choices, Padmé.”

Of course he was right, but didn’t he see? If she had been stronger, if she had not given in to her own selfish desires, if she had held Anakin Skywalker at arms’ length all those years ago… if only she had known… then the Jedi might not have fallen. Had the Republic been handed over to Palpatine solely to save her solitary life? How could she live, knowing that?

“But—”

“No,” Bail said firmly. “Padmé you are a good person and I will not let you blame yourself for this. You were involved in this plot against the Jedi and the Republic against your will. If you were not a part of this, the Emperor would have found other ways to lure Skywalker into his service. He would
have found another weakness to exploit.

“Besides, if another person were in your place, would you blame her for this? I don’t think you would.”

She managed a smile. She could tell what Bail was doing — using logic to break her from a spiral of emotionally driven thoughts. And she appreciated it. But she wasn’t sure her heart would let her accept it.

She knew better than to argue with Bail, though. Especially if he was willing to go into senatorial mode to make her relent. So she only said, “Thank you for all you’ve done. You have put yourself in incredible danger, Bail. If the Emperor suspects—”

“Don’t concern yourself with that,” he said with a dismissive hand wave. “I’ve done what little I can simply because it is right. Do you remember what you said to me just the other day… in the senate?”,

She nodded. She had told him that he and the other senators who opposed the Emperor needed to lay low and bide their time. She knew that Mon Mothma and others would be eager to argue against Palpatine’s annexation of power but that his true, evil nature made it incredibly foolish to try using the old means of democracy against him.

“I am still abiding by that advice. The Emperor doesn’t know of my involvement in saving Master Yoda and bringing him here. And I don’t intend for him to find out. I will be returning to Alderaan soon.”

Bail paused thoughtfully, then suggested, “Perhaps you should come with me.”

“No,” Padmé responded without hesitation. “It’s too dangerous. For you, and for…” she trailed off, resting her hand on her belly.

Bail nodded, as if he expected that answer. “You should remain here for the time being,” he said. “Polis Massa is far from the Repub—Empire’s notice. I can speak to my friends the Kallidahins and arrange for them to keep silent about your presence here. Unless Master Yoda knows of a better place, that is. But there are few places in the Outer Rim which would be off the grid and yet have adequate medcenters.”

“Thank you,” Padmé said. “Truth be told I haven’t had time to think… to really think about what to do next.”

“Of course.” Bail pushed himself to his feet. “You should get some rest. Is there anything I can do for you?”

She declined. She needed to be alone now, more than anything. To rest, for the babies’ sakes if not her own. And to think.

She lay on her side in the narrow bunk. She felt her little ones kick inside her, and allowed herself a small smile as she rested her hands on her belly. Even in this dark time she felt her heart lighten when she thought of her children, who had not yet experienced the pain or suffering outside of her protection. She began to hum a Nubian lullaby to them, one her mother hand sung to her and Sola and that she sung to Sola’s children when she visited home.

Her thoughts strayed from Sola’s sweet younglings to the imagined faces of the Jedi in the temple and she fought against releasing more tears. The lullaby caught in her throat. What kind of terrible world would she be forced to bring her children into? And how would she explain to them, one day, what their father had done? Oh, but that one day was far enough away—the more pressing worry
was what should happen to them if they fell into violent hands. Palpatine’s hands. The very thought
shook her, but she knew it was more than a possibility.

If he had wanted Anakin he would want them too. Or he would want them dead so that nothing
stood in the way of Anakin’s loyalty to him. Or perhaps he would simply want to kill them to have
revenge for Anakin’s betrayal. Each thought made her colder. She could not think of what to do,
where to go, how to get through this. The lullaby died on her lips and she cried silently until
exhaustion finally took her and she fell into a troubled sleep.

Obi-Wan found Anakin in a small workroom surrounded by spare droid parts, methodically at work
on R2-D2. A shiny looking C-3PO was propped up to one side, resting in power down mode.

The outer rim sieges and the trip to Mustafar had taken a toll on R2-D2. Anakin found solace in
giving him a thorough and long overdo cleaning and tune up. C-3PO, not to be forgotten, had not-
very-subtly mentioned that it had been a long time since he had an oil bath and that there were a few
loose circuits in his gearcase that could use some attention.

Anakin helped himself to the tools and spare parts that he found on the base. There was a small
number of Kallidahian scientists on the base, but they steered clear of Anakin and wisely didn’t
object to his taking over their maintenance center. Anakin wondered how much they knew about
him and why he was there – knowing anything seemed like knowing too much, and he wondered
how well they could be trusted to keep secrets. The Vader in him told him to be safe and make sure
no one could talk, but he squashed it down. Instead he threw himself into sharpening Artoo’s
buzzsaw.

He could sense Obi-Wan coming up behind him even before his old master softly cleared his throat,
making his presence known. Anakin was in no mood to continue the earlier conversation, and
pretended not to notice. He brushed away durasteel shavings and allowed Artoo to retract the saw
before closing the compartment with a snap. There were still traces of ash from Mustafar visible
inside his acoustic signalers and Anakin reached for a pipe cleaner to scrub away the debris.

Obi-Wan circled him warily, then brushed aside some things on a workbench before taking a seat.
Artoo beeped and chirruped, as if he thought Anakin might have missed the Jedi’s arrival.

“Hold still,” was all Anakin would say as the little droid wiggled back and forth on his legs like a
small child antsy at being ignored.

Obi-Wan spoke, “I didn’t think I would find you fussing over droids, but I don’t know what I
expected.”

Obi-Wan had always coped with a dry sense of humor. Anakin bristled as the irritating memories of
being constantly needled about Artoo rushed back to him. Darth Vader was rarely needled by
anyone, except perhaps by Tarkin (who at times reminded him of his least favorite parts of Obi-
Wan).

“It’s not ‘fussing’ to take good care of them. Maybe you wouldn’t go through so many R4 units if
—” he broke off suddenly, realizing he’d fallen in a rote response from days long ago when they
fought side by side during the Clone Wars and argued lazily over each other’s habits. Like old
friends.

(But then the war had just ended, hadn’t it? He had ended it… brought peace to the galaxy with one
final storm of violence…)
He scowled at himself for rising to the bait and pretended to be doubly engrossed in getting the last bit of ash out.

“Senator Organa has returned home to Alderaan,” said Obi-Wan, getting down to business. “He must remain visible in order to avoid suspicion.”

Anakin looked up. “If the Emperor decides to question him he may reveal our location here.”

“Organa would not willingly—”

“I didn’t say it would have to be willingly,” Anakin snapped impatiently. He thought Obi-Wan was smarter than that.

“I am aware that there is the possibility of torture,” Obi-Wan said, his tone utterly businesslike and clipped. “Which is why we thought it best he does not know where we plan on going from here.”

“We?”

“I have been discussing things with Master Yoda. He thinks it best that we split up. He will go somewhere undisclosed, and I will accompany you and Padmé somewhere that we can agree is suitable.”

Anakin gave up on the pretense of cleaning Artoo and fixed Obi-Wan with his full attention. “Is that so?” he said. “Do you think I want you ‘accompanying’ Padmé and I anywhere?”

“I know you do not,” Obi-Wan said, looking him steadily in the eye. “But surely you weren’t expecting to be set loose upon the galaxy with a smile and a wave?”

“Not at all. You came to kill me on Mustafar and I have been wondering when you were going to get around to it,” said Anakin. “In fact I’m a little tired of all this talking… this plotting. What could you hope to accomplish with this absurd scheme to dog my footsteps? Are you hoping to catch me off my guard? You have already had that opportunity.”

Obi-Wan watched him with an increasingly disbelieving and put upon expression. His face screwed up in a most un-Jedi-like manner for a moment before he closed his eyes and re-opened them.

“Anakin, I did not betray you. The Jedi did not betray you. You betrayed us.”

“Then shouldn’t you be here to serve justice?” Anakin tossed aside the pipe cleaner. Artoo whistled with low worry. “I know that you want to. Avenge your fallen brothers. The younglings. Why are you hesitating?”

Obi-Wan just shook his head, his eyes never leaving Anakin’s face. “Vengeance is not the Jedi way. You know this as well as I do.”

“Then the Jedi way is no more,” Anakin scoffed. “I put an end to it.”

He felt a brief flare of anger in the Force, but it dissipated quickly, before Obi-Wan even allowed it to show on his face. “I will not forsake everything I have been taught, just because you have,” he said evenly.

“Then you’re in a difficult place. You should kill me, but you can’t.”

“I don’t want to kill you, Anakin.”

“You should.”
He shook his head. “Those are the words of a Sith. Not a Jedi.”

(*Only a Sith deals in absolutes*)

Anakin smiled bitterly.

In another life Obi-Wan had done his duty to avenge the Jedi. Or nearly had, anyway. But maybe that moment was past. Away from the hellish landscape of Mustafar he was able to fall back on his Jedi platitudes and choose inaction. But Anakin knew that below the calm words lay turmoil; turmoil that he understood. Obi-Wan had always been a Jedi first and foremost, placing the code and the wishes of the council over his relationship with Anakin. It was why he’d never been able to confide in Obi-Wan. Never been able to reveal the true nature of his relationship with Padmé or the demons that plagued him and woke him up at night. Memories of his mother, of the Sand People. Killing Count Dooku in cold blood rather than the heat of the battle. (Though his handless, headless corpse had been suspicious enough for anyone to notice something not quite orthodox had occurred.) Now that Anakin had taken everything he held dear away from him, he must burn with a secret desire to have revenge. Anakin couldn’t imagine it not existing somewhere inside his master.

He had used to think that it was only him. That only he had passions he could not keep contained. That he wasn’t the Jedi he was supposed to be. But he thought differently now. Everyone had the dark side in them. Even Obi-Wan.

“Was it always a lie?” Obi-Wan asked.

“What?”

“All of it. Your loyalty to the Jedi, to me. To Ahsoka. All the battles we fought, side by side, as brothers,” Obi-Wan said. “Was it always a joke to you? A farce? Have you always hated us?”

Anakin stared back. Obi-Wan held his gaze unflinchingly.

Anakin tried to remember far back to a time when the thought of Obi-Wan meant something other than fire, and pain, and the ruin of his body. Of something other than the loss of Padmé; first of her love and loyalty and then of her life. Of a time when he could conjure his master’s face without seeing it twisted and red in the fiery darkness, screaming... *You were my brother, Anakin. I loved you. Loved loved loved loved...*

“I’ve hated you for a long time,” he said.

Obi-Wan dropped his gaze abruptly. He slapped his hands on his knees and stood up.

Anakin thought he might depart without a word, but at the door Obi-Wan paused and said, with his back to his former apprentice, “I have failed you, Anakin.” He nodded to himself. “I have failed you.” And then he pulled his robes around himself and left.

Artoo whirred reproachfully. Anakin didn’t need to understand the exact words to get the meaning. “Don’t take his side,” he said. “You don’t know everything.”

He got a mournful *weeeeooollllllllo* in response.
Come Back to Me

Calling your name in the midnight hour
Reaching for you from the endless dream
So many miles between us now
But you are always here with me

She tripped and stumbled in her cumbersome gown, a ceremonial dress with a heavy, ornate headpiece wearing her down. She was so tired. So tired of being trapped in her gown, the sleeves and train seeming to grow longer with every passing moment until she was dragging her arms down along her sides and shuffling forward with slow steps.

She came to a balcony and looked down over the gardens. There he was. Far away, standing with someone else. She opened her mouth to call to him but her mouth was filled with ash. Everything in the garden was dead and gray, blackened weeds strangling the beautiful flowers and bushes. She wanted to cry. The beauty of Theed was all choked out. She called again. Her voice came out in a whisper; “Anakin! Anakin! Come back! Please come back!”

He couldn’t hear her. He stood with his back to her, speaking to a figure made out of shadows. They seemed to be retreating even further away in spite of standing still.

“Anakin, no!” Her throat was all closed up; she was choking on ash and could not breathe or make a sound. Still she tried to get his name out, a single elongated, “Ahhhhhhhh,” as she struggled to reach out. But she was trapped, all wrapped up in heavy dark velvet and pounds of fake hair that slipped over her eyes, blinding her.

She woke with a start and blinked in the gray light of the bunkroom.

Dried tears lay on her face and crusted her eyes. She wiped at her cheeks with the back on one hand. Her mouth was cottony from sleep but she could not shake the feeling of choking in her dream.

She had been searching endlessly for Anakin, she remembered. But she hadn’t been able to find him, just a shadowy stranger surrounded by death.

Padmé felt an acute, aching desire for Anakin. The real Anakin, or at least the Anakin she thought she knew. Her Anakin, not Palpatine’s apprentice. The man she had married. The brave Jedi Knight whom she loved in secret throughout three years of constant galactic war. The young man who had grown up from the pure hearted boy who thought she was an angel and gave her a present when he had no possessions to truly call his own. That Anakin. Had he even existed? And if so, where had he gone?

She wanted him back. So, so badly.

The door whooshed softly open, and Anakin slipped inside, almost as if summoned. Padmé shut her eyes, pretending to still be asleep. He had come. Could he feel her thinking about him through the Force? Could he sense the contents of her dreams? So much about what her husband and other Force users could do was a mystery to her.

He knelt down next to where she lay on the bottom bunk. Even with her eyes closed she could sense
his movement – not through something so esoteric as the Force, but with the simple senses of an ordinary human. She heard the sound of his breathing and felt that nearly imperceptible warmth of another body drawing closer. He didn’t say anything, but put his hand on her belly.

A baby kicked, sudden and hard, against their father’s hand. He snatched it back as if burned.

Padmé opened her eyes. Her children were suddenly awake and shifting inside her. Jockeying for position. Anakin met her eyes, and she asked, her voice rough with sleep, “Did you hear me calling?”

“What?”

“Nevermind.” She shook her head; shook away the fanciful thought. She reached out for his hand and placed it against her womb again. “They know it’s you,” she said softly. “They always jump when you’re around.”

He stared down at his fingers splayed across the white expanse of her stomach, which rippled now with the small limbs underneath it. She could remember him touching her like this the first night he had returned from the Outer Rim, marveling at how large she had gotten since the last time they had been together, when neither of them had known she was pregnant. He had been gone for so long that he missed all the early stages: the thrill and terror of discovery, the morning sickness, the cravings and the sweeping changes in emotion as she waited alone to find out if her husband was ever coming back. They had never been apart for so long during the war before that. Even though he was often away, he had been able to return to Coruscant a stay with her in between missions, or their paths would cross as she set out on diplomatic missions of her own. There were lucky times when they had gone on missions together, as if some guardian angel was kind enough to assign him to her as a Jedi escort when such a thing was needed.

She realized now that that “guardian angel” may well have been Palpatine. The sudden realization sickened her. It had been his idea for Anakin to serve as her bodyguard before the war. She remembered that now. Had he always been pulling the strings behind her very relationship with Anakin? Had everything about her life been a lie?

She sat up and pushed Anakin’s hand away.

Did Palpatine want Anakin to have children? Did he have some purpose, some long turn plan, for the offspring of his apprentice? Was she still falling into his trap?

Anakin rocked back on his heels. “We should talk,” he said.

That was an understatement.

“I know,” she answered. “I know, Anakin.”

He frowned at the sadness in her voice. “Yoda and Obi-Wan have been making plans for us,” he went on. “Obi-Wan wants to take you into hiding somewhere safe. He didn’t say where.”

“What about you?”

He hesitated, the got to his feet and paced a couple steps before coming up short. It wasn’t the sort of room one could really pace in. “I’m not sure,” he said. “He said that we should all go together. The three of us, I mean. Yoda wants to go… somewhere… I don’t know where. But somewhere else. It would be you, me, Obi-Wan, and the babies.”

“You don’t believe him,” she said, recognizing the suspicion in his voice.
“No. I think he wants to take you and the babies away from me,” he said plainly. “It’s the only thing
that makes sense. But he knows I would never agree to that willingly. So he must be trying to trick
me.”

She closed her eyes and exhaled a long breath. Had he always been this paranoid? Or did
committing mass murder do that to him? “Obi-Wan cares about you,” she said. “He just wants to
help.”

Anakin gave her a look that said he thought she was either naïve or lying. “He doesn’t trust me. He’s
waiting for me to do something to give him an excuse to kill me without sullying his conscience.”

“Don’t talk like that,” she blurted unhappily. “Don’t say that about Obi-Wan. He’s like your father.
He doesn’t want to kill you.”

“Do you know that?” Anakin asked. “What did he tell you when he convinced you to take him to
Mustafar? That he just wanted to talk to me?” There was scorn in his voice and written across his
face. His scar stood out, red and angry.

“He didn’t convince me,” she said. “He stowed away. I didn’t know. I never would have…”

His expression softened, and he knelt down again in one quick motion. “I didn’t know that.”

“I was afraid of what would happen if you fought him,” she said, taking his hands, squeezing both
the flesh and the robotic fingers. “You can’t think that I would want that. I was terrified for you.”

“If you didn’t want him coming to Mustafar then you knew he was going to try to kill me,” said
Anakin. “So you know I’m right. We can’t trust him.”

“Because he can’t trust you, Anakin. And can you blame him? Have you forgotten what you’ve
done?”

“Never.” He pressed his lips together, his eyes icy.

“I’m afraid, Anakin,” she said. “Afraid of the Chancellor. The Emperor. I need to hide from him, to
keep our children safe.”

“I know you do. I’ll keep you safe,” he said, pulling one hand from her death grip. He brushed her
sleep flattened curls away from her face, stroking her cheek. “I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

“Have you thought that just your presence makes me unsafe?” she asked, barely able to choke the
words out. “Palpatine wants you. He doesn’t care about me, he’ll be looking for you.”

“He’ll be looking for both of us,” Anakin said, his frown deepening, heavy lines shadowing his face.
“You can’t be suggesting what I think you’re suggesting.”

“I don’t know,” she said, fighting back tears. “But if I told you that you had to leave me, go away,
would you? Would you listen to me?”

“Don’t say that. Don’t.”

She dropped his hand. “Tell me! I can’t be your prisoner, Anakin. If I need to be apart you have to
let me. You have to…”

“Please don’t ask me that,” he shook his head, eyes hard with anger, or was it fear? “Don’t. I can’t…
I can’t do that. You don’t understand. I’d do anything for you Padmé. But I can’t live without you.
Not again. Don’t ask me to.”

She pushed his other hand away from her face. “I told you, I don’t want you killing for me anymore.”

“I won’t. I won’t, I won’t, I won’t,” he said in a rush, reaching for her again. She lifted her hands up and leaned back. He clutched at the hem of her dress. He looked desperate and wild, like he had on Mustafar when he told her that he had laid the world to waste for her. “I’d die for you, Padmé, if that’s what you wanted. If you think I’m too much of danger to be with you. I… I could do that. Say the word and I’ll go do it. I’ll let Obi-Wan kill me… Yoda… I don’t care. All I have to do is pick a fight and they’ll do it. Gladly. Then you can ship me back to the Emperor in a box and no one will bother you ever again. Pad—”

“No!” In shock, she slapped him. He looked stunned. She had never done something like that before. But she was terrified by his wild, destructive line of reasoning. She wanted it to stop. “Don’t ever talk like that again,” she hissed.

He rocked forward onto his knees and buried his face against her, his fists balled up in the plain white fabric of her medcenter gown. “I’m sorry,” he said, muffled. “Forgive me, Padmé. Forgive me.”

Reluctantly, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and stroked his head. She saw that her own hands were shaking. “I won’t ask you to leave,” she said finally. “But you have to let Obi-Wan come with us.”

I can’t handle this on my own. I can’t handle you on my own.

He straightened up and nodded, eyes glistening with tears that left the front of her dress damp. When their eyes met he leaned in to kiss her. She was surprised. She wasn’t sure why. She didn’t resist, but didn’t kiss him back, only stared wide-eyed and unblinking. This kiss was warm and familiar… yet utterly alien. He drew away, noticing her lack of response. Instinctively she reached up and wiped at her face with the back of her hand, then stared curiously at it, as if she expected his lips to have stained her mouth with blood.

The door whooshed open at that moment. “Oh dear me,” exclaimed C-3PO. “So sorry, Mistress Padmé, Master Ani. But I have been sent to inform you that Masters Yoda and Obi-Wan desire your presence in the conference room as soon as you are able. They wish to discuss ‘suitable planets for relocation’ whatever that means. Oh I do hope we aren’t leaving Coruscant? I had grown very fond of—”


“Oh dear, I’m sorry. No need to shout. I’ll be off then.” C-3PO waved his arms and pivoted awkwardly on his metal legs, then shuffled as fast as he could down the corridor. There was something unsettled in his master’s voice that even he could pick up on. He was probably headed to vent his hurt feelings to R2-D2.

“Go ahead,” said Padmé. “I’ll be out in a minute. I need to use the ‘fresher.”

She felt a sudden wave of nausea coming on, as if the morning sickness from the early months of her pregnancy had returned. She staggered heavily into the tiny refresher and sunk to her knees over the sink. The ration bars she had eaten earlier, while waiting for Anakin to wake, came tumbling out in sticky strings of bile. She heaved out everything in her stomach with the knowledge that Anakin was standing on the other side of the ‘fresher door, listening to her vomit.
She took her time after that. She stepped into the sonic shower, still dressed, trying to feel clean. When she was done she rummaged around in the compact cabinet until she found a sonic toothbrush. She wished there was water to rinse with but knew that there would be none on this far off asteroid base. She found a comb and carefully ran it through her tangled hair, then braided it in the simplest style, one that didn’t require a handmaiden or help from C-3PO. She drew out the process as long as she could.

When she stepped out of the ‘fresher, Anakin had finally gone.
“You will give us 5,000 credits for this ship,” said Obi-Wan with a deft wave of his hand.

“I will give you 5,000 credits for this ship,” echoed the vacant looking man.

“It’s a very good deal and you’re happy to make it, but you won’t be able to remember any particulars about who sold it to you,” Obi-Wan continued.

“It’s a very good deal…” the man began to echo, and Anakin sighed, tuning him out.

He looked out across the settlement, scanning for anything—or anyone—suspicious. His gaze wandered to Padmé, who stood with C-3PO at a distance, talking with a shop-keeper who was selling various brightly colored fruits. She wore a patterned blue cloak with the hood up, obscuring her face; it was one of several garments that had been stored in her Nubian cruiser before her impulsive departure from Coruscant. It was a little too conspicuous here. She held a shuura fruit in one hand, and he had an unwelcomed memory from a happier time.

He looked away, back to Obi-Wan, who was exchanging credits with the new owner of a shiny J-type 327 Nubian Royal Starship. It was an incredibly conspicuous spaceship, and even the act of selling it was sure to bring unwanted attention.

Obi-Wan was working overtime with his mind tricks lately. Anyone who looked at them twice was told gently that there wasn’t anything to see, or take note of, or remember for a later date. It kept him busy, which was a good thing, for this excursion was one of the most painfully awkward endeavors of their lives.

The notion that working together was a good idea was all Padmé and Yoda. Anakin didn’t trust Obi-Wan any further than he could throw him, and he was acutely aware that Obi-Wan felt the same way. Anakin was constantly on guard against any attempt to abscond with Padmé, while Obi-Wan no doubt was waiting for him to produce a red lightsaber and proclaim his undying love for the Dark Side of the Force.

He’d never gotten his blue lightsaber back, which rankled. But then again, he couldn’t very well be seen with the signature weapon of the Jedi now that any member of that order were wanted enemies of the Empire. And even out here on the Outer Rim, on a planet outside the Empire’s jurisdiction, it would be foolish to wave one around. But the knowledge that Obi-Wan had it tucked away somewhere still made his fingers itch to go digging around in Obi-Wan’s things. Not that Obi-Wan had many things—just a single rucksack… in which he was now putting a pouch full of credits.

“I still say we sell the droids as well,” Obi-Wan said, walking over to him.

“We’re not selling the droids.”
Obi-Wan sighed as they walked uneasily side by side towards Padmé. “I don’t see what use we have for them, and they attract attention,” Obi-Wan argued, but there wasn’t much conviction in his voice, only the unending need to question Anakin’s decisions.

“They’re family,” Anakin maintained. “And no one pays attention to droids.”

“If you cared as much for people as you did droids…” Obi-Wan began.

“You know I think I’ve still killed more droids than I have organic beings,” Anakin quipped with a laser sharp edge in his voice. Somehow it was easier to needle Obi-Wan about the horrors that stood between them than deal with the looming bantha-in-the-room in any earnest way.

“It’s not killing,” Obi-Wan said softly. “Droids are not alive. You can destroy them, yes, but—”

“Huh,” Anakin cut him off. “That’s funny because it always felt like killing to me.”

They reached Padmé, and Obi-Wan declined to respond to Anakin’s statement, only said, “At least do something about the protocol droid’s finish? It’s absolutely blinding. Stands out a mile away. No one from the Outer Rim has a droid plated in gold.”

“I do apologize,” C-3PO said, turning his entire body towards Obi-Wan. “This plating was a gift from Mistress Padmé when I entered her service.”

“Yes,” Obi-Wan said wryly. “A droid fit for a queen.”

“He’s right,” Padmé agreed. “We should probably repaint you. I’m sorry, Threepio.”

“What color do you want to be?” Anakin asked. He noticed that Padmé still would not look him in the eye. He tried to keep his tone light, neutral… ordinary.

“Oh, dear, I don’t know, I…”

R2-D2 beeped and spun his photoreceptor around.

“Blue?!” C-3PO said. “I—”

“Blue it is, then,” Obi-Wan said. “Fine. Good. Padmé, I have 5,000 credits from the ship. That should be plenty enough to buy us transport to another planet, so I think we can spare a bit for a refinishing job.”

“Whatever you say, Obi-Wan,” she said, almost as vacantly as the spaceship dealer.

Anakin stepped forward and put an arm around her shoulders. “You should get out of the sun,” he said solicitously. They were on a hot, arid planet far in the Outer Rim. Not so terrible and hellish as Tatooine, but still a far cry from the temperate Naboo or climate controlled Coruscant.

He shot Obi-Wan a glance and then started to steer Padmé out of the hot sun. Obi-Wan looked as if he might protest for a moment, then simply motioned for C-3PO to follow him. R2-D2 rolled after them, chirping excitedly.

Padmé allowed herself to be led to a bench under an awning, and Anakin waved away the shopkeeper who tried to come out and speak to them. “Are you alright?” he asked, searching her face for any indication that her pallor was from more than just the melancholy mood she had sunk into. “How are you feeling?”

“Hungry,” she said, gazing down at the shuura fruit cupped in her thin hand. She took a bite and said
around the juices, “Tired.”

“How are the babies?”

She arched her back with a pained look. “Heavy,” she said. “And unruly. One of them is trying to rip out my spine.”

“Do you need to lay down?”

“Anakin, stop.”

He pulled back. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright. I’m fine,” she said, relenting. “All this travel is… just difficult.”

“It’s almost over. We’ll find a ship to take us to Osallao and I think that should be enough hopping around to make our trail hard to follow.”

“We could stay here,” she said half-heartedly.

“Not with that ship on this planet.”

She nodded. She ate the shuura silently, and he had to stop himself from simply watching her. He made a show of scanning the crowd instead, as if he thought a battalion of clone troopers would appear at any moment.

"This was imported from Naboo," she said, breaking the silence. He glanced down at the fruit. “It was my favorite. I once snuck into the kitchen and ate so many that I got sick. I swore I’d never eat another one but I was back at it within a week. My mother said I would get fat.” She shook her head. “Mothers can say such hurtful things without meaning to.”

Anakin let her ramble, enjoyed listening to her reminisce, despite the fact that he had heard this story before. Padmé had always said her mother was the warmest, more caring woman, who loved to cook for her family—and that was the woman he remembered meeting all those years ago when they stopped at Padmé’s home on their way to the lake country. But Jobal Naberrie had also instilled in her daughters a conviction that their outward appearances were very important and they should never let themselves become slovenly or overweight.

*It’s just a Naboo thing,* Padmé had said once, dismissively. *You have to look the part. To be sophisticated is to be upstanding. I never would have been elected queen if I didn’t make a good looking figurehead for the HoloNet. So my mother in right, in a way. I wouldn’t want to have to tell my daughter that, though. It hurts when you’re young to think that something so innocent as loving sweets could make people stop loving you.*

He remembered now how he had been fascinated by listening to Padmé talk about what her life was like as a child. Good or bad, it was all so completely different from his own. On Tatooine there was never any risk for a slave to over eat and the only beings getting fat were slave-owners and the Hutts. Plus everyone’s youth quickly faded under the scorching suns, so vanity as a mark of virtue was hardly practical.

Anakin wondered if Sheev Palpatine retained any shred of that infamous Nubian vanity. It gave him a small measure of satisfaction to think how ugly the Emperor had become. Though truth be told he’d known him as Darth Sidious long enough to understand that his Sith master didn’t care for such things… he cared for the unlimited power of the dark side and took his joy from playing other people for fools. He probably thought his own horrendous visage was the new standard for beauty. Though
he’d never lowered his hood after that day when Master Windu scarred him with his own lightening.

It was hard to figure out how much of Palpatine was still human. Even as Darth Vader he hadn’t been able to parse it. The man who had once seemed like a kindly grandfather with only his best wishes at heart had changed so much the day he triumphed over the Jedi. It could not be said that he had ever been kind to Vader after that day. Resurrecting him from near death did not count. Anakin hadn’t asked for or wanted that.

“Anakin? Are you listening?”

“Yes,” he said automatically, even though his thoughts had drifted away while she was still talking.

“No,” she sighed, “you’re not. I wonder where you go, sometimes.”

(I wonder who’s inside there…)

“I’m here,” he said, taking her hand. It was sticky from the shuura fruit. He gave it a squeeze and smiled. She just looked at him, expression unmoving.

He wondered how long it would take for her to look at him and see Anakin Skywalker again. He was sure that Darth Vader reflected out at him from her eyes every time he met her gaze. He saw the mask he had never worn and somehow, he felt that she could see it too.

Breelden was a city nearly inaccessible except by air. Nestled in a deep valley and surrounded by tall, inhospitable snowcapped mountains, it was an ancient stronghold from eons before air or space travel had come to the distant Outer Rim planet of Osallao. The ring of mountains kept the valley dwellers relatively safe from the marauding Wampas and allowed them to flourish into the planet’s earliest civilization.

Over the years it had grown up into the capital of the planet, and roads had been carved through the mountains to connect to the outside world, but Breelden had never lost its mystique as the Hidden City. The dark valley dwellers, as the native inhabitants were dubbed, were a race of heavily furred humanoids that were sometimes confused for Wookies. But unlike the natives of Kashyyyk, the Osallans were of comparable height to humans and spoke Basic easily. Some of them had adopted the habit of shaving and all wore clothing, as if conscious to set themselves even further apart. It was said that the best way to insult and alienate an Osallan was to confuse them for a Wookie.

Since other races had come to Osallao, Breelden had come to be the most metropolitan of settlements on the planet. Despite its former distinction as a hidden fortress, it now saw the most intergalactic travel and species diversity.

That made it the logical destination for a group of human immigrants and their service droids.

Most human denizens of Breelden congregated in the northeast sector, and that’s where the Skywalkers made their new home. It wasn’t a large dwelling place; but a modest stone cottage which, like most buildings up on the mountainous edge of the valley, made up for its lack of grandeur by having a breathtaking view of the spaceport spread out below. If you stood at the front door or looked out the windows you could scan the far off jagged horizon to the south.

Anakin hoped that, in some small way, the vista was reminiscent of Padmé’s penthouse apartment on Coruscant.

He used up almost all the remaining credits from the sale of Padmé’s spaceship in order to buy the house. He’d hoped that Padmé would be more interested in looking at the dwellings for sale and
would have an opinion on which one to purchase. Her fatigue and malaise only seemed to be worsening though, and he worried that she was falling into a listless depression. It was due to the travel and the pregnancy, he told himself. She would bounce back once they were past this trying time. Padmé had always been resilient.

He pushed down the nagging voice that whispered she would never be alright. The voice said that the sadness and stress he had put her through would worry away at her like a sandstorm eating away at a rock on Tatooine. It would reshape her into something rounded down and thinned away until she lost the will to live.

There was no question in Anakin’s mind that Obi-Wan would have to find his own accommodations. He put up with his old master following them to this planet and knowing their street address, but he would not tolerate Obi-Wan for a housemate. Let Padmé have him over for supper if she needed to do so, but Obi-Wan could sleep somewhere else and spend his days generally elsewhere.

Luckily, Obi-Wan seemed to also understand this without needing to be told. He looked around at the interior of the house, which was not wholly unfurnished but still looked fairly bare and dismal without any decorations or homely touches, and said, “What do you plan on doing now? You need possessions.”

He said it curiously, as if he was asking the same thing of himself. A Jedi had no individual possessions and all living necessities were provided for by the Order. Obi-Wan, unlike Anakin, could not remember a time in his life when he didn’t have a small, ascetic room in the Jedi Temple to call home.

Anakin had a moment of dissociated confusion. It was not uncommon these days, but was always acute when Obi-Wan said some mundane and human to him. Was he talking to someone else? Another Anakin? A man who stood just to the side of his own body and looked out of eyes that had never seen the sacking of the Jedi Temple and the slaughter of that entire order?

“I’ve got it under control,” he answered, focusing on a flickering light set into a wall sconce in order to center himself. He would have to see about fixing that. Probably a loose wire somewhere. The shell of this house was fairly old and all the electronics had been installed sometime after its initial construction. He could already see several improvements and modifications that needed to be made.

“Oh, I’ve no doubt of that,” Obi-Wan said, crossing his arms and looking over the ceiling as if inspecting it for cracks. His tone of voice refuted his words.

“I’ll have an easier time finding ways to make credits than you will,” said Anakin. He was as good of a pilot, mechanic and droid maker as he had ever been a Jedi. “Unless you plan on mind tricking people into giving you things.”

“That would be quite dishonest,” said Obi-Wan. “A Jedi doesn’t use mind tricks for personal gain.”

Anakin fought the urge to roll his eyes so far back into his head that he could see out the other side. He only partially succeeded.

“I’ll be close by,” Obi-Wan said. “I’ll take on the name Ben.”

Not very subtle, Anakin thought. His master had used that alias any time a mission required hiding his true identity. “Ben what?”

“What?”
“You’re not just going to go by Ben Kenobi, are you?”

“Kenobi is a fairly common name on Coruscant,” Obi-Wan said with a shrug.

“I know you have a thousand second cousins back on Coruscant,” said Anakin. “But try to remember my children’s safety relies on staying undetected. You might be the only Kenobi on Osallao.”

“Fine, I’ll think of something… Set.”

Anakin and Padmé were officially known to their new neighbors as Set and Veré Agolerga. If Obi-Wan had known the reason behind the names he might also have scoffed at the lack of subtlety – those were the names they had used for their secret marriage ceremony on Naboo, and the surname belonged to the Holy Man who officiated for them. Anakin had suggested the names, hoping to remind Padmé of a more romantic and optimistic time, but though she had agreed it had been with indifference.

Padmé had gone into the bedroom and lay down on one of the few pieces of furniture their new house came with—a shoddy, uncomfortable looking double bed covered in a traditional Osallan spread woven from the shed fur of the native species. Anakin made a mental note to toss out the blanket later because the idea of sleeping under another sentient creature’s fur mat wasn’t very appealing.

He glanced through the doorway, where she could be seen breathing gently on her side, one arm resting over her belly and the other curled beneath her head.

“Before you go,” he said to Obi-Wan, “I want my lightsaber back.”

Obi-Wan heaved a sigh.

“It’s not a request.”

Obi-Wan reached inside his rucksack and pulled out the Jedi weapon. “Surely I don’t need to remind you that to be seen using this is an invitation for the Empire to come looking for you,” he said wearily.

“I’m not going to wave it around in the marketplace,” Anakin retorted. “But I’ll need it to defend my family. If Aurra Sing shows up on my doorstep I’m—”

“Aurra Sing? That’s very specific. I thought she was in prison,” Obi-Wan said with an arched eyebrow. He walked over to a windowsill and placed Anakin’s lightsaber down on the stone ledge, then retreated warily to a safer distance from both Anakin and his weapon.

“Not for long,” said Anakin. In another life, he had personally ordered Aurra Sing’s release from prison on the stipulation that she hunt down Jedi for the Empire. The bounty hunter had once attempted to assassinate Padmé, but as Darth Vader he hadn’t bothered to hold onto that old grudge… because Sing was exceptionally good at fighting Jedi, having once been a Padawan herself.

She was just one of the agents of the Empire that Anakin knew might be coming for him now that he, too, was a fugitive. Maybe in this changed reality he was not there in his capacity as the Sith apprentice and chief Jedi hunter, but he had little doubt the Emperor could figure out who would make a good asset or even a potential replacement apprentice.

He couldn’t relate all his alternate life knowledge to Obi-Wan, though. So he said, “Before I left to
perform my… duty… to Palpatine he told me that he was going to release known enemies of the Jedi and offer them a deal. He’s very concerned about eliminating any Jedi who escaped the clones. Could be Aurra Sing, or Cad Bane… could be Barriss Offee for all I know. Point being, I’m going to need this.”

He picked up his lightsaber, feeling the satisfactory weight of it in his hand. He couldn’t carry it dangling from a clip on his belt anymore, but he’d find some way to carry it, concealed, at all times. It would be foolish not to.

“Barriss,” Obi-Wan said, mistily. “I know she turned her back on the Jedi, but I can hardly picture her hunting us down across the galaxy…” He looked at Anakin and suddenly seemed stricken, as if once more realizing that there was a time he couldn’t picture Anakin slaughtering their brother and sisters, either.

“I don’t know,” Anakin said. “You never know.”

"No. I suppose not.”

In that other life, Barriss had been released and sent forth but had never been heard from again. Either she had perished pursuing her new orders, or had never any intention of following through. Palpatine hadn’t much cared, so long as she was no longer a Jedi, so that had been that. Vader would have killed her instead of giving her the opportunity to either serve or abandon them, because he had not forgotten what her betrayal had meant for Ahsoka. And for him. But he had let her go because it was the will of Darth Sidious and in that other time he had been bound, body and soul, to his dark master.

Obi-Wan seemed hesitant to leave, so Anakin opened the front door and said, as unironically as he could, “Well then. May the force be with you.”

He thought that his old master looked very much that—old—as he walked past out into the street. For a moment he seemed years beyond thirty-seven, but Anakin shook that thought away. To dwell on it would lead to pity and underestimating the power his master still possessed. It had been this same man who destroyed him on Musafar and he would do it again here on Osallao if Anakin let his guard down or provoked Obi-Wan too much.

Obi-Wan turned back to survey him, and if he were thinking similar thoughts about his old apprentice, Anakin did not know. “Take care of them, Anakin,” he said, and Anakin frowned at him for using his real name in the street. “Take care of yourself.”

“Goodbye, Ben.”

“I’ll be in touch.”

Anakin shut the door.

He stood for a long moment just staring at the light blue finish on the durasteel door, which had been inexpertly installed in the recess of the stone framed doorway, and he allowed himself to escape with thoughts of making a new one.

But soon he turned away and looked down at the lightsaber in his hand. He turned it on, watching with an unexpected thrill as the blue blade thrummed to life. It was not that he had expected Obi-Wan to sabotage it—he would have known if the kyber crystal were missing without having to switch it on—but that it had been many years since he’d last seen this particular saber.

He’d wielded a new, red saber after losing this one to Obi-Wan on Mustafar. He would have had to
replace it eventually, even so. Red was more fitting for Darth Vader, the Sith Lord, anyway. But now he looked at the blue brilliance of his old Jedi blade and thought about the years he’d wielded it during the Clone Wars.

This blade had belonged to the Hero with No Fear, the loving husband of Padmé Amidala, the brother of Obi-Wan Kenobi, and the master of Ahsoka Tano. All things he had not been in so very, very long.

It had also been the blade which cut off Mace Windu’s hand, dooming him to Darth Sidious’ retribution, and the blade which had massacred the Jedi in the temple and the separatists on Mustafar.

“Anakin? What are you doing?”

He shut the blade off with a start. Padmé was propped up on one elbow, peering out of the bedroom at him.

“Nothing, my love,” he said, and went into the bedroom, setting the lightsaber aside on a bare, dusty shelf before sitting on the bed beside her.

“How are you feeling?”

She sunk back down into the bed and moaned, “I’m carrying a pair of shaaks in here.”

He laughed and reached out to stroke the brown curls that fell over her shoulder. He hadn’t expected a sense of humor. That was a good sign. Maybe being able to rest in a real—albeit substandard—bed was already improving her mood. Soon he would get her a new bed and she would feel even better.

“They’re killing me,” she muttered crossly, and his smile fell. She awkwardly turned over onto her other side, brushing his hand away from her hair.

“What can I do for you?” he asked, reaching out again once she had settled with her back to him.

“Nothing. I’m fine. I’m tired. I just need to rest.” She reached a hand back and lightly touched his fingers. “You can lay down with me.”

“Alright.” He got up and went over to the right side of the bed, which had always been his side when he could steal nights in Coruscant away from the Jedi with her during the war. They lay facing each other, not sleeping, but not speaking either. She just stared at him solemnly, and he fought not to wither under her searching gaze. It felt as if she were trying to read his soul; if she could reach out through the force to pry out all of his secrets she would. He wasn’t sure, in those long moments, that she could not.

“Who are you?” she whispered.

“I’m yours.”

She shook her head almost imperceptibly against the pillow. He knew it was an evasive answer, but also the most true. Who was he? Anakin Skywalker? Darth Vader? Some new person born of conflicting memories and an impossible reality?

“Kiss me,” she said.

He obliged, kissing her gently at first, afraid she would change her mind. But she closed her eyes and breathed a sigh, parting her lips to welcome his touch. He shifted closer to her on the bed and pulled her into his arms.
It had been so long.

He gave himself over to a long, earnest kiss, and she pressed herself into him. “I’ve missed you,” he murmured after a while, drawing back just slightly enough to brush kisses along her jaw and neck.

“Ani,” she said breathlessly, an endearment he hadn’t heard in a very long time, “if… if I should die…”

That brought him up cold. “No.” He didn’t know what the “if” was, just that anything to do with her dying was a no. He hadn’t even had the dream when he stole a few hours of sleep here and there on their hyperspace travels. Why tempt such a thing now?

“I won’t, and I’m not going to,” she said, reaching up to stroke his face, her fingers tracing the small scars along his jaw. “But if… something were to happen—”

“I won’t let anything happen.”

“Shhhhh.” She covered his lips with her fingers, smiling a little. “I need to know that the babies will be safe. That you will take care of them. Love them.”

He kissed her hand and said, “Of course. But I don’t want to hear you talk like this.”

“You are so focused on my not dying that I’m afraid of what will happen if I do,” she said, resting her head back on the pillow and sighing. Her eyes drifted shut. “You sound as if you’ll just die with me.”

The thought of living without her was more than just a terrifying specter of a possible future, but a reassignment to a hell he still hadn’t fully escaped. She couldn’t know how empty and dark everything had been for him for so long. Her concerned “what if?” was like hearing the echoes of his respirator, calling him back into his artificial lungs and limbs, reminding him that it could still yet come crashing down.

“I can’t live without you, Padmé,” he told her. “Please don’t ask me to even think about it.”

She opened her eyes. “I would rest easier if I knew my children would be safe no matter what happens,” she said. “You have to promise me you’ll find the strength to live without me, if you have to.” She held either side of his face in her hands and fixed him with a deadly serious stare. “Stay strong. And stay good.”

“I promise.” He had learned to tell her what she wanted to hear.

She smiled and pulled him down so she could plant a kiss on his forehead. “Then I can rest,” she said. “And sleep easy.”

He couldn’t say the same.

She snuggled up close to him and sighed as she relaxed. He held her and rested his head on the pillow as if to sleep with her, but he couldn’t shut his eyes. He stared unseeing ahead at the wall for a long time, just listening to the gentle rhythm of her breathing. He didn’t want to sleep or dream.

But eventually, without realizing it, he must have drifted off, lulled by the silence and Padmé’s peaceful aura.

He was dreaming before he realized it. But he didn’t dream of Padmé in pain or dying.
There were children dying and he was killing them. Not a vision but a memory. And then people he’d never met, never seen, were dying all around him. He wasn’t doing anything and they were dying all the same.

And he saw his children dying, consumed by lightening arcs of blue flame.
Tea and Counsel

The greatest thing you'll ever learn
Is just to love and be loved in return

“You live in a cave.”

Anakin glanced around, deeply unimpressed, taking in the dreary surroundings. A pallet sat on a ledge near the back and a fire crackled in the middle of the “room,” with a small pot rigged above it. A few other odds and ends were spread about or tucked away in recesses, all made of wood or clay. It was like something out of a holocron in the Jed Temple archives about the dawn of civilization. He half expected Madame Jocasta Nu to emerge and wave her hand about, saying, “And now Obi-Wan will demonstrate the primitive habits of early man.”

Of course, he had killed Jocasta Nu. Impaled her with his lightsaber in the library where she had spent the last decades of her life.

“I find it comfortable,” Obi-Wan said. He stirred whatever gloop he had cooking in the pot with a wooden spoon and then turned to a speckled tin pot resting on some stones near the flames. “Tea? I found some remarkable herbs growing in a field only a few hours walk from here.”

“I’ll pass,” said Anakin. Obi-Wan didn’t seem to be listening, though, and poured some brown liquid into a cracked mug and pushed it towards him.

Obi-Wan hadn’t been surprised or startled when Anakin showed up in his makeshift home. He had been quietly meditating before his cookfire but had cracked open his eyes and said, “Ah,” as Anakin picked his way through the dimly lit path that led from the cavern opening to Obi-Wan’s personal niche.

“Have a seat,” Obi-Wan said, waving at the rocky floor opposite the fire.

Anakin lowered himself down and sat cross legged, surveying his former master through the trivet. Obi-Wan’s hair and beard was starting to look shaggy. He still wore his Jedi robes, with the hood pulled over his head.

Obi-Wan was, apparently, returning the favor, and remarked, “I see you finally cut your hair.”

He had allowed Padmé to trim his hair, cutting it down not quite as short as the original Padawan buzz, but still removing almost all of the shagginess it had acquired over the years since he had been knighted. And she had dyed it black, in an attempt to make him look a little less like the HoloNet broadcasted image of the blonde Hero with No Fear that might be recognized even here, far across the galaxy. Obi-Wan must be going for the opposite effect, hoping no one would correlate the unkempt, graying mountain man with an untrimmed beard to the dapper Negotiator, who flirted his way through combat and winked at the HoloNet crews when they asked for an update on the war efforts.

“You should ditch those robes,” Anakin said as Obi-Wan taste-tested his stew.

“Hmm, yes, I know.” He grimaced and reached for a canister of some kind of spice. “How is
Padmé?”

“Good.”

He could have elaborated, told Obi-Wan how tired Padmé was of being pregnant and how, even though she was not due for two more months, she was ready to be done with it and talked about giving birth any day now. But the man across from him wasn’t his friend anymore. An awkward silence descended, and not knowing what else to do, he picked up the mug of tea and sniffed it suspiciously, then hazarded a sip.

“What brings you here, Anakin? I’m sure it wasn’t to make cautious small talk.”

“Padmé is concerned about you,” he admitted begrudgingly, making a face at the bitter taste of Obi-Wan’s tea. “We haven’t heard from you in a while. She thought I should see where you had settled, what you were up to.”

Obi-Wan nodded. It had been about a month since their arrival in Breelden. Anakin had been busy trying to settle in and find ways to make credits like an average, unassuming family man, which had been more difficult than he imagined. Not because he lacked skills, but because it had been a very long time since he had needed to worry about material possessions and being nice to other people. It reminded him a little too much of being a poor little slave boy… because of course that was the last time he’d lived as a civilian. Even trying to lay aside the phantom years as Darth Vader, Anakin Skywalker the Jedi Knight didn’t go around offering to fix up people’s speeder bikes or droids in exchange for groceries.

He’d had little time to spare thinking about what Obi-Wan must be up to. As long as his former master didn’t show up in his living room or come skulking around to see Padmé while he was out working, Anakin couldn’t care less whether Obi-Wan was sitting in a cantina all day watching the HoloNet or living in the wilderness trying to integrate himself into a pack of wolves.


Obi-Wan arched an eyebrow. “I don’t need much to be content,” he countered. “It’s quiet here and I have ample time to meditate and commune with the Force.”

“This tea is vile,” said Anakin, taking a full swallow.

“By all means, insult my hospitality,” Obi-Wan said.

“Padmé wants you to come over for dinner,” Anakin spat the words out, but not the tea. “So you can return the favor.”

“I would never insult Padmé’s cooking.”

“Padmé doesn’t cook. She has to stay in bed.”

“Really?” Obi-Wan looked genuinely concerned. Anakin didn’t like having to make that announcement, but he nodded.

“The midwife’s orders. Bedrest until it’s over.”

“I see. So you do the cooking.”

“C-3PO, mostly. It’s a good thing we didn’t sell him. He’s very helpful around the house… that’s
what I made him for originally, after all.”

He thought he saw the ghost of a smile flicker over Obi-Wan’s face. “You may tell Padmé I will visit when I have a chance.”

Anakin snorted.

“There’s something more,” Obi-Wan said. “I sense you are troubled.”

“I’m always troubled.”

“But you have something specific. You want to talk about it but you’re hesitating.”

Anakin looked into the fire. The last time he had brought his problems to a Jedi, Yoda had given him useless advice.

“I’m no Yoda,” Obi-Wan said, earning a sharp look, “but I would like to help you, Anakin.” Then he added, softly, “I’ve always wanted to help you.”

Anakin put the unappetizing mug of tea down and crossed his arms. He didn’t have robes to tuck his hands into and for a moment missed the comfortable volume of Jedi clothes. It was chilly up here in the mountains, even with Obi-Wan’s glowing fire.

“When I had dreams about my mother, you told me to ignore them, and I did. And she died. She didn’t need to die. If you had listened to me and we had gone to Tatooine right away I could have saved her.”

Obi-Wan watched him steadily. He wondered if his old master was surprised he had chosen this time to air a nearly four year old grievance. After his return to Coruscant following Geonosis, Obi-Wan had expressed sympathy for his mother’s death, but offered no admittance of guilt. Anakin hadn’t said anything at the time—he’d been too secretive, wrapped up in his new marriage with Padmé, fresh off a brief honeymoon on Naboo in the name of taking some time off to recover from the injuries he’d sustained at the hands of Count Dooku. Plus he had not wanted to talk to Obi-Wan about what happened in the Tusken camp, knowing such a display of rage and vengeance would probably merit expulsion from the Jedi Order and Obi-Wan’s unequivocal censure.

“Is that why you never told me about your dreams about Padmé?” Obi-Wan asked finally. “You went to Yoda instead.”

“Yes.”

Obi-Wan nodded. “I have had much time for reflection lately. I’ve spent a lot of time thinking how I could have done this or that thing differently. How I could have trained you differently. What I could have done to keep Palpatine away from you, or if I could have just figured out who and what he was, then maybe all this would be different. Yoda says it’s no use to dwell on the past because the past cannot be changed. Qui-Gon always used to admonish me to live in the present… though back then I worried more about the future than mistakes of earlier days.”

“I wish I had the luxury of ignoring the future,” said Anakin. “But I still have dreams.”

“About Padmé?”

“No.” He reached out to the fire, felt its warmth on his flesh, pushed away a phantom memory of flames burning through to his bones. “I dream about the children.”
“Your children?”

“All of them.”

As Darth Vader he had been able to push away memories of the younglings, fill his head with lies about them being orphans with no hope and his extermination being a mercy, even. Somewhere along the line, though, he’d lost that ability. Going back in time had returned his wife and children to him and now he saw the crimes he hadn’t fixed rebuking him every night. You overturned reality itself to save her but you couldn’t come back and spare us.

And then his own children died because of what he had done. Every night.

“I think about them, too,” said Obi-Wan. “I think about what I could have done differently and how they might still be alive, if only…”

“You didn’t kill them. I did.”


Anakin squared his shoulders. He didn’t like this conversation. Too redolent with guilt and self-recrimination. “Yoda should spend some time blaming himself for letting a Sith Lord become the Chancellor in the first place,” he said harshly.

“I’m sure that he does. Even Yoda struggles to heed his own advice. He’s a living being, not a droid, after all.”

“Palpatine played us all like fools,” said Anakin. “I can blame you and you can blame me and we can talk about the past all day. But if Palpatine were standing here I would kill him.”

“You could try,” said Obi-Wan. “He’s very powerful. Even Yoda couldn’t best him.”

I am more powerful, thought Anakin, but didn’t bother to argue. Obi-Wan didn’t know of the years he had spent as Darth Sidious’ pupil or the powerful secrets of the Dark Side he had learned and already used to get himself back to this point.

“I keep having dreams where Palpatine kills my children,” he confessed. “And I know I should do something about it, but I don’t know what to do.”

He wondered if Obi-Wan understood how much this terrified him. Enough that he would admit it to Obi-Wan, of all people. Obi-Wan, who he knew still probably considered taking his children away from him.

“That is a reasonable fear, even without dreams,” said Obi-Wan calmly.

“I think I’m doing the right thing by staying here,” Anakin said. “But I don’t know it. Maybe I should try to go back to Coruscant and face him, put an end to this.”

“Have you considered that such an action might instead cause your dreams to come true?”

“Of course I’ve considered it.” That’s what had happened with Padmé in that other life, after all. He was acutely aware that any action he took could bring about the very worst. Not knowing what to do, having no hindsight to guide him, was maddening.

Obi-Wan was silent for a long moment as he stirred the stew in methodical figure eights. “Have you
come to ask what I think?”

Anakin shook his head. But then after another few rotations of the spoon he said, “Yes.”

“I don’t think you’ll be surprised to find that I don’t think you should face the Emperor,” Obi-Wan told him. “You’re not ready. I’m not sure you ever will be. He convinced you to destroy the Jedi once, I fear you might fall back under his influence if you go to him again.”

Anakin waved a hand impatiently. “That’s not going to happen. I’ll die before I call him Master again.”

“And that’s the other possibility,” said Obi-Wan. “He kills you. Then what will happen to your children? I wish I could say that I can protect them, but I fear I might fail you, Anakin. He’s very powerful and he has an army on his side, not to mention your conviction that he has skilled assassins on our trail. Your family needs you here.”

“What if I killed him?” asked Anakin. “What if I put an end to this?”

“It’s not worth the risk. Trust me, I’ve thought about throwing caution to the wind and flying to Coruscant myself, but… I doubt I’d make it into orbit.”

Anakin knew for a fact that Coruscant had become an impenetrable defense once it transformed into the seat of the Empire. Even as the heart of the Republic it had been heavily regulated, especially as the Clone Wars dragged on and fear of a Separatist invasion mounted. But as the Imperial center it was impossible to enter. Not that he didn’t know all the codes and protocols for entry. He had been the Emperor’s right hand man, after all.

“I need to protect my family.”

“You need to trust in the Force.”

“And the Force is telling me that they are in danger from Sidious.”

“But you also dream about your own past acts of violence. Perhaps the Force is warning you not to seek out a violent solution, this time,” Obi-Wan mused. “We have spent the last several years pursuing nothing but the violent solution. The war destroyed the republic. It destroyed the Jedi. The only thing it hasn’t destroyed is your family, whether you deserve that or not. So perhaps fighting isn’t the answer. Perhaps it never was.”

Anakin nodded slowly, gazing into the fire. He had ceased fighting the moment he returned to this time, and so far it had worked out better than he could have hoped. Inaction, holding back, had changed his and Padmé’s fate on Mustafar. Going into hiding had quieted the dreams of her death in childbirth. They had been replaced by other premonitions of doom, but perhaps… perhaps… He rested his head in his hands and squeezed his eyes shut. Guessing at the vague images the Force sent him was an exercise in maddening futility. The only thing that had ever provided clear answers was standing in the future looking back upon the past.

“I think,” Obi-Wan mused, “that you came here so I could talk you out of going to confront the Emperor.”

“Do you?”

“Yes. Go back to your wife, Anakin.”
When Shmi Warka was sold into slavery as a young girl, she lost the family name that had belonged to her, passed down from the parents she would eventually forget. For a long time she was just Shmi the Slave, because a slave girl didn’t need a name. She was property and that was all that mattered.

When she became pregnant she didn’t know what was happening to her. She had not had sex yet and so she had no reason to expect such a thing would happen. She thought she was sick and tired because she was hungry and overworked. She thought that she was throwing up her meager rations because she’d come down with a flu. She worried that she would be beaten for her work productivity failing, or killed because a sick and weak slave was a useless one.

She was very young, though her rough life on the Outer Rim made her appear older. She had lost the mother who could have taught her about life… about what menstruation meant and all the other intricate workings of the human body. She had been terrified the first time she bled, until she had been laughed at roughly by an unsympathetic woman who clapped her across the head and told her to stuff herself up and go on with her day. After that she had only felt embarrassment and shame.

By the time things changed again, she thought that she had managed to learn the basics of reproduction. And she thought she knew that babies did not just happen on their own. But the same bewildering terror and confusion overcame her when she stopped bleeding for no discernable reason and her belly started to grow.

She didn’t have a lover. She was worked too hard and too long to have time to socialize with the other slaves. Some managed to find the time, to make the time, but she was a shy and lonely girl who kept to herself. She spent what little free time she had gazing at the stars. She still felt like a girl, a child, and had never been drawn to the human males she had met.

“Shmi has her head in the sky,” the others often said about her.

“There she goes, walking into the clouds,” they would tease behind her back. She heard them but said nothing.

Once, an owner had whipped her and told her to keep her feet on the ground, her hands in the dirt, her eyes on her work.

“Come back down, little sky-walker,” a kinder person had said, once, when her steps slowed and her head tilted upwards to the blue expanse above, distracted by a trail of white left by a departing spaceship. “There’s nothing for you up there.”

When she finally went to see another slave who was known as a healer and was told that she was pregnant, that all the signs pointed to it, she cried and thought she might never be able to stop. The others only sneered at her. Water was scarce and to leak it all out over an impractical thing like
emotion was seen as indulgent, foolish, just the sort of thing an incurable dreamer would do.

She had asked, *but don’t you need a man for that to happen?* And she had been told not to pretend to be stupid. “Doesn’t matter what you’ve been up to, or who the father is, the child will belong to the Owner, just like you.”

She cried herself to sleep and was afraid because she knew that she wasn’t lying and she wasn’t pretending to be stupid. She wondered if someone had crept in upon her while she slept and had done this to her. But something told her no... no... no one had ever visited her in the night. She’d have known. Wouldn’t she?

When her son was finally born she decided that he was a gift from the stars. The stars she had turned her eyes to and prayed to for some form of happiness, of freedom, of love. An answer from the sky itself.

He didn't look anything like her, with his blond hair and blue eyes. He looked like the suns in the bright blue sky and she could think of no other place he might have come from.

She wanted him to have a name that was more than just a sound for slave owners to shout when they wanted his attention.

Now she couldn’t remember what her parents’ name had been.

So she called him Skywalker, and she called herself Skywalker to anyone who asked, though not many people did. When she and her son were sold to Gardulla the Hutt the auctioneer called them “woman and child.”

But she was Shmi Skywalker to herself and anyone with enough respect to listen. Years later, when she married, she became Shmi Skywalker-Lars. She loved her new family but would never shed the name she had chosen for herself and her son. That name was the only part of her son she had left. The stars that had gifted him had come to take him away and she could not hold him down.

It gave her peace of mind to know that he was free and that he would be known as Anakin Skywalker. Always and forever.

**Chapter End Notes**

The name "Warka" is taken from a Wookieepedia note that says Shmi Warka was the working name for the character in Episode I.
The Birth of the Twins

You're gonna find real love
And you're gonna hold your kids
You'll change the course of generations

There were a lot of things that Anakin didn’t know about his mother and never would.

But he did know that she had chosen her own name and his. He’d turned his back on that name once, when all the memories it represented were too much to bear and the person he had been hated the person he had become.

Coming back to it had been hard. Leaving it behind and taking yet another, different alias, had been necessary.

He knew she would understand why he couldn’t give his own children, her grandchildren, the name she had given him. It was too dangerous because it was too famous.

But still, when his children were born and their names were recorded in the Osallan registers as Luke and Leia Agolerga, born to Set and Veré Agolerga, he felt guilty. It was his fault that the Skywalker name she’d been so proud of had to be buried.

It was just a name, he told himself. But he knew better. It had never been just a name. It had always been his mother’s name. Vader couldn’t bear to use his mother’s name. Anakin wished that he still could.

When the twins were born, it was the darkest hour of the early morning, just before the sun rose over the mountains behind their new home.

They were two months premature and a low, steady fear permeated the house. It had become a difficult pregnancy, one that had forced Padmé to bed and made the past month an uneasy waiting game. It wasn’t uncommon for twins to be born early, in fact quite the opposite, and the earlier they were born the less likely that both would survive. In Coruscant there were ways to avoid all this—incubation tubes and medicine and state of the art medical droids. But they weren’t on Coruscant.

Padmé was attended by a midwife named Soolan, who brought along her own cadre of med droids. On Coruscant it would have been customary to travel to a medcenter, but it was tradition on both Naboo and Osallao to have the baby at home. The bedroom was transformed into a mini-medcenter, with the midwife calmly watching as her droids moved everything they would need into position.

She had been tending to Padmé ever since the Skywalkers’ arrival in Breelden roughly a month ago, and Anakin wanted to trust her. She was the best, the most competent, the kindest… everyone he had asked agreed on these facts. Go with Soolan, you won’t regret it.

He still harbored all sorts of irrational fears about her, though. She was an Osallan, how much could she really know about human pregnancy? If she was so wonderful, why didn’t she charge more credits for her services? She was a secret agent of the Emperor and would kill or kidnap the twins. And more.
It was his fear and anxiety that was radiating through the Force and it was his storm of emotions that brought Obi-Wan Kenobi down from the mountains. Anakin had thought he didn’t want his old master around when the time came, because he didn’t want to be distracted by suspicions of Obi-Wan waiting to take off with the children and deliver them to wherever Yoda was hiding. But there was something unexpectedly not infuriating about Obi-Wan standing in the corner, stroking his beard and watching Anakin pace.

Perhaps all that meditating in his cave had paid off. Obi-Wan radiated calm and compassion in a way that Anakin could barely remember.

Obi-Wan maintained a respectful distance, keeping to the living room while Anakin stalked in and out of the bedroom. Sometimes Anakin knelt by the bed and held Padmé’s hand but other times he couldn’t trust himself to stay in there, listening to her screams, without making the windows the crack and the objects in the room dance uneasily. Sometimes he just needed to keep moving, despite the glares from Soolan and her reminders that he needed to stay calm for Padmé.

When their first child was born, Padmé named him Luke. She smiled from a reddened and sweat drenched face before more pain overtook her and she screamed out. Anakin would rip the roof off his own house and fling it down into the valley if he thought that it would make her suffering stop.

The midwife placed a cleaned and swaddled baby into his arms and Anakin felt the violence drain out of him. He stared at Luke’s tiny face, his tiny arms and tiny hands, and was stupefied.

He’d dreamed of his children night after night, but they had been faceless, humanoid shapes without names. Now his son was a tiny person with a face, with eyes squeezed shut and fists tucked under his chin.

He finally understood what made Padmé say, If I die, take care of them. He was finally catching up to a place she had lived in for months.

With the birth of Luke Skywalker, a darkness which had been roiling around the house lifted noticeably. Obi-Wan could feel it. A lightness and calm broke through all the fear, anger, suspicion, and pain.

Obi-Wan dared not enter the bedroom, lest he upset the delicate balance. But he inched closer to the doorway where he could see his former Padawan and friend standing motionless over the bed, holding the bundle that concealed the child he could not see but could feel through the Force. The life of a newborn baby sent out a powerful Force signature, a potential sensitive or not, as if announcing to the world that the living Force had just grown.

Anakin’s face, bent in concentration over his child, looked more at peace than Obi-Wan had ever seen him. It made Obi-Wan’s heart ache. This was the sort of attachment a Jedi was never supposed to have, and Obi-Wan understood why. He had always agreed with the sentiment that a Jedi was supposed to love the offspring of the galaxy rather than devote all their energy to an extension of themselves. Hadn’t Anakin already proved the dangers of this sort of attachment? Hadn’t he already writ large in blood the reasons why a Jedi should not take a wife and father children and forsake everyone else in the name of preserving his own brood?

And yet… and yet. Obi-Wan felt something stirring within his tired heart and after reaching within to ask what it was, realized he was feeling hope.

Anakin himself was marveling, as he looked at Luke’s tiny, red, scrunched up face, that this could
be real. Just looking at Luke, his son, so freshly alive, made him want to be good. And not just
behave well, or keep himself in check, but to be good in a genuine way that he had not really felt
was possible all this time. This was a revelation. This baby made him want to be good not just to
please Padmé but because he didn’t want the darkness to touch this tiny person who was so pure.

The ordeal was not over, however. Padmé still struggled to give her second child life. Giving birth to
Luke had drained her more than she ever imagined possible, and yet she could not relax, could not
lay back and gaze at her child the way Anakin was entranced by the newborn boy. She looked up at
him. He was standing next to the bed but he and Luke seemed so far away.

But she fought to keep going. She fought, and soon she felt Anakin holding her hand, brushing her
sweat slicked hair away from her face and murmuring encouraging words in her ear.

Soolan had taken Luke away and put him in a waiting bassinet, whispering sternly to the new father
that his wife needed him. Anakin had felt ashamed. How could he forget Padmé, even for the
briefest moment? She was fighting for two lives.

Leia Skywalker came screaming into the world at the top of her newly minted lungs. When she was
presented to her mother her eyes were already wide open and taking everything in. The moment
Anakin saw her he knew that she would have a special connection to the Force. There was
something preternatural about the way she looked into his face, as if she knew everything there was
to know already and would find out more.

If he’d thought his heart couldn’t take anymore after meeting Luke, he was wrong. Padmé called her
Leia, breathing out the name in a sigh of relief that she had done it, she had given both her children
life. Anakin heard the name and for the time being didn’t remember that he’d heard it before in
another life. There was no room for that other life in this moment.

She reached a tiny fist out, still screaming loud enough to wake the entire street, and when he offered
her his hand (the robotic one, unfortunately, because the other was tucked under her small body
holding her) she grasped one finger and went suddenly quiet. She gazed at him with solemn eyes, as
if to say, “I know you.”

Anakin Skywalker would never be the same.

He thought he would die a thousand deaths if it meant keeping her safe and happy. He would exile
himself to the farthest, darkest, loneliest rock if it meant making sure the Emperor could never touch
her, could never do so much as whisper a single solitary word in her ear. He would keep the
darkness away from her. Away from Leia and away from Luke.

Padmé nursed her children and held them but soon she needed sleep. She was exhausted and empty
—filled with love but drained of everything else. Anakin didn’t want to leave her, but Soolan insisted
that it was time to move the twins into the other bedroom, which had already been prepared as the
babies’ room. It was time to let her rest and have her own body back for the first time in months. The
droids were busy cleaning up after the birthing and monitoring Padmé to make sure she remained
stable.

Anakin reluctantly allowed himself and the babies to be ushered out. Their bassinets were pushed
into the adjoining room, which was separated from the main bedroom by a joint refresher. It was
only then that he finally remembered that Obi-Wan was out in the living room. Waiting.

He felt a tinge of jealous protectiveness. The Jedi wouldn’t have his children. But at the same time he
couldn’t suppress the desire to show Obi-Wan what he and Padmé had made together. He wanted
everyone and no one to see his children. He was sure they were the most breathtaking works of art
the galaxy had ever seen, but the galaxy wasn’t good enough to look upon them.

He went over to the door that opened out into the living room and waved it open. The panels parted
with a whoosh and he stood looking at Obi-Wan for a moment. “Well?” he said finally.

Obi-Wan came into the room, his hands folded and hidden in the robes he had not stopped wearing. He
guided Anakin over to the waiting bassinets and looked down at the children, who, having
been fed and cuddled and welcomed into the world, were now sleeping.

Anakin thought he could sense that his old master was particularly drawn to Luke. Obi-Wan stood
looking down at the boy for a long time. Anakin couldn’t help but think, Good. Now I know. If he
comes for one of the children, it will be Luke.

As if sensing his thoughts, Obi-Wan lifted his eyes to meet Anakin’s gaze. Then with a wordless
nod, he backed away.

Anakin watched him go, as he walked slowly up the street into the pale pink of the rising sun. His
master cast a long shadow behind him. Anakin wondered if the rift between them would ever be
healed. He wondered if he wanted it to be.
“Oh dear, oh my,” said the pale blue protocol droid, shuffling his way through the marketplace. “I do wish people would not be so very rude. Pushing and pulling all the time. Why is everyone always in such a terrible rush?”

The blue and white astromech at his side whistled a response.

C-3PO and R2-D2 had become something of a fixture on the streets of the northeast sector of Breelden. Artoo was often at his master’s side, helping the man known as Set Agolerga with his business. Agolerga could fix or build pretty much anything, from speeder to droid to home appliance, and Artoo was known as his faithful assistant. C-3PO could more often be seen running errands for his mistress, Veré, or running after the couple’s twin children, Luke and Leia.

“Excuse me,” said a tall hooded figure, reaching out to lay a hand on the shiny, silvery blue of C-3PO’s arm.

Threepio jumped. “Oh! I’m so sorry, hello! I am C-3PO, human cyborg rela—no Artoo I am not, how dare you say such a—”

“Excuse me,” the hooded stranger repeated, “but I was looking for the Agolerga residence? I was told you could show me to them.”

“Why, yes, of course. I am the personal protocol droid of Mistress Agolerga,” C-3PO said proudly. “We were just heading there, weren’t we, Artoo?”

Artoo whirred a confirmation.

They set out, the droids carrying the goods they had been sent to retrieve, the tall hooded figure following close behind.

The streets of northeastern Breelden were steep and winding, and the trio had to climb steps up the sidewalk on their way towards the residential district. Eventually they came to a stone house which had a small plaque affixed to the side of the door. It read:

Droid repair and manufacture / speeder repair
Parts for sale: home, business, transportation use

They entered the building, and the hooded figure scanned the room silently. It appeared to be a junk shop, with a random assortment of spare parts spread out on shelves and tables all around the room. A young boy, who looked about nine or ten, was lounging on a bench idly playing with a toy spacecraft, making whirring noises as he mimicked flight by swinging he arm back and forth.
“Master Luke, you have a customer,” C-3PO announced. The boy blushed and dropped the toy to the side, standing up.

“Do you work here?” the stranger asked.

Luke peered up at the shadow-obscured face. “My father owns this shop,” he said. “He’s in the back.”

There were various noises coming from a back room, and the figure tilted their head to peer through the doorway. A man with his face covered by a mask was seated in front of a half completed droid, surrounded by a shower of sparks as he welded its durasteel panels together.

Artoo whirred past everyone, making a b-line for his master. He stopped just short of crashing into him, chirping and thrumming with excitement.

“What’s the matter, Artoo?” He set aside the welding torch and flipped up the visor of his mask, revealing the face of a man in his early thirties. But it was still unmistakably the face of Anakin Skywalker.

The stranger moved through the shop, past Luke, to stand in the doorway of the backroom. They reached up and lowered their hood, revealing the tall montrals and long blue and white striped lekku of a togruta. The face was of a young woman, mid-twenties, but she had old eyes.

“Hi there, Skyguy.”

“Ahsoka.” He stood up and took off his welding mask, tossing it to the floor where it landed with a clatter. “You’re alive.”

“So are you,” she said.

The last time Anakin had seen his former Padawan, he was leaving the Outer Rim to go to Coruscant with Obi-Wan in response to the news that Chancellor Palpatine had been kidnapped. He’d never known what happened to her when Order 66 went down. She had never resurfaced in all those years of his alternate life, not so that he’d heard any news of her as Vader. He’d thought she was most likely dead.

The idea that she might still be alive was not something he’d allowed himself to hope for in this life. Dwelling on it would only bring more guilt, useless guilt, the reminder that he couldn’t fix everything, he couldn’t even begin to try.

But here she was, and she was alive.

He took a few steps towards her, then stopped. “When did you get so tall?” he marveled, realizing that their eyes were on a level.

She laughed. “I got older. I had a growth spurt.”

He closed the distance and wrapped her in a hug. “You’re alive,” he repeated, disbelieving.

“I am.”

Luke watched, his eyes growing wide. He’d never seen his father hug anyone besides his mother, himself, or his sister. Certainly not some strange togruta woman he’d never seen before.

Artoo wheeled out of the back room and sped over to C-3PO, bumping into the protocol droid’s legs
and beeping triumphantly.

“Well of course I knew it was her, too, you oaf,” said Threepio. “I just didn’t want to say anything so 
you wouldn’t be embarrassed.”

Anakin released the togruta and said, “How did you find me?”

“I didn’t know I was looking for you,” Ahsoka said. “Yoda sent me, but he told me your name was
Set Agolerga. Well, he sent me to look for someone by that name. He didn’t tell me it was you.
When I saw Artoo I realized it must be, or at least I dared to hope…”

She patted the little astromech, and he burbled happily.

“I didn’t know Yoda knew what name I’ve been using,” Anakin said. “Obi-Wan must have told him. I figured they might be in contact.”

“Obi-Wan?” Her eyes widened. “Obi-Wan is alive?”

Anakin smiled. “Yoda didn’t tell you that, either?”

“No.” She looked as if she were fighting back tears. “I thought both of you died when… well, you
know. Everyone died. I didn’t think there was any hope that you two wouldn’t be right in the thick
of things.”

“He’s alive, but he’s called Ben, now.”

“Uncle Ben’s real name is Obi-Wan?” Luke asked. “Why? Is this like the secret names you and
Mother call each other when you don’t think we can hear you?”

Anakin suddenly realized that Luke was watching this entire exchange. He shot Ahsoka an
apologetic look and went over to Luke. “What have I told you about eavesdropping?”

“That eavesdroppers get their ears cut off and replaced with droid parts,” Luke answered
unconcernedly.

“Run home and tell your mother we’re going to have a visitor,” said Anakin.

“But you said I could go with you downtown to pick up some power convertors,” Luke protested.

“We’ll do it later. Go on now. Take Threepio with you.”

Luke heaved an exasperated sigh and motioned for the droid to follow him. Ahsoka watched him go,
her hands clutched to her heart.

“You have a son,” she observed after Luke left, as if the full magnitude of the boy’s existence was
just dawning on her.


A bright, joyous smile spread over Ahsoka’s face. “This means… their mother… Padmé? She’s alive
too?”

“How did you know it was Padmé?”

She uttered a sudden loud bark of laughter, and then could not stop. Tears trickled down her face as
Anakin looked around awkwardly. She wiped at her face and suddenly she looked as if her tears
were overtaking her mirth. “I thought all of you were dead,” she said, a faraway look creeping onto her face as if falling back into years of sadness.

“Padmé was declared dead… they said she had been assassinated by the Jedi as part of their attack on the senate right before… well, you know. I didn’t believe that, but I thought it was some kind of cover-up and she had been killed by the clones. That maybe she’d been with you and they’d killed you both.”

Anakin looked at his feet. So, Yoda hadn’t told her anything, then. He didn’t know if he should curse the little green meddler for sending Ahsoka his way in complete ignorance, or be grateful. How could he ever tell her what he had done?

“How did you escape?” Ahsoka asked. “Where were you when it happened?”

“I…” he just stared at her, stricken, for a long moment. “I was still on Coruscant. But... I… can’t talk about it.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I shouldn’t have asked. It must have been terrible. I can’t even imagine. It was bad enough on Mandalore, but to be there, at the Temple…” She shook her head. "I can't even imagine."

_You really can’t, Anakin thought. You can’t even begin to imagine what I’ve done. What I became._

“You’ve been with Yoda,” he said, changing the subject. “Where is he?”

The haunted look left her eyes, and she snapped back to attention. “That’s what I came here to talk to you about. Yoda said this ‘Agolerga’ person had some key information that could help us.” She leaned forward, said conspiratorially, “Help the rebellion.”

He groaned inwardly. Yoda could not possibly be serious. Maybe he’d gotten his wires crossed and thought that Obi-Wan was using the name Agolerga. Obi-Wan hadn’t ever bothered to come up with a new surname for himself. He didn’t really need one, living up in the mountains. He just went by Old Ben, or, to Luke and Leia, Uncle Ben.

Ahsoka put out a hand, her eyes shining. “I want to tell you, Rex is with us. I mean you know that he left the army before it all happened, I’m sure. But you didn’t know about the chips. He said you didn’t understand. He blamed himself when he realized what happened, that all the clones had turned on the Jedi, because he removed his own chip but didn’t fight for the rest of the clones. He thinks you died because he left and wasn’t there. He thinks one of his men killed you.”

Anakin smiled weakly. This was terrible. Truly awful. He didn’t want to hear all about how Rex, his former second in command in the 501st, blamed himself for getting out before Order 66 went down. Commander Appo had taken his place and had marched by Anakin’s side when he stormed the Jedi Temple. Appo and the rest of the men Anakin had led throughout the Clone Wars had set the Jedi Temple ablaze.

“So there’s a rebellion,” he said, steering her away from talk of Order 66.

Of course he knew there was a rebellion—as Darth Vader he’d become entrenched in fighting rebel cells that kept popping up all over the galaxy. The rebellion had been growing when he abandoned that life, and he hadn’t cared, but he’d really never taken it very seriously. Perhaps it would flourish in his absence, if that timeline even existed somewhere in an alternate reality. He liked to think the entire thing had just poofed out of existence, consumed to fuel the dark side energy which made his little trick possible.
Back in reality, Ahsoka was talking excitedly about senators sympathetic to “the cause” and former Jedi in hiding and he thought he heard her mention Barriss Offee.

“Barriss?” he said, coming back to the present.

“I know what you’re thinking,” said Ahsoka. “But after what happened, well, she realized the Jedi weren’t the enemy, but the victims. That we’d been fooled, duped into fighting Palpatine’s war. She came to me several years ago.”

“And you forgave her? For what she did to you? And for the Jedi she killed?”

“It wasn’t easy at first. But, to be honest, I thought everyone else was dead. Part of me was still angry with her, but another part of me was just happy she was alive,” said Ahsoka. “I’m not asking you to forgive her, but… well it’s hard to explain. She’s a good friend, now. Again.”

*I’m the last person who should be holding a grudge against someone for killing Jedi,* Anakin thought. But he just nodded and said, “I understand, Snips.”

She smiled at the old nickname. “I still can barely believe it’s you,” she laughed. “I’ve spent so many years trying to accept that you, and Obi-Wan and Padmé and Master Koon and everyone else… were dead.”

*At least I didn’t kill Plo Koon,* Anakin thought. *Not directly, anyway.* That distinction belonged to the clones under Master Koon’s command, who had shot down his spacecraft over Cato Neimoidia.

If Ahsoka ever found out what Anakin had done, personally, he wasn’t sure that not technically killing her dear old Master Koon would make much of a difference.

“I don’t know what sort of information Yoda thinks I have that could help you,” Anakin said. “What you see is what I’ve been doing for the past ten years. I used to be a slave in a shop like this when I was a boy, guess I fell back on the only thing I knew how to do other than be a Jedi.” *Or a Sith Lord.*

“This is better than being a slave,” Ahsoka said. “You own your own shop now. That’s nothing to sneeze at.”

Anakin shrugged. This place had once been his and Padmé’s home, until he had been able to afford a new place, and their first house together had become his junk shop. It was a bit out of the way of the commercial district, but people found him through his reputation for being able to fix anything and build quality off-market droids that worked better than ones imported from off-world factories on the Mid or Inner Rim. Plus his special models didn’t come with loads of Empire imposed taxation and background surveillance subroutines. He was doing well enough.

It wasn’t ruling the galaxy, but his family was safe and he found some measure of peace back in his workroom, where everything made perfect sense and no one was dying around him. That experience was reserved for at night, in his dreams.

“It’s not a bad living,” Anakin agreed. “But, like I said, I’m not exactly picking up the empire’s secrets all the way out here.”

He was being cagey and he thought, from Ahsoka’s quirked eyemark, that she could sense it. Certainly he hadn’t been a part of the new Empire for a very long time, whichever timeline was in question, but he wasn’t wholly without helpful knowledge. But he couldn’t—wouldn’t—get involved in the rebellion. He had his children to project.
And besides, if anyone other than Yoda found out about what he’d done, they wouldn’t be so forgiving. They wouldn’t exactly welcome him into their circle. They shouldn’t welcome him. He was still skeptical that Yoda and Obi-Wan had forgiven him, no matter how many times Old Ben reminded him that grudge-holding and vengeance were “not the Jedi way.”

“Yoda wouldn’t have sent me here without a reason,” Ahsoka was saying, thoughtfully. She walked around the shop, absently brushing her fingers across ambulators and power cells. “Maybe it’s not the information you might have, but you that I was sent to find. You are the best that the Jedi has, Anakin. There are very few of us left, but knowing that you survived would be a great morale boost, not to mention we could use you to fight against the Inquisitors.”

Ah, so there were still Inquisitors. Force sensitives trained in surface level use of the dark side, instructed to hunt down and eliminate any Jedi in hiding. As Darth Vader he had helped to train these Jedi Killers, though they were overseen mainly by a former Jedi Temple Guard who had pledged his allegiance to the Empire in order to avoid extermination. Still, the Grand Inquisitor had answered to Vader, and Anakin wondered who he was bowing to now. The Emperor himself? Very unlikely. Palpatine had always been careful, even as Emperor, to hide his true nature as a Sith Lord from his underlings. Very few people knew and those who might suspect kept it to themselves. Vader and the Inquisitors had been the enforcer and the visible threat to the Jedi, the one who wielded the Force publicly, while Palpatine maintained the facade of Force blind politician. The fact that the Empire still thrived in Anakin’s absence showed just how resourceful Darth Sidious was.

“I can’t join the rebellion, Ahsoka,” he said. “I have a family. And I’m not a Jedi anymore.”

Ahsoka cocked her head to the side. “I’m not a Jedi either,” she pointed out. “No one really is, anymore, without the Order. We’re all just former Jedi trying to be a force for good in dark times. I also hesitated, at first, but then I decided that I didn’t need the title of Padawan or Knight or even Master to still adhere to the ideals I was brought up to believe. The Clone Wars tested those ideals… the Jedi lost their way and fought a war that was ultimately being waged by a Sith Lord against everyone. But this is different.”

“How so?” Anakin asked, mildly. Apparently, under the older exterior, Snips was the same optimist as ever. Ten years hadn’t dampened her spirit.

“We have a clear cause. The Empire is evil. It’s a distorted monstrous version of the Republic it used to be,” said Ahsoka, her eyes glowing with conviction. “We were fighting on the wrong side during the Clone Wars. As someone who was a part of that, being a Commander in the Grand Army of the Republic, I feel like it’s my duty to undo the wrongs we committed. We should never have tried to stop the Separatists. No planet should be forced into one alliance or the other, but should be able to choose its own destiny.”

“There wasn’t a right side to be on during the war,” Anakin told her. “Don’t you see? The Emperor was both sides of the war. He was controlling the Republic, the Jedi, and he was controlling Count Dooku and the Separatists. Hasn’t Yoda told you that?”

Once upon a time he had tried to convince himself that the Jedi were the enemies and were trying to take over the republic, but he’d been a foolish child then. It was a lie he’d told himself to justify all the innocents he slaughtered in pursuit of a bone the Emperor dangled before his eyes: the power over life and death and the ability to save Padmé from his nightmares. He’d found the power to turn back time—but if he’d just made the right choice the first time around he wouldn’t have needed to go back in the first place. Going to war had been a mistake. He should have left the Jedi Order after the first battle of Geonosis, married Padmé publicly, and retired to Naboo. It was too bad he hadn’t been able to go back that far.
“Yoda told me about the Emperor… about how he was a Sith Lord and how Count Dooku was his apprentice,” Ahsoka said with a nod. “I understand that he was playing both sides. And he won! That’s why this is different. We finally know who the true enemy is, and it’s Emperor Palpatine. The rebellion is about putting an end to his tyranny.”

“Say you can kill him, what do you plan on doing then? What does Yoda plan on doing then? Declaring himself Emperor?”

“No, of course not. We would return to democracy,” Ahsoka said, clearly growing exasperated. “We would form a new senate and vote on a new chancellor.”

Anakin sighed. “You know I never liked politics, Snips. I wasn’t that fond of the old way of doing things. If that’s all your rebellion has for a plan, I’d just as soon stay out of the way and raise my children.”

Ahsoka crossed her arms. Despite her changed appearance, he recognized the mannerisms of his unruly Padawan when she disagreed with him and wasn’t about to back down. “You can’t be saying that you think everything is fine and dandy with a Sith Lord controlling the galaxy? Do you follow the HoloNet at all? I realize that this planet isn’t under the control of the Empire… yet… but surely you’re aware of all the suffering that’s been going on under the new empire.”

“The HoloNet shows what the Empire wants it to show,” Anakin pointed out. Now he was just nettling her, but he couldn’t stop. “From what I’ve seen everything is running smoothly. Orderly. Just like it should.”

“I don’t believe you,” Ahsoka huffed. “Anyone can see through the propaganda and tell that it’s not what they say it is. Besides, you know how the Empire began.” She paused, her eyes misted over. “He killed all the Jedi. He turned our brothers in arms against us. He made the clones turn on their Generals. I may have left the Order before it happened, but I felt it. All those Jedi dying, so suddenly. And then the temple burning, all the Jedi there dying as well. Tell me you didn’t feel it happen.”

Oh I felt it happen, alright. He couldn’t look her in the eye. Artoo whirred and beeped delicately from the corner, and Anakin was glad for the distraction. “I’m not really interested in making you question your cause,” he told Ahsoka. “But I can’t join it. We all need something to live for. I have Padmé and the twins.”

She sagged and shook her head. “I know. I realize that. But your kids are going to grow up in a dark and dangerous world, Anakin. You can protect them now, but what about later? What if the Empire comes here and takes over this planet? Are they…” she paused and looked around as if expecting a Stormtrooper to be lurking in the next room, “…you know?”

“Force sensitive?” Anakin spoke the dreaded phrase aloud. “Yes, they are. They are both extremely strong in the Force.”

“What if the Inquisitors comes looking for them? There have been rumors of Force sensitive children being stolen from their homes and never seen or heard from again.”

“If that happens I’ll be here to protect them, instead of running around the galaxy sabotaging Star Destroyers,” Anakin responded evenly.

She nodded. “I see.”

He could tell that his dismissive tone had wounded her, so he offered, “Maybe you should talk to Obi-Wan. Maybe he’ll be more enthusiastic.”
He doubted it, though. The quiet hermit life seemed to suit Obi-Wan. His greatest joy, it seemed, was when he was allowed to visit the children. Luke and Leia loved their Uncle Ben to bits and pieces.

“And Padmé,” Ahsoka said. “I can’t believe Padmé would stand by and watch the galaxy suffer. She was always felt so strongly about the republic, about helping those in need.”

Ahsoka was certainly hellbent on making him feel bad and selfish, Anakin thought. If only she knew how good he had become at squashing those feelings down; or learning to live with their constant presence, at least. Still, her words made him squirm. It was as if she suspected he was hiding things from her. Or maybe she was just being her old bratty self who always argued with whatever stance he chose to take.

“They’re Padmé twins too, you know,” he pointed out. “We’re both committed to taking care of them, keeping them safe. Letting them have a childhood…”

“I know.” A sudden smile broke out on her face, washing away the furrow their argument had grooved into her forehead. “I always knew you two would end up together after the war. I just never thought it would be like this. In hiding.”

“You knew all along, did you?”

“Well not all along,” she said with a shrug. “But it didn’t take long. You were so obviously in love. Even a child like I was at the time could see that. But the Jedi code kept you apart. I didn’t tell you but I thought it was sad. And romantic.”

“Nice to know you were observing my life like it was a HoloDrama,” Anakin said dryly, to hide his discomfort. Ahsoka had known… Obi-Wan had known… and Palpatine had known. Had the whole Jedi Order and half the senate known and just pretended ignorance?

“Don’t be mad, Skyguy,” she said, giving his arm a playful punch. “Not even Grievous’ torture droids could have gotten it out of me. And no one is going to find out from me where you live now.”

“Speaking of that,” said Anakin, “let’s go home. You still need to meet Leia, and I know Padmé will be overjoyed to see you. That is, if you can spare a few hours.”

“I think I can do that,” she said with a grin.
Twilight was falling over Breelden as they exited the shop, Artoo wheeling along behind them. The sun was a faraway orange light, its rays filtering through the mountains peaks to the west. Ahsoka paused to take in the Osallan sunset, lagging behind as Anakin went to the speeder he kept parked next to the shop.

He glanced back, feeling something… off. A bad feeling. Ahsoka stood out front, alone in the street, tall and graceful, all grown up and independent, but her face towards the sun still held that bit of wonder that Snips had always shown when visiting a new world. It almost made him turn to take in the natural wonder of the day turning to night with her.

But something was wrong.

He felt a disturbance in the Force.

"Artoo," he said, reaching his hand out. His faithful droid knew exactly what that movement meant, and one of his top compartments popped open. Anakin’s lightsaber came shooting out and landed in his hand.

Ahsoka turned, ”Master—"

A blaster shot came from above, aimed directly at Ahsoka’s chest. But Anakin dove towards her just in time to deflect the shot. It burned into the pavement harmlessly, leaving a blackened scar on the cobblestones.

Ahsoka instinctively ducked and rolled over to the shelter of the house. She crouched between the speeder and the stone wall, looking out to where the blast had come from.

Anakin also looked up, and saw a figure standing on a rooftop up the street. Without thinking twice he took off towards it at a run.

Ten years of nothing, and now a sniper poised to take a shot right at his front door?

Someone had followed Ahsoka here.

Someone had aimed a blaster at her heart.

Someone had seen him wield his lightsaber.

Someone was going to die.

Ahsoka was running alongside him as they both saw the figure, silhouetted in the sunset, turn and jump to the neighboring rooftop.

Anakin switched off his saber and leapt, with the aid of the Force, up on top of the nearest house and hoped his neighbors were oblivious inside their homes, preparing for the night.
He hadn’t had much to challenge in the last ten years, but he’d kept in shape, knowing that a day would come when he would have to fight. Ahsoka proved that her inhuman togruta athleticism had not faded over the years, and was soon leaps and bounds ahead of him.

The figure had a head start, and they leapt from rooftop to rooftop and across several streets, as the would-be assassin retreated towards the mountains.

Out of the corner of his eye Anakin saw two blinding white lightsabers come to life, and Ahsoka sprinted forward, tossing one saber ahead of her. It arced through the air and clipped their quarry, eliciting a sharp cry. The lightsaber came whistling back and Ahsoka caught it with one hand, never pausing in her stride.

That was enough to allow them to close the distance. The lightsaber had caught the leg of their prey, and she—as Anakin was able to recognize the identity of the bounty hunter—slipped and fell from the roof into an alley below.

She twisted around and fired off a couple of blasts at them, but they were easily deflected by the three lightsabers they held between them.

Ahsoka cut the blaster rifle in half, sending the pieces clattering across the alley. Anakin stopped before the figure on the ground.

“‘Aurra Sing,’” he said grimly. “It took you long enough.”

Then he aimed a sharp kick at the bald, pasty white head of the humanoid alien he had once upon a different lifetime paid to hunt down Jedi. His boot met her skull and she went out cold.

Ahsoka sheathed her lightsabers. “She was after me,” she stated the obvious. “But why? I don’t have a bounty on my head. I’m not really a Jedi…”

Anakin bent down and picked up the inert form of Aurra Sing. With a grunt he threw her over his shoulder.

“You’re a Jedi in every way that matters to the Emperor, Snips. But we’re gonna ask our friend here a lot of questions.”

Back in the shop, Anakin put Sing down roughly on a table in his workroom, which had been the twins’ bedroom for a while. He removed several weapons she kept on her person, including a hip blaster and a lightsaber.

His commlink beeped and he saw that it was Padmé. He left the workroom, leaving Ahsoka to guard their prisoner.

“Yes?” he asked, going into the opposite room, which was now a storeroom but had once been his and Padmé’s bedroom.

“Anakin,” her voice came out tiny but unmistakably worried. “Luke told me we have a visitor. Where are you?”

“I’m still at the shop,” he said. Outside the remaining rays of light had gone and the northeast sector of Breelden was cloaked in gray night. It was far past time to be home, their family together, gathered around a meal that C-3PO had made for them.

“Is everything all right?”
“Yes. I’ll be home soon.”

“Obi-Wan is here for dinner,” said Padmé. Then, she added with a wry laugh, “Starving as always.”

It had become something of a joke that Obi-Wan swore by the healthy, nut and vegetable based diet he had adopted up in the mountains over the years, but still managed to find excuses to help himself to leftovers whenever he visited them. Padmé felt it was her duty to make sure Kenobi didn’t starve.

“Start without me,” Anakin said.

“Your visitor…” Padmé ventured. “Luke said… well it sounded like…”

There was cautious hope in her voice. Luke had probably told her a togruta woman had come to the shop and even though that species was not totally absent in Breelden, they each inevitably thought of Ahsoka whenever they saw one at a distance. As if they were always ready to see someone turn and it would be Snips, despite whether or not the patterning or coloring on the distinctive montrals and lekku matched.

Anakin had a lot of ghosts in his past like that. He was always catching glimpsing of beings he thought were Jedi, even knowing it was impossible. Most of the time it was impossible because he knew they were dead. Most of the time it was impossible because he had killed the person he thought he saw.

“I have to go,” he said, hearing a groan from the workroom. Sing was coming around. “Save some leftovers. For two.”

He switched off the commlink, knowing that he was leaving Padmé with more questions than answers, but at the moment he was more concerned with finding out what Aurra Sing knew.

If she had merely tracked Ahsoka to this planet, his secret and his family were still relatively safe. But if she had known she would find him, or Obi-Wan, or Padmé here… then he had a very bad feeling about this.

Sing was sitting up, grimacing and holding her head in her hands. She didn’t look a day older than the last time he’d seen her, which in this lifetime was about a dozen years ago, when she’d been imprisoned following her assassination attempt on Padmé in Alderaan. He knew that’d she’d escaped and given Obi-Wan some trouble, but he hadn’t crossed paths with her and had heard that Aayla Secura had managed to capture her once more.

That was in this life. In his other life he had seen her many times once she became an Imperial agent who reported to him. Either way, she never seemed to age.

Sing was an unsettling human/alien hybrid with Force powers who had at one time long ago been a Jedi Padawan. Most of what he knew about her he had learned as Darth Vader, researching prisoners to be set free after Order 66. Her mother was human, but her father’s species was unknown, and she was far older than she looked.

She had been very good at killing Jedi. She could have been an Inquisitor if she had cared about anything besides money.

“Who sent you here?” he asked without preamble. Ahsoka hovered over Sing, her arms crossed, looking down at the humanoid as if daring her to try anything.

“What’s it to you?” Sing responded, glowering at him. “You sure love to kick a girl when she’s down, Skywalker,” she said with a laugh that ended in a wince.
Anakin braced himself on the table with one arm and leaned in towards her face… which was always blanched white, but looked a little paler than usual even so… “Who. Sent. You,” he said, his voice a low growl.

“It’s a regular job,” she said, leaning away from him. “The Empire. You know, Jedi are wanted for treason. It pays good money.”

“Who were you after?”

Her gaze flickered between him and Ahsoka. “Tano,” she said. “I’ve been tracking her for a while. We go way back, you know.”

“Oh I know,” Anakin said. He hadn’t been present on Alderaan when her repeated assassination attempts against Padmé were foiled, but he had heard all about it. It had been all down to Ahsoka’s premonitions, heroic actions, and quick thinking that his wife had survived.

“Finding you here is just an added bonus,” said Aurra. “You’re supposed to be dead but I bet the Empire would pay a lot to get their hands on you.”

“It’s not a bonus,” Anakin assured her.

She had a cagey look about her, and he could tell she was casing the room, trying to determine how she could get out of this. They hadn’t tied her up, which obviously surprised her. But Anakin wasn’t worried. She wasn’t getting away.

“Who do you go to when you have a bounty to deliver?” he asked. Ahsoka quirked an eyebrow, obviously wondering why this mattered.

Aurra also seemed to be turning the significance of the question over in her mind, because she stared at him without answering. A brief smile twitched at Anakin’s mouth before he held out a hand. He had no patience for this.

He was missing family dinner, after all.

Aurra’s eyes bugged out suddenly and she reached toward her throat with her long, alien fingers. She made a strangulated clicking noise as she clawed ineffectively at the invisible hand around her neck.

Ahsoka shifted back and forth on her feet and he could feel her gaze on him, questioning. But she said nothing.

He released Aurra and she slumped back, gasping in gulps of air.

“Who do you report to?” he asked, Ahsoka quirked an eyebrow, obviously wondering why this mattered.

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“Who do you report to?” he asked.

She glared at him, rubbing her throat, but there was fear in her eyes now.

“He’s called the Grand Inquisitor,” she said. “I don’t know his name. He’s a pau’an. A Force user.”

Anakin knew the being she was describing. He’d served under Darth Vader as the head of the Inquisitorius. So, bounty hunters like Sing were reporting to him. But who was he reporting to? Vader had trained him and been in charge. The Inquisitor hadn’t reported directly to the Emperor in that other time, and Anakin doubted he was doing so now.

"He’s the only you’ve dealt with?”
She nodded. “He freed me from prison, gave me the option to join the Inquisitors. I said no thanks but that I’d be happy to bring him Jedi for a price.”

“Does he know you came here?”

She looked over at Ahsoka, then back at Anakin, the wheels turning in her brain.

“I’ll know if you’re lying.” he said, slamming his metal fist on the table. She jumped, startled, and narrowed her eyes at him.

“No,” she said. He saw her hand inching down towards what was likely a concealed weapon. Ahsoka saw it too, because one white lightsaber leapt into her hand and thrummed to life, aimed at Sing in an instant.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” she said, then reached down with her free hand and fished a knife out of Sing’s boot.

Sing leaned back and affected an air of false calm. It wasn’t convincing.

“I only go to the Inquisitor when I have a Jedi to deliver,” she said. “Alive or dead.”

Anakin nodded. He believed her. He reached out with the Force and took hold of her trachea again.

“Anakin,” said Ahsoka, “what are you doing? She told you what she knows.”

“She knows too much,” he said as Aurra Sing writhed beneath his phantom grip. “She can’t be allowed to leave here.”

“Yes, but…” Ahsoka looked at the bounty hunter, conflict playing across her features. “It’s not…”

“…The Jedi way?” Anakin finished her thought. She was right. He should be merciful. He let Sing go, but only long enough to draw his lightsaber and with a quick movement, he severed her neck from her shoulders.

Ahsoka gasped as the head rolled and bounced off the table, coming to land in a corner of the room next to a protocol droid head.

“I’m sorry. She knew too much,” Anakin repeated as he walked slowly over to the head.

The dead bounty hunter’s face was frozen in shock, her eyes bulging and mouth slack. She hadn’t had time to take a breath between the force choke and the beheading.

Ahsoka found her words after a moment of shock that mirrored Sing’s death face. “She was unarmed… our prisoner… Anakin that was murder. That wasn’t right.”

Anakin picked up Aurra’s head by her long pony-tail. He turned back to Ahsoka.

“My family’s safety depends on secrecy,” he explained, his voice calm, patient, as if he were instructing her on lightsaber techniques back at the Jedi Temple. “No one in the empire can know that we live here. The Emperor can’t know that we live here. Do you think she’d have kept quiet if you sent her on her way?”

“We have prisons,” Ahsoka said. “The rebels. We have… we have some places where I could have taken her.”

Anakin shook his head while carrying Aurra’s over to an incinerator mounted in the back wall. It had
been installed after the bedroom’s conversion to a workroom, for disposing of garbage and spare parts which couldn’t be put to use anymore.

“It’s too dangerous,” he said. He opened the incinerator door and tossed the head inside. “She was too dangerous. Do you know how many Jedi she’s killed? She was known for it even before you or I were born.”

“So? Jedi don’t take vengeance,” Ahsoka said, her eyes following his actions with horror.

“It’s not vengeance,” he said with a sigh. He knew Ahsoka was good hearted, but surely she had to understand that Aurra Sing was a very great threat. “It’s precaution. It’s not underestimating your enemy.”

He turned the incinerator on and stared at it grimly for a moment. There was no window to the inside, which was just as well. “I’m protecting my family.”

He looked back over his shoulder at Ahsoka. She had turned her gaze to Sing’s headless body.

“You’ve changed,” she said. “I don’t think you would have done that when I was your Padawan.”

“Probably not,” he agreed. He’d have had no reason to execute Aurra on the spot back then. He’d have dragged her to a Republic prison which she would have escaped from eventually. “It’s been a long time. I have different priorities now. I have a family. You do what you have to do.”

She looked up at him. “Have you done this before?”

“This?” he pointed towards the incinerator. “No. This is the first time someone’s found us here.”

He knew it was a half-truth. What she had really asked was if he’d murdered in cold blood before, casually dispatching a sentient being as if it was an easy thing.

He’d rather not answer that question.

Ahsoka nodded. “I led her here,” she said, rubbing her forehead wearily. “I was sloppy in my movements. I put you in danger.”

“It’s not a problem,” said Anakin with another dismissive wave. “I’m happy to see you, Snips. And we took care of... this. There’s no more danger. I’m glad you came.”

Should he feel remorse over Aurra Sing? He didn’t think so. She had come to his home. She had shot a blaster at his former Padawan’s heart. She would have killed him if he’d given her the chance. And if she snooped any further into his life here, she would have found his wife and children and would have delivered them to the Grand Inquisitor if she didn’t kill them as well.

He shuddered at the thought of the twins being handed over to the pau’un Inquisitor to be trained in darkness, given numbers like the rest of the Inquisitorius. No longer Luke and Leia but something like Tenth Brother or Ninth Sister. That was not the life he wanted for his children.

If he had to murder so they did not, so be it.

“You’re not going to like this, Ahsoka,” he said. “But the rest of her isn’t going to fit in the incinerator one piece.”
Padmé stood at the window and looked out over the back yard. Outside, under the starlit sky, Obi-Wan sat in meditation. The twins flanked him on each side, copying his cross-legged pose. Padmé smiled at her children, at their eagerness to learn their Uncle Ben’s curious ways. She watched as they fidgeted and glanced around, unable to quite achieve the statuesque serenity of the former Jedi Master.

Obi-Wan had excused himself to go outside and meditate after dinner, while they waited for Anakin to return home. He might have gone to investigate, but he told her that he sensed no danger to Anakin, and felt that patience was appropriate. They both knew that sometimes it was best to leave Anakin to his own devices.

Still, the fact that he was with a visitor who matched the description of Ahsoka had made Padmé want to go find out what was keeping them. Was it really Ahsoka, and if it wasn’t, who else could keep Anakin at the shop for so long? He didn’t usually let just any customer keep him away from home after hours. She wished Luke had been able to remember the name of the togruta visitor. She wished Anakin hadn’t ended their conversation over the commlink in such an abrupt and mysterious manner.

But she waited.

Padmé had learned patience over the years.

One might think that she should have mastered that art long ago, but the truth was that as a young queen and a senator she had been rash. Those closest to her had often joked about it with an undercurrent of anxiety… her handmaidens and Naboo guards had sworn that she aged them by a decade or more.

She had always considered herself level headed, and prided herself on thinking things through. It wasn’t her fault that the sound option almost always involved putting herself in danger. She could handle herself—she was a crack shot with a blaster and athletic enough to hold her own, despite not being a Jedi or soldier. She had undergone the same rigorous training as her handmaidens, long ago, when she attended their training program unbeknownst to them. And so she was a capable fighter. She had proved this time and again, from the blockade on Naboo when she was just fourteen, to the first battle of Geonosis, when she had been right in the thick of things. And time and again during the wars she had rushed in to take matters into her own hands, whether it required diplomacy or aggressive negotiations.

She had a wonderful track record for success. But still, she was not known for holding back. She was not known for sitting still and waiting. She had never been particularly interested in that sort of patience.

Motherhood had forced patience upon her. She had started to think of the twins first and foremost, in
every decision she made, every action she took. Them, and Anakin.

She wished she could leave the twins in the care of Obi-Wan and run off to see what was going on with Anakin, but she couldn’t. She trusted Obi-Wan but she had promised to Anakin that she would never leave them alone with his former Master. Anakin still lived with the fear that Obi-Wan would take the children from him. It troubled her that even after a decade things were uneasy between them. She wanted so much for them to be friends again.

She could only be glad that Anakin trusted her. At least, she thought that he did. She did not feel that he suspected her of leaving him or taking the twins away. He never objected to Obi-Wan being at their home when he was not, as long as Padmé was there. He had gotten over the fear that she was in league with Obi-Wan against him. Getting over the fear that Obi-Wan was against him was the next step.

The past decade had been a strange one for Padmé Naberrie-Skywalker. Not the least because she could never use that name. It was her true name, the name of her two families—the first, as a daughter and sister, the second as a wife and mother. But it was a private name, one she could never claim publicly.

Padmé was no stranger to aliases. Every time she adopted a new name, it was almost as if she created a new person. It seemed that her entire life she had lived behind one mask or another.

Amidala had been a political name for her public persona. A person who spoke in a commanding tone that defied anyone to underestimate her for her petite size or her young age. It was all an elaborate act; one she believed in and one she was good at, but an act nonetheless.

Now to everyone she met she was Veré Agolerga. She had made friends and was well known to her neighbors. She had become involved in local politics slowly over the years, first by joining the local parent teacher board of the twins’ elementary school and then by serving on more committees and citizen action collectives and whatever else her neighbors’ kept asking of her. Everyone was impressed by her skill in debate and political acumen and sought her out when they wanted to get something done.

As Veré, she allowed herself to be herself as much as possible. But her relationships with her friends and neighbors remained distant, because her history was false. There was no honesty in this life, no opportunity to make true connections, at least not with anyone besides Anakin and Obi-Wan. They were the only people who knew the life behind the lies, because they were lying to everyone else with her.

But even that thought struck her as false, sometimes.

Set and Veré were an unassuming young couple who ran a small business together. (Anakin had no head for the business end of things; he loved to tinker in his workshop but loathed anything that had to do with permits or taxes or bank accounts; or even the task of making sure his customers paid in full.)

They were relatively happy. They had two beautiful children that meant the world to them. They loved each other and knew how to get through each day, each week, each planetary rotation around the benevolent Osallan sun. Their goal for the future was to see their children grow up safe and happy. Beyond that, they had no aspirations, no grand ambitions.

Anakin and Padmé didn’t really exist anymore.

They had replaced themselves because simply being Anakin and Padmé was too much to handle.
Setting aside the practical need to conceal their identities, to hide them from the Emperor, Padmé felt as if simply being who they were would kill them both if she allowed it. They had become too big for their boots.

Anakin’s undoing was more palpable and obvious; the blood he had shed and the ruin of the Jedi was a testament to that. But she also felt as if everything had gotten away from her. She hadn’t been able to stop the Republic from becoming mired in war and morphing into an Empire no matter how hard she had tried. Their lives had collapsed, imploded under the impossible weight of fear and destiny. The only way to escape the ruin was to shed their skins and forget they had ever lived so large and dreamt so big.

They were so different than the people they had been. Ten years in and Padmé could almost convince herself that Set and Veré were the real people. That she had only lived a dream where she was Amidala—always in the thick of things, dedicated to one cause or another that was so much larger than her own life. And her husband… Jedi Knight? War General? Surely not. (Sith Lord for a day? Never. Laughable. Ridiculous. Wrong.)

There were other times when she didn’t know who these strangers were. She looked into the mirror and didn’t know who she saw. She gazed across the breakfast table and wondered who this Set person was, where Anakin had gone.

And yet everything that was good belonged to these strangers with the unrecognizable faces.

So she tried to stop turning it over in her head, tried to stop understanding who and what she was. She was Anakin’s wife. Luke and Leia’s mother. Obi-Wan’s friend. She was all those things whatever name she called herself and whatever history she owned up to. Wasn’t that what mattered, after all? She was who and what she loved. The Republic was dead, but her family was alive.

If she allowed herself to think of the Naberrie family, far away, who thought their daughter, their sister, their aunt, was dead, she almost lost her hold on happiness. She feared she would never see them again. Ryoo and Pooja probably didn’t even remember her face. And so she thought of them as little as possible, only allowing herself to be glad that they were alive out there. There was a time she had feared they would be killed as retribution for her role in stealing away the Emperor’s prize, but she’d heard no reports of their deaths. Padmé Amidala, on the other hand, was declared dead by the Empire, a victim of the Jedi’s treachery in the official story of the Rise of the Empire. She told herself not to fear, not to weep for her family’s sadness if they believed the lies the Empire peddled as truth. She told herself to forget.

She was no longer the daughter of Jobal and Ruwee. She was no longer the sister of Sola.

She had made her choice.

Padmé’s reverie was interrupted when she heard the beeping of the security code being entered in the front door. Anakin was home, finally. She turned from the back window and rushed through the house to the front entry room.

Anakin entered, followed by R2-D2 and a tall, serious looking togruta woman. It took a moment to register that this was Ahsoka. Even though she had suspected and hoped that Anakin’s old Padawan was alive and had come to see them, she looked so different from the slight teenager Padmé remembered. She was as tall as Anakin with fully grown lekku draped over her shoulders, trailing down to her waist. But she smiled, and it was Ahsoka’s smile.

“It is you!” Padmé said, ignoring the years of distance and wrapping Ahsoka in a hug.
“The one and only.”

Ahsoka’s smile faded and her eyes grew distant. Padmé thought that she was tired and even a little big sickly seeming. Her voice was light but something was troubling her. Perhaps it had to do with why she had sought them out after all these years. Questions raced through Padmé’s mind, the most important one being how Ahsoka had found them at all. No one was supposed to know where they were, not even Yoda or Bail Organa, who had been the only beings privy to the knowledge that they were still alive and at large somewhere in the Outer Rim.

But she set those questions aside, for now. She turned to Anakin, and looked between him and his former Padawan with a smile. C-3PO shuffled out to greet them and R2-D2 chirped a response. In that moment it was as if the Republic still stood, as if her husband had never fallen to the Dark Side or become Palpatine’s tool of destruction even for a moment, and as if it was safe to be Anakin and Padmé again.
Imperial Officers

We were born in the shadow
of the crimes of our father
Blood was our inheritance
No, we did not ask for this [x]

Anakin wished that Ahsoka’s return had not been marred by the incident with Aurra Sing. Or at least, that it had not ended so awkwardly. When they had been fighting her together, leaping across rooftops in pursuit, it had felt like old times. It had been, he dared to admit, enjoyable. They had always made a great team and over a decade apart had not changed that. It had also been good to know that even after all this time leading a quiet civilian life he could still do what needed to be done. Thankfully, even though it had ended with Ahsoka disapproving of his actions, she had accepted it. He was sure that Ahsoka understood the impossible situation Sing had created for herself, for him. She only objected out of a need to uphold the Jedi ideals she had been taught since she was a child. Snips was just too much of a Jedi, still, despite having walked away from the order over a decade ago. Killing an unarmed prisoner was strictly against the code. He’d once felt conflicted over this, as well, back when he’d killed Dooku at the feet of Palpatine.

He’d done much worse since that pivotal moment, and somehow he could not muster regret for Sing. It wasn’t the dark side, he thought, that had motivated him. He had not touched that power in years and he didn’t think he’d fallen by the wayside now. It wasn’t a kill done for passion or power, she wasn’t an innocent, and he didn’t hate himself for it. He felt numb at the memory of her head bouncing across his workroom floor. His once peaceful, murder-free workroom.

He’d done what needed to be done. No more and no less.

Still, despite the leftovers saved for them, neither Anakin or Ahsoka found they had much of an appetite. Padmé kept throwing them questioning looks, especially when they declined dinner. Obi-Wan also knew something was up. He didn’t ask any probing questions or even look mildly curious, but Anakin could tell.

Obi-Wan didn’t seem surprised to reunite with Ahsoka, which confirmed Anakin’s suspicion that he was in contact with Yoda and had told him of their presence here. He was not happy about that. He’d hoped Obi-Wan had given up scheming and plotting with Yoda behind his back after all these years. And besides that, transmissions between star systems could be intercepted. Even if their communications hadn’t been overheard, Ahsoka’s arrival here had brought at least one unsavory character too close to his family. Despite telling Ahsoka (truthfully) that he was glad to see her and happy she came, Anakin made a mental note to express his displeasure to Obi-Wan.

But not now. Not when Padmé and Ahsoka and the twins were all gathered around. This was a happy moment. This was family time; and Ahsoka fit into the picture in a way he hadn’t allowed himself to think about before, when even the idea of her being alive was too much to hope for. It was good that she was here now.
The only person missing was Shmi. She would have made the circle complete. He pushed that thought away. There would always be someone missing. There would always be ghosts pushing at the corners of his mind, reminding him of failure and loss. It was better not to entertain those dreams.

Luke and Leia were fascinated by Ahsoka, and she was only too happy to sit with them on the sofa and listen as they vied for her attention. Anakin stood in the doorway, leaning against the frame, content to watch as Ahsoka become acquainted his actual children. It was strange and yet perfectly fitting. The Master and Padawan relationship was the closest thing the Jedi had allowed to family. At times Ahsoka had been like his child, at other times an infuriating little sister. Anakin glanced over to Obi-Wan, who was the closest thing he had to a father, but who had also been his brother.

Obi-Wan caught his eye, and Anakin looked away.

Luke wanted to know all about where Ahsoka had come from and flying on spaceships and whether she had been to various star systems he’d learned about in school. That was Luke. His eyes were always on the sky and his mind was always in a spaceship. Anakin couldn’t blame him; he’d been the same way as a boy. He’d been able to tell Luke a few things from his past but not as much as he wished he could.

Leia was an exceptionally bright girl and whenever her parents had company, for as long as she had been old enough to stay up with the adults a little while, she would entertain them by reciting a speech, poem, or essay she had prepared for school. Leia, like her mother, loved to debate and give speeches. She was undeniably a teacher’s pet; she was routinely head of her class and was now president of more than one club.

Anakin could tell Leia was itching to get up and show off her skills, but he caught her eye and shook his head. Now wasn’t the time for Leia to demonstrate how precocious she could be.

Padmé was thinking the same thing, and she eyed the wall mounted chrono while saying, “It’s past your bedtimes.”

The twins made the usual protests, Leia pointing out that they were too wide awake to fall asleep properly, Luke crying out that he had just asked about what Shili was like and hadn’t heard the answer yet. Anakin pushed himself off of the doorframe and said, in his most commanding voice, “Children, silence. You have school tomorrow. Up.”

The twins leapt obediently to their feet and were suddenly at attention.

“Go on,” Anakin waved them from the room. “I’ll be up in ten minutes. You had better both be in bed.”

“Yes, Father.”

Ahsoka looked confused as they both saluted him like tiny Stormtroopers and marched from the room.

“What was that?” she asked.

“Oh that’s a game he plays with the children,” Padmé said. “They pretend they’re Imperial Officers. It may seem strange but it makes them think obeying orders is fun. It’s a competition, really, he promotes them if they’re good and gives them demerits when they misbehave. Leia can’t stand it if Luke’s an Admiral and she’s just a Commander.” She laughed.

“They’re getting a bit old for make-believe,” Obi-Wan observed mildly, sipping some caf.
“They’re ten,” Anakin said, his voice flat.

“Well it is a bit unsettling to see them parade around like they’re part of the Empire,” said Ahsoka. “I suppose all the way out here it doesn’t seem quite real, but it’s no game to those in star systems controlled by the Empire.”

“It doesn’t mean anything.” Padmé said, with forced brightness, as Anakin just sighed and rolled his eyes.

He was used to Obi-Wan questioning his parenting but to get it from Ahsoka as well was a bit too much.

The Imperial Officer game had begun when the twins were very young and utterly unruly. He’d once commanded respect as General Skywalker, and in another lifetime as Lord Vader, so pretending he was running a military operation was the only way he’d really been able to get the twins to come to heel. It wasn’t the same, of course, because disobedience meant court martial or death to actual Stormtroopers or imperial officers. To the twins, punishment was being confined to their quarters or having toys taken away or privileges revoked. If they were especially trying to his patience he would send them to the brig, which was actually the cleaning supply closet, to sit and pout with the housekeeping droids.

As much as he hated to admit it, Obi-Wan was right that they were getting a little too old for discipline to be a game. But now it was more of a habit than an actual game. He had once lined up their toys and explained to them that these were their troops and had assigned them positions of authority over an army of miniature droids he had made for them, but that was when they were very small, just three or four. Now that they were ten he simply used The Voice and they reacted as expected. But he couldn’t remember the last time he’d called Leia, “General” or gave Luke a pretend medal of honor for doing well in school. Soon enough they would be teenagers and would probably scoff at him and tell him he wasn’t in charge of anything and would run off to do whatever normal, non-Jedi teenagers did. To enjoy their freedom and the ease of not having any greater purpose to worry about.

And what would he do about it? Besides cut off their allowance, which was about all the power he had over them, really. There was something beautiful and innocent about that, though. The stakes for Luke and Leia were low, and that was how he wanted it to be. They were children. Just children.

It was a fantasy. He knew it. The older they got the more real everything would be. They would never serve the Empire, not while he was alive to prevent it, anyway. But his dreams told him they would be targeted. They could not stay hidden forever. One day, Darth Sidious would come for them.

He only hoped they could escape the fate he saw for them in his nightmares. Dreams were fear, fear and suffering. They were not real. Padmé had not died. Luke and Leia wouldn’t die either. He had kept her safe. He would keep them safe.
Children of the Force

Are you gonna be like your father was and his father was?
Do you have to carry what they've handed down?

When Anakin left to check on the children, Padmé turned to Obi-Wan and said, “Have you been talking to him about it again?”

“No. But in time, we must,” Obi-Wan said.

“Talk about what?” Ahsoka asked.

“The twins. They are strong in the Force,” said Obi-Wan. “They should be trained as Jedi.”

“But Anakin doesn't want them to be?” Ahsoka raised an eyebrow.

“It’s not that, exactly. It’s just that we wanted them to have the chance to grow up as normal children. We haven’t told them everything about the past,” Padmé told her. “Out of necessity. I’m sure they suspect some things; it’s impossible to keep things from them, I think, they’re so in tune with everything it’s like one slip and they pounce on it like cats. But we have tried to be discreet.”

“They don’t know about the Jedi?”

“We haven’t told them,” Padmé repeated.

She was not naïve enough to think that what the twins knew and what they had been told were the same. Leia, especially, seemed to see right through any lie. Their false names, their fabricated history. But Padmé and Anakin had tried to shield the truth from them as much as possible. They didn’t want the twins spilling family secrets to their classmates when they were too young to fully understand the gravity of the situation. On the opposite end of the spectrum, they did not want them living in constant fear, weighted under the knowledge that their parents were among the Empire’s most wanted.

And most of all, she—they—did not want the children to know what their father had done.

“I never thought I’d live to the see the day I’d find Anakin Skywalker living like a civilian,” Ahsoka said. “I guess I thought that the war was a part of him, but that’s foolish, isn’t it? I only met him—and both of you—after the war was in full swing. It was always a part of our lives; even after I left the Jedi Order.”

“It only lasted, what, three years?” Obi-Wan said, remembering. “But it felt like its own lifetime, I suppose. And when it ended, it was the end of our old lives.”

“It’s not really over, though,” said Ahsoka, leaning forward, on the edge of the sofa. “Some of us are still fighting.”

“We’re all still fighting, young one,” Obi-Wan told her, and Padmé thought he sounded far older than his years. “It may not look that way, but the war is still being fought here, in this very home. Not the war with the Separatists, not that sham, but the real war.”
Ahsoka wrinkled her nose at his vague words. Padmé understood what he was alluding to, but Ahsoka only heard the distracted rambling of someone who had been out of the fight for too long. “Yoda said I would find help here, and now I understand. He sent me here to find you, and Anakin, and you, Senator. You’re needed by the rebellion.”

“Ahsoka—”

“I know.” Ahsoka put a hand up. “Anakin already told me I’m wasting my time. And I understand that you have the twins, I just… if you could only see what it’s like out there. The Empire has a strangle-hold on the galaxy, and it won’t be long before they spread out they reach even here. I don’t believe they’ll stop until every inhabited star system is under their control. We can’t be still and do nothing and wait for them.”

Obi-Wan and Padmé exchanged glances, but Obi-Wan just sipped his caf and remained silent. Thanks a lot. Padmé sighed. “This rebellion,” she said. “I haven’t heard anything about it on the HoloNet or in rumors on the streets. How large is it? Who is in charge of it? How many star systems are a part of it, which senators support it?”

“It’s small right now, but it’s growing,” Ahsoka said eagerly, pleased that Padmé had shown interest rather than shooting her down. “I have been in contact with some people you might remember. Yoda, of course. Bail Organa. Mon Mothma. A few Jedi who survived the purge. We’re still getting organized, reaching out to see who will join us. There have been small pockets of insurrection, some independent cells acting out against the tyranny of the Empire. It’s been my job mostly to follow the rumors that the Empire cannot fully suppress and make contact with those who want change.

“It’s important that we gather together and share our intel and our strength, but of course the more of us there are the easier it is for the Empire to find us. So we’re scattered. We use code-names and encrypted frequencies and meet in orbit over uninhabitable planets far away from the eyes of the Empire.”

“What is your goal? What exactly are you doing to ‘rebel’?” Padmé asked. She had an idea it wasn’t legislature brought before the Imperial Senate.

Ahsoka leaned in close and said conspiratorially, “Did you hear about the Imperial Star Destroyer that was destroyed over Ryloth a few years back?”

“No.”

“Of course not. The Empire squelched that news as best they could. But some freedom fighters in Ryloth managed to blow up a Star Destroyer which had the Emperor himself on board. Of course, he escaped, but it was a huge bow to the Empire. They lost an entire ship and a great deal of personnel.”

Padmé nodded. “And that was you?”

Ahsoka shook her head. “No, it was an independent group of twi’lek freedom fighters. But that’s where it starts. Small groups here and there who stand up to the Empire. I find them and I bring them together. Soon all those small groups who dare to strike back against the Empire will come together.”

“Sounds like you are trying to start another large scale war,” Obi-Wan said. “Star Destroyers being shot down. Lives being lost. It does indeed sound like the Clone Wars all over again. This endless fighting; are you sure it will accomplish true peace and democracy in the end? Or will it simply lead to more conflict, new enemies, more war?”

“Now you sound like Yoda,” said Ahsoka, and Obi-Wan smiled.
“Isn’t Yoda a part of this?” Padmé asked.

“No,” said Ahsoka. “Not exactly. He understands the need to bring down the Emperor because he’s a Sith Lord, but he is always cautioning against repeating the mistakes of the last conflict. Talking about how the Jedi lost the war the minute we began to fight. And I understand that—but I really don’t know what he expects us to do. He never gives a straight answer when I ask him that.”

“No, he never does,” said Obi-Wan.

“Have you been in contact with him?” Ahsoka asked.

"Yes, from time to time."

“You should be more careful.” It was Anakin. They turned to look at him where he stood in the shadows by the stairs. No one knew how long he had been eavesdropping. He walked out into the softly lit living room and took a seat next to Padmé. “Yoda’s not the only one who is listening.”

“There’s no need to worry,” Obi-Wan said. “I reach out to him when I meditate. Sometimes, he reaches back, mind to mind through the Force. I have not broadcast our location on any comm frequencies.”

“You don’t know what the Emperor is capable of overhearing, even through the Force,” Anakin said.

Padmé looked at him in surprise. “Can he do that?”

“I don’t know what he can do.”

“Even Sidious cannot see everything that happens in the Force. It is good to be cautious, but not to be paranoid,” said Obi-Wan.

“Don’t lecture me, Obi-Wan,” Anakin snapped, and Ahsoka looked between them with a suspicious frown. Padmé sighed. Ahsoka had no idea the strain that existed between her former Jedi friends. The last time she had seen them they had still been a team, given to bickering perhaps but still very much good friends.

Padmé put a calming hand on Anakin’s leg. He leaned back against the sofa, draping his arm across the back and stretching his long frame out, as if trying to convince her was calm. But she had known he was on edge ever since he arrived home. There was more to it than Ahsoka’s sudden appearance. She knew something was going on but hadn’t wanted to press for information. She thought she knew: Ahsoka had probably been giving him the same speech about joining the rebellion and toppling the Empire.

“There was a bounty hunter after Ahsoka,” he said, directing his words at Obi-Wan. “You remember Aurra Sing? Nasty white freak. Antenna in her head.”

“I recall,” said Obi-Wan. Padmé felt her stomach drop. She had once been targeted by that same bounty hunter.

“What happened?” she asked.

Ahsoka looked down at her feet and remained silent. But Anakin said, “Tell them, Snips.”

“We took care of her,” said Ahsoka. “She won’t be a problem.”
“May I infer that she is no longer alive?” Obi-Wan said drily.

Ahsoka nodded. “She was tracking me, for the Jedi bounty, or at least that’s what she claimed. I don’t think it had anything to do with you communing with Master Yoda.” Her eyes flicked towards Anakin. “I thought we agreed she was telling the truth?”

He shrugged. “Let’s hope she was telling the truth.”

“Yes, let’s,” agreed Obi-Wan. “The twins are not ready to face such a threat.”

Anakin tensed. “I’ll be the one to face anyone who threatens my family,” he said. “That’s not the twins’ responsibility.”

“Of course,” said Obi-Wan. “That is what I meant. I am also here, to help, if needed. But there may come a time when we cannot help them. They are growing up fast.”

“Not that fast,” Anakin countered. Padmé rubbed his leg a little, sensing the irritation with Obi-Wan that was rising within him. He reached over and placed his left hand over hers, as if to say he was fine, he was under control.

Padmé hoped that Obi-Wan wouldn’t bring up the fact that Jedi were usually trained at a much younger age, because it was an especially sore spot with Anakin. Obi-Wan knew this, yet he often acted oblivious, as if testing the limits of Anakin’s ability to argue with him in a civil manner.

“They’re beautiful children,” said Ahsoka. “They look so much like both of you, I can’t believe it. I wish I’d gotten to see them before, I’m sure they were the sweetest babies.” She scrunched up her face in a smile as if she were imagining an even more miniature set of twins.

“Oh they were. Well Luke was the sweetest thing,” Padmé said, thankful to Ahsoka for steering the conversation into safer waters. “Leia was a handful at times, feisty even before she was a day old. No idea where she got that from,” she added slyly, and the two of them burst into laughter.

“We have holos,” said Anakin, and once the idea was out there, Ahsoka wouldn’t rest until she had seen all the holovids and images of the twins as younglings.

The aura of irritation and mistrust seemed to flee the room, as Obi-Wan was content to stroke his beard and drink his caf and watch the holovids with them. He was in some of the holovids, and Ahsoka delighted in watching the twins crawl over him like vulture droids and tug at his robes, destroying any semblance of authority or gravitas.

Padmé felt relief like a long sigh settle over their small group. Anakin just smiled a little as he watched Ahsoka watch the tiny versions of the twins. There was no more talk of bounty hunters or other agents of the Empire coming after them, no more talk of rebellions, and no more talk of having to prepare the twins for war.

Eventually, though, Obi-Wan cleared his throat and said, “I fear it is getting quite late. It’s high time I made my way back to my cozy home.”

“Won’t you stay the night?” Padmé said in surprise. They had a guest room that was reserved for Obi-Wan, and she encouraged that he use it as much as possible rather than returning to his damp, cold cave. It had been a small victory, years ago, getting Anakin to agree to let Obi-Wan stay the night. When they lived in the smaller house he had never allowed it, but with the passage of years and the move to a newer and larger home, Padmé had gotten him to relent and now Obi-Wan often slept under their roof.
“Oh I don’t think so,” said Obi-Wan. “It’s the perfect season for a late night walk, and besides, Ahsoka will have need of a room for the night.”

“Well then, let me get you that stew I had set aside for you,” Padmé said.

“My thanks,” Obi-Wan said with a small bow.

“I have to leave tomorrow,” said Ahsoka. “Please come back and say goodbye?”

“Of course,” Obi-Wan agreed. “I’ll return first thing in the morning.”

She hugged him, and he seemed a little surprised and slightly uncomfortable. But he patted her back awkwardly and even gave her a gentle nod when she drew away. Padmé smiled. Obi-Wan was still unused to physical displays of affection... or any overt display or declaration of affection, really. It wasn’t the Jedi way, and though he was used to the twins unbridled and open joy at seeing him, a hug from an adult was another matter. Padmé wondered how Ahsoka, who had also been raised in that same Order, had learned to be free and honest with her emotions.

“Anakin,” said Padmé, “show Ahsoka to the guest room? I’ll walk Obi-Wan out.”

Anakin, who had ostensibly been ignoring them, engrossed in watching a holograph of Leia crawling for the first time on a loop, snapped off the display unit and stood up. “Of course,” he agreed.

Padmé wanted to have a moment alone with Obi-Wan before he left. She led him into the kitchen and made a show of rummaging around in the conservator even though the container of spicy nerf stew was right in front of her. She was turning over in her head what she wanted to say.

“I worry,” she began, and straightened up with the container in hand, “but I don’t know what should be done.”

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow.

“We can’t keep the twins in sight all day, every day,” she elaborated. “They go to school, they have friends and after school activities... like normal children. But what happens if someone comes for them?”

Obi-Wan smiled reassuringly. “I would feel it. And Anakin would most certainly sense if there was any danger.”

“You don’t have to tell me that,” she said with a wry smile. “But we both know that it might not matter, you might not get there in time. If someone came for them... well I agree with you about the children needing to be trained, you already know that.”

He nodded. They had discussed this before. But the revelation that a bounty hunter—one who had known them in their previous lives, even—had followed Ahsoka to Osallao, lent the issue more urgency.

“But when you suggest it, Anakin shuts down. I think he knows they need to learn to defend themselves, but Obi-Wan,” she paused, trying to phrase her words in a way that would not hurt her old friend’s feelings, “I think you should leave well enough alone for now. Let me handle it. He will listen to me.”

“Of course,” said Obi-Wan. He looked down at the plastic tub in his hands. “I understand that Anakin has little regard for Jedi teachings, and I have no desire to push the issue. But I worry that if
they are simply taught how to fight, it may not be enough. If they fall into the wrong hands, whatever combat skills Anakin might teach them may be twisted to serve…”

“The dark side, I’m aware,” said Padmé, a touch hastily. Obi-Wan loved the children, she was sure, but he was often too focused on the fear that they could become agents of evil. She feared first and foremost for her children’s lives, and she knew Anakin felt the same way.

“Like I said,” she told Obi-Wan, “I will talk to Anakin about it. It’s better if you let me convince him. He trusts me.”

“Of that I am glad,” said Obi-Wan.

Padmé stood at the door and watched her friend leave, his shadow cast by the streetlamps following him like a ghost. She sighed. She did not know what she would say to Anakin, because she did not know what she wanted him to do.

This conversation had been reoccurring in some form or another over the years, and she was growing tired of it. Every inch the twins grew and every year they become more assured and part of the larger world (school, friends, hobbies) was a joy to behold as a parent—as Veré Agolerga—but a worry to their Uncle Ben. They should be taught the ways of the Force, the ways of the Jedi, he hinted or outright stated.

Anakin refused to discuss the issue realistically, always shutting Obi-Wan down with the same refrain: they were children, only children, let them be children, let them live. Sometimes Padmé thought that if it wasn’t for Obi-Wan’s meddling (well-intentioned as it was) Anakin would have taken some steps to train them already. But the word Jedi was an anathema to him and the idea was lodged firmly in his mind that Obi-Wan’s secret mission all along was to turn them into his obedient Padawans and present them to Yoda as a replacement for the younglings Anakin had killed.

The longer they went without training of any kind, the less good they were to Yoda as Jedi. Anakin didn’t need to explain his reasoning in so many words for Padmé to understand it. His own problematic history as a Padawan too old for the Jedi to train echoed behind his words every time he said, “Just let them be normal kids. Just let them be.”

When it came down to it, Padmé was more on Anakin’s side, though she understood where Obi-Wan was coming from.

She didn’t want to see the innocence and joy go out of their children, replaced by hearts burdened with fear or duty.

She didn’t want them reliving the lives of their parents.

The legislative youth program on Naboo was no Jedi Order, but leaving her family so early to pursue such ambitions had, in its own way, robbed her of her childhood. She would not go back and change her life; she had done good in the galaxy and she believed in that, in the relief missions she had gone on when she was barely older than Luke and Leia were now. But she had been Queen at fourteen and that was too young; she hadn’t been ready and she understood that now. She thought back to her vote of no confidence in Chancellor Valorum that had paved the way for Palpatine’s rise to power and shook her head. Perhaps if she’d been older and wiser she could have sensed the wrongness of the whole thing… perhaps not.

But in any event, she thought of Leia, so eager to advance in her studies at school and be the best in every subject, so ready to win any debate, and remembered her own self at that age. Leia’s teachers talked about her daughter in much the same way hers had spoken about her.
She remembered how her school accomplishments had transferred right into her election to Queen, so seamlessly, as if she had been elected president of the debate club rather than Queen of the entire planet.

It had all seemed like a game up until the point that it wasn’t.

Besides the weighty issues the Trade Federation Blockade had brought upon her so early in her reign as Queen, the experience had affected her in other ways she had not really understood until now, when she could look back on herself from a distance of two decades. She hadn’t been able to form any real, genuine friendships as a teenager, and she knew Anakin had been unable to do so either. She’d had her handmaidens, and had considered them friends, particularly Sabé, her dearest and must trusted confidant, the one who knew her so well she could play her to perfection when necessity called for a decoy. But in the end, they hadn’t been friends, they had been Queen and bodyguard. There was a power imbalance there that got in the way of their more genuine emotions. Her friends had to be ready and willing to die for her, but she could not be expected to die for them. This fact had truly hit home when Cordé died.

It hardly seemed a coincidence that Anakin had come back into her life at that same time. He was her bodyguard, another person sworn to lay down his life for her and she was growing so, so tired of that. He wasn’t supposed to be her friend or lover, she wasn’t supposed to care about him as much as she did, but she had become too fed up with the rules. Too fed up with never being able to love someone properly, to let all her fears go and just do something impulsive and emotional and real, for a change. Maybe it had been a mistake, but she would not let herself think that way now, when all she had was Anakin and the twins. They were the dearest beings in all the galaxy to her. Was it a mistake for her to have this small family to call her own?

Anakin’s own troubles growing up in the Jedi Order were different than hers but somehow the same. They had talked a lot about the decade between their first meeting and their second, sharing stories of their experience with others, as they had gotten to know each other better after their secret wedding. Anakin had always felt that the other Jedi Padawans were wary or disdainful or jealous of him—take your pick—and he didn’t really have close friends for many years. There were a few names he spoke of… a girl named Darra, a boy named Tru… but things had gone wrong. Lives had been lost, friendships revoked. Only Obi-Wan had been a constant, and Padmé felt that that could not be altogether healthy… to only have your Master, your parent figure, for a friend.

Whatever Padmé wanted for Luke and Leia, it wasn’t that.
While Padmé and Obi-Wan were going into the kitchen, Anakin led Ahsoka up the stairs, telling her, “Obi-Wan’s getting more eccentric every year. He’s been obsessed with getting back to nature. I don’t know why. Padmé has been trying to get him to rejoin civilization, but he found a cave his first day here and just… won’t leave it.”

“A cave?” Ahsoka echoed, looking curiously over her shoulder in the direction Obi-Wan had gone.

“In the mountains,” Anakin confirmed. “You should see how he lives. It’s just wrong.”

“Everyone is so different,” Ahsoka murmured. “You and Padmé living the quiet life, with kids. And Obi-Wan, the mountain man…”

“Cave dwelling hermit,” Anakin snorted. They passed the twins’ room, and he paused to peek in and make sure they were still sleeping. Or at least, had sensed him coming, made it back into their beds, and were pretending to sleep.

“Are you happy?”

“Me?” Anakin was surprised. “Don’t I seem happy?”

Ahsoka tilted her head and gave him a familiar look, one he wouldn’t have forgotten no matter how many years or phantom timelines he had lived through since seeing her last. It was skeptical and amused and knowing all at once.

“I’m happy, Snips. Life is good here. I have everything I need.” He paused at the door which led to the third floor guest room, and added, “More than I deserve.”

“Don’t say that, Mas… Anakin. You and Padmé deserve to be happy together. To have a family. You fought for the galaxy long enough.”

“I thought you disapproved of us hiding away here,” he said as Ahsoka followed him up their second set of stairs.

The guest room, which saw rare use aside from Obi-Wan, and was for all intents and purposes, his old master’s home away from cave, was a small attic space with a single round window that faced the rising sun.

“It’s not like that,” Ahsoka replied, following him into the room. She paused, taking in the simple surroundings. “It looks like… it looks like the way I remember the rooms in the Jedi Temple.”

Anakin glanced around. He never came up into this room, usually. It did resemble Obi-Wan’s private quarters in the temple, a bit.

“I suppose so. It’s the way Obi-Wan likes it. Padmé keeps it this way for him.”
“It reminds me of home,” Ahsoka said wistfully. Anakin thought it was strange to be nostalgic for the small cells that the Jedi were assigned for sleep or private meditation. Jedi did not have possessions so each room was spare, ascetic, uniform.

Anakin’s room in the temple had been unorthodox; filled with spare droid parts and other odds and ends he’d acquired, mostly from the garbage. He’d also kept what few mementos from his childhood he could—among them a poster of the Boonta Eve Classic, and a small model replica of the first spaceship he had ever flown—the Naboo Starfighter he’d used to shoot down the Trade Federation’s droid control ship. He’d been reprimanded for being messy and for being too attached to material things many times as a young Padawan. Eventually they had given up on him and left him to his own devices. That, or perhaps being Knighted had afforded him some tolerated eccentricities and the privilege to decorate his room in peace.

After his marriage to Padmé he had scarcely even been in his room. Whenever he was in Coruscant during the war he spent his nights and whatever days he could with Padmé in her senatorial apartment at 500 Republica. If anyone had been suspicious, they didn’t say anything to him or ask any questions. If something could be said for the Jedi, it was that they were not a nosy bunch. That, or they had just been glad he wasn’t around.

(Obi-Wan and Ahsoka, had, apparently, known exactly where he’d been.)

Ahsoka slipped easily into a cross-legged position on a low, round seat facing the window. Anakin could picture his old master greeting the sunrise in just such a pose, in that very spot. The seat even resembled the meditation cushions that could be found in the Jedi Temple. Anakin hadn’t seen this particular chair before… is was something Padmé must have brought in when he wasn’t around, to furnish the room with the intention of reminding Obi-Wan of home, no doubt.

It surprised him, sometimes, how unreasonably feelings of jealousy would arise when he thought of Padmé being kind to Obi-Wan. He was being foolish to begrudge them their friendship, to mistrust Padmé’s intentions. But then, he had lived with suspicion and mistrust of all beings as a rule of survival for so long that he didn’t think he could ever let it go completely.

Hatred, jealousy, bitterness, mistrust. That was what it had meant to be Sith. These days when he felt the pull of those emotions, the nagging worry of those thoughts, he just reminded himself that there had been no love or joy in that life and what good was it… what good was there in the power that darkness brought when it took so much away?

“Are you happy, Snips?” he asked. “Still fighting the war?”

She closed her eyes. “I didn’t know how much I missed this,” she said, and he didn’t know if she was talking about the room that looked like it had been plucked from the Jedi Temple, or something else.

“You and Obi-Wan and Padmé,” she continued, as if sensing the question in his thoughts. “You were my family. When I left the order I was on my own for the first time. I felt like an orphan. I asked myself if I had made a huge mistake… I asked myself that all the time. I had nothing and no one to fall back on.”

“You could have come back at any time. I would have been there for you.”

She nodded. “It was the right decision, though. To leave. To see what it was like to be my own person, for the first time in my life. It prepared me for what was to come. Being alone, no Jedi… because…”
They were all dead, the unspoken words filled the room between them.

“I wish I’d known you were alive,” she changed the direction of her sentence abruptly. “I wish you had let me know.”

Anakin shifted from foot to foot uncomfortably. “I didn’t think you were still alive,” he said. “You were on Mandalore last time I saw you. Not officially a Jedi but, honestly, I didn’t think that would matter to the clones all around you. And I had a lot of things going on. I couldn’t… you know I couldn’t…”

“If I hadn’t left the order, if I was still your Padawan, would you have come looking for me?”

“That’s not why I didn’t look for you. I had Padmé and the twins to worry about.”

He knew that sounded harsh, as if he wasn’t worried or didn’t care. But he didn’t know how else to say it. The truth was that he couldn’t look for her because at first that would have been the same as hunting her down in order to kill her himself. Darth Vader only spared former Jedi who agreed to forsake everything about their ideals and submit to serving the Empire and the dark side, like the Grand Inquisitor. And something told him that even if he had come across her in that other life she wouldn’t have joined him. No, the Ahsoka he knew then and the person he saw now, who was in deep with the burgeoning rebellion and filled with conviction that the Empire was evil and oppressive… she would never have looked at Darth Vader and seen someone she could side with.

The second time around, well, it was simply true that ensuring the safety of Padmé and the twins was everything to him. He had to pick his battles. So why did he feel so guilty looking at her now, as if he’d abandoned her instead of her making the choice to strike out on her own?

“The Emperor wants my children,” he ventured, trying to explain. “Keeping them secret and safe is the reason we cannot get involved with the rebellion… why I never came looking for you. It’s not just that they are strong in the Force. It’s because they’re my children.”

Ahsoka turned her face to the side. “Why?”

“He knows about them. He knew about Padmé and me, he knew she was pregnant. He knew, and…” he stopped before it became a confession.

Ahsoka nodded thoughtfully. “You were always good friends with him—back when he was the Chancellor. His betrayal must have been hard to take.

He hated the sympathy in her voice. The kindness. The trust she had in him, the assumption that he had always been on the side she thought was right. Against the Sith, with the Jedi.

“I always wondered… why? Why did he wait so long to make his move?” Ahsoka mused out loud, her thoughts taking her away from Anakin and into the larger picture. “Why spend all those years fighting the war? Rex told me that the mind control implants were in every clone since the beginning, that the Kaminoans were in league with Palpatine to betray the Jedi. So he could have given the order at any time since the first battle.”

Anakin was silent. He had once believed that the Jedi had forced Palpatine to exterminate them—that the order given to the clones to turn on their Generals had been a fail-safe for just such a day when the Council became greedy for power and sought to overthrow Palpatine. He had wanted to believe that version of events, because it made it easier to play his part in the destruction of the Jedi.

But that belief had always been confused by his own upbringing as a Jedi which taught him that the Sith were evil and that the Jedi were the arbiters of good—the guardians of peace and justice. If the
leader of the Republic was a Sith, then the Jedi had every right to remove him from power. But Palpatine had convinced him, or he had convinced himself, that maybe everything was turned upside down and wrong and it was the Jedi who were evil. In order to do what he had to do to save Padmé he had to believe that the Sith had it right and the Jedi were the enemy.

So what did it matter if the Supreme Chancellor was a Sith? What gave the Jedi the right to decide what religious belief the leader of the Senate held? And if they came after the leader of the Senate, they would target the Senators next. He was just protecting the Republic, just as he always had.

But the younglings. Oh, it always came back to the younglings. Killing them had been wrong. Why had he done it? Because Palpatine had willed it, had told him to spare no one and take no prisoners. And he told himself that once he had sided with Darth Sidious against Mace Windu there was no turning back. No apologizing to the Jedi and asking for help. No disobeying his new Master and making decisions for himself about who should live and should die. And so he had chanted the refrain, “I have no choice, I have no choice, I have no choice…”

Obi-Wan would have chosen death over conversion. He would have stuck to his moral convictions even knowing it meant letting Padmé die. He didn’t understand the enormity of what Anakin felt for her. He didn’t understand the idea of devotion to a single person over any ideal, over even the idea of right and wrong, good and evil. He thoroughly disapproved of such a thing—attachment like that was forbidden, just for the very reason that was Anakin’s love for Padmé.

Anakin knew Obi-Wan saw him as the textbook example of why the Jedi way was correct and infallible. Anakin knew his life was a cautionary tale for Jedi younglings who would never be taught… ironically enough, because of him. Don’t fall in love. It will doom your soul. Don’t love, it will turn you to the dark side. Don’t love, or you’ll find yourself in a room full of people who still trust you right up until the moment you cut them down, and you’ll be asking yourself, how did this happen? How did I get here?

Now, Anakin would tell those hypothetical future younglings a different sort of cautionary tale, though.

Don’t give in to the dark side because there is no love to be found over there.

Love, by all means. Fall in love.

But don’t give that love to the darkness or it will eat every part of your soul, it will take your love, it will take everything you care about and it will not give it back. It will be lost, your love, your soul… you will forget joy, and kindness, and you will have nothing besides hate, anger, bitterness, and regret. The dark side will take and take and take and what it gives back is ashes and dust.

Love, like the Jedi and the Sith cannot. The Jedi fear love’s all-consuming power but the Sith disdain it. Don’t be a Jedi or a Sith, my children. Love each other, love your mother, love me… love your Uncle Ben, even, but tell that he’s wrong.

Love isn’t the problem. Fear is the problem. Maybe Yoda had it right all along. But it’s not easy to let go of fear—Force knows I’ll never master it—but you can be better than me.

Don’t let the Sith take advantage of your fear and steal your love and joy away and lock you in a cage made of hate.

Don’t be a Jedi. Don’t be a Sith. Be free. Don’t be a slave to anyone. Be free.

Ahsoka had the right idea.
“You were right to leave the Order,” he said. “I wish I had left when you did. But I was too afraid.”

Ahsoka still sat with her back to him, but he could see her watching him in the reflection of the night-darkened window.

“It was a hard decision. I never would have been able to do it if it hadn’t been for everything that happened,” she said. “I know you wanted to leave the order, but you couldn’t have done it then. We all have to come to our own breaking points.”

His breaking point had been very different from hers. She had no idea.

“When I found out Palpatine was a Sith I did feel betrayed,” he said. “I wanted to kill him on the spot. But I didn’t. I wish that I had.”

Ahsoka pivoted around in one graceful movement, now facing him.

“What happened?”

He didn’t answer. Instead he answered her earlier question about Palpatine’s motives; his timing.

“You wondered why Darth Sidious waited so long? He waited to take out the Jedi because he knew the long, drawn out war would make the galaxy tired and turn public opinion against the Jedi. So no one would complain when they were gone, because they were the problem all along. And you know how well that worked.”

Ahsoka nodded, knowing he was referring to Barriss’s actions, the bombing that had led to Ahsoka being wrongly accused, put on trial, and kicked out of the Jedi Order.

Barriss bombed her own Temple because she was tired and disillusioned. And wasn’t that what he had done, as well? He had been all too ready to turn against his brothers and sisters, and he was supposed to have been their Chosen One. The poster boy for the Jedi Order in the Republic’s Army.

It was no wonder that much of the galaxy had cheered when Palpatine announced that the Jedi were criminals who had attempted a coup and had been defeated. No wonder people believed the official story behind Padmé’s disappearance, that a Jedi had murdered the beloved Senator from Naboo. No wonder everyone decided that the war had been begun by the power hungry Jedi to seize control.

It wouldn’t have worked so perfectly in Palpatine’s favor if he had struck earlier. The Jedi were stronger, more united before three years of war. The war had scattered them across the galaxy, thinned their numbers, and shattered the trust they had in one another.

But there was a second reason for the long wait.

Palpatine had been waiting for him.

He had indeed been the chosen one; chosen by the Sith Lord.

Palpatine had told him that the Jedi forced his hand, that their treason set their destruction into motion.

But hadn’t it been to him that Sidious had first revealed himself?

In his indecision Anakin had run to the Jedi Council to tell Mace Windu the truth. But he’d known that the Jedi would try to kill the Sith. Before he knew that Palpatine was the Sith Lord they had been looking for, he would have done the same without hesitation. He had killed Count Dooku and
if it had been anyone besides his once trusted friend, the kindly, fatherly Chancellor, he would have killed the Lord of the Sith himself.

Or, at the least, stood by and let Master Windu do what needed to be done. Because he was a Jedi. And the Jedi believed the Sith were evil. It would have been that simple if he was the Jedi Obi-Wan had always wanted him to be.

What did it matter if the Jedi took control of the Republic in the wake of the Supreme Chancellor’s execution? Either way, the Empire would be controlled by one or another religious faction. Sith or Jedi. Why should Anakin care at all?

He’d only wanted to save Padmé.

But Palpatine had never intended to save Padmé or let him be free. He knew that now. At least if he had allowed Palpatine to die and the Jedi to seizure control he wouldn’t feel all this guilt. Right or wrong, he would have been on the side that Obi-Wan was on.

He wouldn’t have ever had to live all those years as Vader, trapped in a broken body, a dead soul. He wouldn’t live now knowing that Obi-Wan was ready and willing to strike him down.

He wouldn’t have to think about the fact that Padmé still feared his return to the darkness. She had forgiven him for what he had done but she would never forget.

And Ahsoka. She would be so disappointed.

In his long silence, Ahsoka was watching him gravely. Now she asked, “What did you do when you found out? That Palpatine was the Sith Lord?”

How could he tell her? He knew what she would say. How could you? How can I trust you? How do you expect me to love you after this?

How could he look her in the eyes and tell her even one part of the truth?

“I told Master Windu,” he said. “And he told me to wait in the council chambers while he went to kill the Chancellor… with Master Fisto, and Kolar and Tiin.”

“So the attempted coup the Emperor claimed. It actually happened, in a way,” Ahsoka said.

“In a way,” Anakin agreed. “But they were no match for him. He killed them easily.”

“You were there, weren’t you?” Ahsoka was serious and quiet. “You didn’t just wait in the council chambers. I know you. You wouldn’t just wait. You saw it happen.”

“I was there.”

She looked at him kindly, and he hated that kindness so, so much. “You failed against him,” she said.

“Yes, I failed.”

“There’s no shame in that. Master Yoda failed, as well.”

Anakin smiled bitterly. “I didn’t even try, Snips. I didn’t fight him.”

She cocked her head to the side, confused… so trusting in him that she still hadn’t put it together.
“Did you run away?” she asked softly. “Maybe it’s not the heroic thing to do, but sometimes retreating from a hopeless situation is the wiser option. Didn’t you teach me that? If you had faced him—”

“I didn’t run away.”

She shook her head. Her long lekku twitched in agitation. “I don’t understand. What did you do, then?”

He couldn’t do it. He just couldn’t. Why did she trust in him so much? Couldn’t she sense the darkness that clung to him still, after all these years?

“Ask Obi-Wan,” he said. “He’ll tell you everything.”

"Master, I don’t understand.” There was fear in her voice, denial in her honest eyes. She was like a fourteen-year-old Padawan again. Like a youngling. “What could be so bad that you can’t tell me yourself?”

He just shook his head.

“It’s late. Get some rest.”

He turned to go, to escape, to retreat from a hopeless situation.

“It doesn’t matter, Master,” she said, leaping up. She put a hand out to stop him from going. “I don’t want to know.”

He smiled, disbelieving. She shook her head more vehemently this time. “I don’t want to know. Forget I ever asked.”

She hugged him, tears in her eyes. He knew that she would ask Obi-Wan. Or Yoda. She would have to. She would have to know.

But he was a coward. He didn’t want to see her face when she knew.
When Anakin went into their bedroom, he found Padmé curled up in her favorite spot—a cushioned windowseat that looked down over the backyard and up towards the mountain ridge to the north. At least, during the daytime. Now she had a fall of gauzy light blue curtains pulled close over the window and was bathed in the soft sheen of a reading light that cast an angelic glow over her loosened curls, her head bent over as she read from a datapad. She looked up when she heard the door open, and asked, ‘‘All tucked in?’’ with a little smirk. His only response was to drag himself over to their bed, where he sank down on the edge with a dejected and pointed sigh.

She lay aside her datapad and uncurled her legs, slipping down from her seat to come over to him. She was already dressed for bed in one of her beautiful nightgowns, this one a satiny brown that fell in waves down to her bare feet. ‘‘What’s the matter?’’ she asked, coming to stop just before him.

‘‘Nothing,’’ he said, reaching out to pull her closer.

‘‘Nothing,’’ she echoed, mockingly, taking his face in her hands. But then she grew more serious, looking him in the eye. ‘‘Is everything alright with Ahsoka?’’

‘‘Everything is fine,’’ he assured her, pulling her hands away and wrapping her up in a hug, burying his face in her shoulder, away from her scrutiny, inhaling the safe, soothing floral scent of her favorite soap. She had just come from the refresher and was clean and good. ‘‘I’m tired,’’ he murmured. ‘‘Just tired.’’

‘‘Anakin, be honest with me,’’ she said, and he could feel her sigh, her heartbeat, the way her words vibrated in her chest.

He pulled away, looked up at her, then let her go and pushed himself to his feet. ‘‘I am,’’ he said, planting a kiss on her forehead, before he slipped around her and headed toward the refresher. ‘‘I’m tired and dirty.’’

She crossed her arms and frowned, but said nothing and didn’t move to stop him from avoiding her questions further. He was glad: he didn’t want to talk anymore. It had been a long day, a long and hard day, all things considered. Ahsoka’s arrival, Aurra Sing following close on her heels, and then the endless talking, talking, talking. He didn’t think he could take another conversation tonight. Especially not one about feelings he didn’t particularly enjoy having.

The water from the refresher washed away the dirt, sweat, and grunge from a busy day of working in his shop, and fighting, and killing, and disposing of a body.

That had been a messy task. It was the first time he’d ever had to do such a thing, despite the many victims he’d left for others to clean up. It was, he discovered, very unpleasant. And as little as he cared about Aurra Sing, it made him think about her more. The sheer mundanity of it clung in his memory. The weight of the head, the sizzle and spit of the flesh as their lightsabers—his and Snips—
cut her up before they stuffed her limb by limb into his too-small incinerator. In the end she was not much different than spare droids parts… just wetter.

He found himself staring absently at his mechanical hand as he flexed it under the spray of warm water. He shut off the shower and stepped out into the refresher, shaking droplets out of his hair, reaching for a towel. He skillfully avoided catching his reflection in the mirrors. There were too many of them in this room; medium ones and large floor length ones and little useless decorative ones that fractured his face among frosted white swirls.

He was clean now, all trace of the day scrubbed away, but he was dirty on the inside. Ahsoka’s eyes reminded him. Her furrowed brow, her look of disgust as she helped him make Sing disappear… which didn’t stop her from looking at him with trust and acceptance as she accompanied him back to his home.

Stepping out into the bedroom, he saw that Padmé had gone to sleep. At least, she was lying in bed with the room darkened. He could sense her wakefulness, though, as he made his way through the dimness over to his side of the bed.

When he slipped under the covers she turned over and reached out for him, wordlessly. He sank into the mattress and received her embrace, her gentle but insistent kisses, for a few moments just lying there as she pressed herself against him. It was clear what she was asking for. This was Padmé’s way of talking to him when he wouldn’t give her the words she wanted. He knew.

He finally reached up and ran his fingers through her hair. The soft tresses fell down around her shoulders, the ends tickling his skin, and he brushed it back, pushing it away from her face, which was pale and ghostlike in the night. Her brown eyes were pools of darkness gazing down at him. His uncovered hand glinted in the sliver of moonlight that squeezed through the curtains of Padmé’s favorite window.

His closed his eyes. He kissed his wife. He breathed in the life of her as she straddled him, warm and wet and alive. He pushed the bad thoughts away and pulled Padmé closer.

There were four distinct nightmares that Anakin Skywalker woke from at night.

Sometimes he dreamed that he was still a captive of his former life.

He “awakens” encased in his suit, staring out of his mask, a hazy red vision clouded by darkness at the edges. He is Darth Vader again, with too many memories of too many lives, of living once as Anakin, then as Vader, then as Anakin again, and now he is certain that only this life as Vader is the truth.

He cannot go on. The hate and rage and the lies that once fueled him before are gone; he has nothing left to shield him. Padmé was alive, but she has died a second time. He rails against himself, he burns inside the hot prison of his black cage and he thinks No, no, no! She was alive. I went back. I fixed it.

He tears himself from his suit, ripping the armored cloth, tearing out the wires that sustain him, happier to die that to return to this life.

From that dream he would often wake up thrashing, caught in the sheets and drowning in sweaty
terror, adrenaline shooting through his limbs and a shout strangled in his throat.

He was always waking Padmé up with this nightmare and she was always soothing him back into calmness, assuring him that whatever he had dreamed it was not real. He never could tell her exactly what he dreamed, just that the darkness had him, Sidious had him, the Sith had him again. If this scared her she would hide it, only saying, that would never happen. Never, as she brushed the hair away from his face and cradled him in her arms like he was a child... like he was still that little boy from Tatooine and not her husband. Being that way should shame him but it didn’t, because it was Padmé, she was alive, and she was stronger than anyone he’d ever known.

Sometimes he’d wonder why she put up with it; being jostled awake, losing sleep to his night terrors. But he was glad she was there, that she didn’t opt to sleep in a different bed, a different room. She had never even suggested such a thing and neither did he; he was too selfish to pretend he didn’t need her.

Those dreams were just nightmares, terrible as they were. Memories from a different time, the dark side refusing to extract its claws from his heart, wrapping itself around his lungs, twisting inside his ribcage until he thought he couldn’t breathe again. They weren’t real, he knew when he awoke. But inside the dream, inside the suit, he felt such despair. As if he had dreamed this whole other life up. As if he had dreamed Padmé alive, the twins, his simple mechanic’s life, silly old Ben with a fond smile for the children.

The second dream found him running, running, always running.

He runs along the streets of Coruscant’s underworld, streaks of neon in his vision; he runs between the boulders lining Beggar’s Canyon, a sandstorm on his heels; he runs through the flowering grasses of the green fields of Naboo, no laughter in his heart, only fear; he runs down the corridors of the Jedi Temple, and it is empty.

He runs across the melting parapets of the mining facility on Mustafar.

A terror in a black cape and oily night dark mask chases him through every place, transcending time and space, pursuing him across the stars. He stays a pace ahead until he reaches Mustafar. There it catches him every time. He is cut open and consumed by flame and it is the shadow that looms over him, wielding a blade made from lava which is pointed at his heart.

“You are weak,” rumbles the monster. “I will destroy you.”

He’d always wake up before it could. And even though he didn’t always wake up Padmé, and somehow didn’t feel nearly as afraid as with the first dream, he would turn it over in his mind and found that it troubled him more.

Was it a memory, a fear of his former persona returning and consuming him as the darkness once had?

Or had Palpatine—Sidious—found a replacement for him who would cut him down? (Cut him down as Obi-Wan once had?) Was there another man in his old suit hunting him down even now?

Was the Force trying to warn him that his soft life on Osallao had made him weak; an easy target for the Sith?

But the last dream was the worst.

It starts with the sudden terror of a great many voices crying out in fear before being silenced forever.
He is always in the center of this, standing alone in the dark, listening. Trying to hear what the voices are saying. They are speaking to him... whispering... and then they scream a shrill keening wail and he is overwhelmed by the sound. A supernova explodes in his mind...

And then he sees it, the worst scene in his personal theatre of doom: Luke and Leia, contorted in pain, electrified by the blue flame.

But that night, after drifting to sleep with Padmé in his arms, he dreamed something new.

It starts out like the dream of the twins, but this time something is different.

The voices whisper and hiss and are trying to tell him something and he cannot understand them, but the sharp bolt of fear, the crescendo of the whispers into screams before they fall into resounding silence does not come. The voices crackle and transform into something else. Energy. Power. Destruction.

He is in the darkness, as he always is, but Ahsoka is there. And the monster is there.

The darkness is punctuated by flares of violet and blue.

He is the monster.

He watches the monster.

The part of him that is the monster sees her—the love and the light and the forgiveness—and rejects the bright shining dagger of pain that threatens to pierce what is left of his soul. He hates her love, her kindness, her trust. If she dies all his doubt will die with her.

The part of him that is the monster wants to end this farce, the pantomime, this play-act in the memory of a man who is dead. Dead and gone.

Then you will die.

The part of him that watches the monster is standing so far, far away and can only reach out, helpless and alone, towards his Padawan, towards himself.

Stop. Don’t. It doesn’t have to be this way.

But they don’t hear him. He cannot speak. Perhaps he is not even there.

They are both lost to him, or he is lost to them; he cannot stop the monster.

Anakin woke with the sweaty, sick feeling of dread that always shivered through him when the dream of Luke and Leia succumbing to blue flame visited him. This dream of Ahsoka was different and yet the same. He stared up at the ceiling for a few moments, trying to regulate his breathing, telling himself to be calm. Only a dream, only a dream. Padmé didn’t stir and he didn’t want to wake her, but he didn’t want to lie alone in the dark thinking about what it could mean.

He got up and dressed quietly, listening to the soft breathing of his wife dreaming peacefully (he hoped) in their bed. After rousing Artoo from the little droid’s low-power-mode slumber he left the house. Artoo whirred sleepily behind him as he walked down the street in the cool early morning hours.

He could have taken his speeder but he didn’t want to. The sky was not forebodingly dark; the shining pinpricks of billions of star systems looking down upon him and the chirp of night crickets
singing in time with the distant lights made it seem as if the stars above were speaking to him. If he listened within his mind he could hear the voices that made up the living force whispering to him from worlds far away in a low, constant hum.

He vaguely remembered how for a long time this hum had been muted, replaced by an empty echo inside his head and a steady hoooooo-per of mechanical breath. But away from the swamp of nightmare sweat he wasn’t upset by this memory. It was too long gone, too dream-like, unreal. He almost felt pity for that other self, who still came to him in dreams and called him weak.

Dawn was a distant promise behind the mountains and there was a heady smell of the Breelden residents’ favorite night blossoming flowers growing in the front lawns and flower boxes of his neighbors’ houses. He passed by the homes of people whose children played with his and he mentally ticked off their names as he went. The long blood red vines of the Osa flower curled around stone fences and up trellises; their blossoms glowed ever so slightly in the dark, smudges of white and pale green and yellow.

He remembered Obi-Wan’s words from a few hours before. It was indeed the perfect season for a late night walk. Osallao was beautiful this time of the year.

It was beautiful every season compared to a place like Tatooine, which had nearly indiscernible seasons that consisted of drought and worse drought. Osallao wasn’t as beautiful and lush as Naboo, but then, no place he’d ever visited could compare to Naboo.

Perhaps this was sentiment speaking. But he believed it.

He entered the security code and waved open the front door of his shop. The memory of death still lingered everywhere in the back workroom, lurking in the corners and seeping out into the front room.

He went over to a framed holograph of the twins from when they were around three years old, and gently removed it from the wall. Behind where the holocube had been displayed was a safe. Not the main safe, which was under the desk and which Padmé had access to, but a secondary one which she did not even known he’d installed. He keyed in the first level code, then allowed it to scan his handprint, and finally, spoke into a receiver to trigger the voice recognition access.

Inside was a single datapad. He stared at it for a moment, then made up his mind, and pulled it out.

He had lived over a decade as Darth Vader, and it had been another decade since then. That was a very long time to be removed from the Empire, but he had been saving his memories, preserving them on this datapad as they faded from his mind.

On it was a collection of Imperial codes and protocols. Names and details of secret operations. The names and identities of the Inquisitorius. Information about high ranking Imperial officers. Plans for which Star Systems to conquer, what Senators to monitor, who was suspected of involvement with the Rebellion. Names of prisoners, identities of the known dead and beings who were declared dead by the Empire, officially, but who were in fact very much alive.

A lot of the information was probably useless because it belonged to a phantom reality, an alternate galaxy where Darth Vader was the Emperor’s faithful enforcer.

Who was dead and who was alive had changed drastically, along with his knowledge of it.

He couldn’t guarantee that any of the codes or protocols or plans were in the least bit valid.

But some things were bound to be the same. Darth Vader had not been the whole empire, merely a
part of it. A pivotal part, yes, but a cog in the machine nonetheless.

Some things were bound to be the same. The imperial juggernaut stilled turned; the same Empire that was currently running a large portion of the galaxy without any help from him.

He set to work reviewing the information and transferring it to a datachip, with R2-D2’s help. Artoo was an invaluable little secretary, helping him go through all the scattered, private notes he’d made over the years and transform it into something that might be halfway useful.

The rebellion would just have to accept that this information had merit without wondering how he knew these things, where he had gotten such insight into the machinations of Palpatine’s mind.

He worked through the rest of the night and into the morning, ignoring the sunrise that washed through the shop windows. Padmé would know where he had gone when she woke up to find his side of the bed empty. He often went to work early when he couldn’t sleep through the night. He would come back to take the twins to school, never wanting to be absent from their mornings, but today he ground through his task, determined not to see Ahsoka again without something to give her.

When he was finished, he tossed the datapad into the incinerator where it burned with Aurra Sing’s ashes.

Then he returned home, where he found that Obi-Wan had already arrived, as he had promised Ahsoka the night before. Everyone was gathered in the kitchen, eating a very late breakfast. Anakin stood in the doorway and surveyed the scene, the cozy family brunch, and once again he wondered if this was the dream. If this really was the fantasy that he would wake from eventually into horrible reality.

It seemed so right. Too right.

He didn’t want her to leave. Why was she always leaving? The datachip weighed heavily in his pocket. He wondered if he shouldn’t be trying to convince Ahsoka to give up on the rebellion instead. She could stay there, with them; she could help train the twins to defend themselves from the many threats the galaxy had to offer. This was her family, wasn’t it? She was his Padawan once, as he had been Obi-Wan’s. She was like his younger sister, or his oldest daughter—estranged for years but now returned to resume her correct place with them. Luke and Leia already looked up to her… he could see the looks on their faces as the vied for her attention over pancakes. He wondered if Snips had ever tried to train anyone. She would make a good teacher.

He wanted to ask her to stay. To forget the rebellion. To let someone else be on the front lines, for once.

But he’d begged her to stay once before and she hadn’t. That just wasn’t Ahsoka, was it? She did what she thought was right, not what would make him happy, whether that was staying or going, fighting or walking away from it all.

He wouldn’t ask her, he decided, as he joined the rest of them in the kitchen. He couldn’t.

When Anakin presented the datachip to Ahsoka, he told her, “This is what I can do. None of this might mean anything. It’s been a very long time. Everything could have changed. But it’s all I’ve got.”
Ahsoka looked at the datachip he held out toward her. She looked back up at him, still confused. Apparently even after having all night to stew on it she hadn’t let herself entertain the thought that he had been part of Palpatine’s Empire.

But then she reached forward and took the chip from his palm without any questions.

“Thank you,” she said, slipping it into a pocket on her utility belt. She paused, looking wistful. “I would stay longer, but… well, I promised Barriss I’d be back soon, and in one piece. I’d hate to be a liar.”

He frowned. “Are you sure about Barriss?” he asked. Her name was among those listed on that datachip, categorized officially as an agent of the empire—a former Jedi who had been released from prison on the agreement that she would find and bring any other Jedi “to justice.” This had happened in one reality and if Barriss had been released from prison in this one as well…

“Yes,” Ahsoka said, tilting her chin defiantly. An automatic response. Then she softened her tone; “I didn’t believe her at first when she said that she regretted what she had done. But I gave her a second chance. She’s proven herself to me, time and again. She understands that Palpatine is the true enemy. I trust her.”

He nodded. “I trust your instincts,” he said, even though he wondered if Ahsoka’s emotional connection to Barriss was clouding her judgement. It had happened before, when Ahsoka could not see that it was Barriss who was fighting her. But he let it go. Ahsoka wasn’t his Padawan to admonish anymore. He settled on, “I just don’t want to see her hurt you a second time.”

“She won’t. If you talked to her you would see what I do; she’s changed.”

“Good.” He smiled, adding, “At least you have someone waiting for you. I’d hate to think of you all alone, doing everything on your own.”

She returned the smile. “You are always welcome to come find us, Master. If you ever reconsider and decide to get involved again… You and Barriss would have a lot to talk about, I think.”

Would they? He wondered what she meant. Was it because he had uncovered Barriss as the true culprit behind the Jedi bombing and brought her before the Council, all those years ago, or because Ahsoka knew—suspected—that he and Barriss were both reformed Jedi killers? What a pair of friends Ahsoka had.

“You’ll be the first to know,” he said, having no intention of joining the rebellion. “If you need me, you know where to find me.”

“You too,” she said, then reached out and put a hand on his shoulder. “Take care of your family. Take care of yourself.”

“And what about old Ben?” asked Obi-Wan, approaching them with a smile.

“Dear terribly old Obi-Wan,” Ahsoka said, laughing, “are you sure you don’t want to come with me? We could use you…”

“My place is here,” Obi-Wan said.

*His assignment is here,* Anakin thought. Sometimes he almost forgot. Forgot that Obi-Wan was there to keep a careful eye on him, make sure he kept on the straight and narrow. Also, to keep an eye on the twins for Yoda.
And yet, Obi-Wan was the one who always stayed. Not Ahsoka. They stood side by side, watching her back recede into the distance as she walked away from them.

“Did she ask you?” Anakin said.

“Ask me what?”

“Nothing.”

So she didn’t ask, then. He wondered why. Perhaps she understood that whatever it was, it was so terrible and unforgiveable that she really did not want to know.

This bothered him more than he thought it would. He hadn’t wanted to tell her, but somehow, he needed her to know.

He needed to know if she cared about him even if she knew. If she could forgive Barriss, she could forgive him, couldn’t she? Part of him insisted this was only reasonable. Another part, a hissing, insistent part, told him that there was no one in the galaxy—not even Padmé—who could look at him with anything but disgust.

Anakin watched her go, her figure growing smaller and smaller as she walked further away. Eventually she turned down a different street and was gone altogether. As soon as she got on a ship and left the star system even the presence of her force signature would fade.

“I feel something brewing,” said Obi-Wan. “Not quite a disturbance, but a ripple. I don’t know what it means. Have you felt it?”

Anakin turned and gave his old master a questioning look.

“There are always ripples, everywhere,” he said.

Obi-Wan nodded. “But,” he maintained, “I have a strong feeling. Something is about to change. Ahsoka’s return was just the start.”

“The start of what?”

Obi-Wan smiled and offered up a shrug. “That’s the question.”

“Ahsoka only came here because you told Yoda where to find us,” Anakin pointed out.

“I thought you would want to see your former Padawan,” said Obi-Wan.

Anakin sighed. “Of course. But what is the point of being in hiding if you’re going to broadcast our location?”

“I did not ‘broadcast’ our location,” Obi-Wan said, and as Anakin turned away shaking his head, he fell in step.

“I have felt it,” Anakin conceded. “Something is coming. We need to be ready for it. How are your lightsaber skills, old man? Haven’t been letting them get too rusty, I hope…”

“You put too much stock in the blade,” Obi-Wan said. “I have been focusing on increasing my connection to the force… increasing my understanding of it.”

“That’s great,” Anakin said, unimpressed. “When is the last time you even ignited your lightsaber?”

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“Nothing.”

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“I still practice the forms and go through my exercises daily,” Obi-Wan said.

“Good.”

“Really, you sound as if you think I’m a Padawan with no concept of self-discipline.”

“I’m terribly sorry,” Anakin said, in his most unapologetic voice.

“I do not feel that whatever threat I sense will require the brute force of combat, however,” Obi-Wan mused, ignoring the needling.

“You say that, but you weren’t here when a bounty hunter tried to take out Ahsoka.”

“No, and you dealt with that with ease, I hear,” said Obi-Wan.

“Yes. With the brute force of combat.”

Anakin wondered if he had been talking to Ahsoka about what happened the day before. He was ready for Obi-Wan to question him about it or launch into a lecture about killing prisoners, about slipping back towards the darkness. But none came.

Instead, Obi-Wan asked, “What are you getting at, Anakin? Do you truly think I’ve wasted away in my old age; that I cannot fight if it comes down to it?”

“No.”

“Good, because I can assure you I am well aware of the possibility that I will need to fight,” said Obi-Wan, and Anakin wondered if he meant that he would have to fight Anakin himself. He still thought about that possibility, daily. Obi-Wan was only forty-seven now, still plenty spry under his robes.

“I don’t know what I’m getting at,” Anakin said. “Maybe I wonder why you are here, still, what you’re expecting to happen. With me.”

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow. They’d spent the last ten years carefully skirting this subject. It was how they got along. It was how they maintained the status quo.

“Should I be expecting anything to happen?”

Anakin stopped in his tracks, forcing Obi-Wan to come up short. “Do you trust me?”

Obi-Wan looked surprised, which was almost amusing, since he spoke so often of communing with the force to hone his senses. “Do I trust you?” he echoed. “I certainly want to.”

“But you don’t.”

“I trust that you love your children,” Obi-Wan said slowly, “and that you love Padmé. That you won’t do anything to hurt them, that you’ll protect them as best you can.”

“But?”

“Must there be a ‘but’?”

“There always is.”

“I worry for you.”
“For me?”

“Yes. You are still very troubled. I can sense it. You haven’t found peace, Anakin. You haven’t learned to trust in the force.”

“What does that have to do with anything? With you being here, watching me all the time, watching the children for Yoda. How am I supposed to ‘find peace’ with you and Yoda and the emperor all breathing down my neck?”

“I have tried very hard not to breathe down your neck,” said Obi-Wan. “And this has nothing to do with Yoda. It has very little to do with Palpatine.”

“What then?” Anakin couldn’t think of what else this could be about. Didn’t Yoda and Palpatine represent everything that had divided them?

“It’s about you, Anakin,” Obi-Wan said, visibly fighting the frustration that crept into his voice, clouded his eyes. “I don’t want to lose you again.”

This led to a long moment of awkward silence. Anakin started walking again. They were on their way up to the mountains, somehow, their shared walk leading them away from the city. Artoo was the only other being on the road with them. The droid had been wheeling behind them, unusually quiet, not uttering the chirps and beeps that only Threepio could decipher. Though Threepio stayed in the house mostly, Artoo rarely left Anakin’s side, or was far behind his heels.

He beeped now, breaking the silence, and Anakin finally said, “Are you on my side, Obi-Wan?”

“I have always been on your side, even when you were not.”

“Then maybe you should trust me at some point. I’m not going to go back.”

“What if all this should fail?” Obi-Wan asked. “What if despite your best efforts, you are unable to protect your family from the powers that would seek to destroy them?”

“That’s not an option.”

“It’s not an option either of us want to entertain the thought of, but I have to look beyond that. I have to ask myself what would happen if you lost Padmé? If you truly had to face your fears, what would you do?”

“Why is it always about me and my attachments? What about you? What would you do if you lost everything?”

“I have lost everything. The Jedi Order is destroyed, the Republic is gone,” Obi-Wan said, looking somewhere distant.

“Don’t be that way,” said Anakin impatiently. “Don’t pretend that you have nothing. You care about Padmé and the twins and I can see that you think of them as the last hope for you to preserve the Jedi way, all while you admonish me to prepare for the worst. I don’t have to let go. You haven’t let go.”

“No,” Obi-Wan conceded. “No, I haven’t. We all struggle with our attachments, in our own way. But you, Anakin, you have proven that you’re willing to burn the world down around you rather than loosen your grip. That is what I fear.”

“And you’ll be here to put a stop to me if I do?”
“I don’t know what I’ll do,” said Obi-Wan. “I hope such a day never comes.” He paused. “Where, may I ask, are we going?”

Anakin hadn’t been heading anywhere with an exact plan, not really, and they were headed vaguely in the direction of Obi-Wan’s cave. Mostly, he had wanted to leave behind the city with its inhabitants. Now that they had reached the outskirts, he had to examine what he was thinking and he realized that he knew.

“I think it would be good to have some lightsaber practice. Don’t you?”

Obi-Wan just looked at him.

“You can’t really practice on your own. When is the last time you sparred with someone?

“I haven’t fought anyone since Grievous,” said Obi-Wan. “Do you wish to test me?”

“I think we could both use some testing.”

Obi-Wan nodded, though his eyes were still guarded. “Very well.”

They climbed further up into the mountains, leaving the road behind, trading it for the small footpaths that finally gave way to no discernable path at all. They came to a meadow of pale yellow mountain grass punctuated by small boulders, and Obi-Wan casually removed his robe and took his lightsaber in hand.

Artoo, who had been faithfully following even when the path got rocky and steep, popped open the compartment that held Anakin’s lightsaber. Anakin reached out with the force and pulled it to him.

“You will of course go easy on an old man,” Obi-Wan said with guarded geniality.

“Of course,” said Anakin, igniting his blade. It thrummed to life and he added, “Just like old times.”

They had spent over a decade as sparring partners. Obi-Wan had taught him almost everything he knew. Now, as his former master ignited his own blade, Anakin remembered a far off, different life in which the last time they had stood before each other with sabers drawn, it had been on Mustafar. It had ended with his defeat, his destruction.

But they were on Osallao now.

They traded a few experimental parries, nothing fancy. Anakin thought Obi-Wan moved slower than before, but perhaps he was merely holding back, pacing himself. Because so was he. As they got into the rhythm of it, Anakin took a few more risks, a few lunges here and there. Obi-Wan seemed content to play defensive, merely giving ground and blocking thrusts.

“You are getting old,” he goaded.

“As are you,” Obi-Wan said, “I was expecting to work up a sweat, at least.” Anakin thought he detected a gleam of enjoyment in his eyes.

“We’re just getting started.”

He pursued Obi-Wan around the perimeter of the field, as the other man continued to deflect every blow and move easily backwards. They lost track of time in this manner, slipping with almost alarming ease into the sparring patterns of days long gone. There was none of the urgency or animosity of a true duel (the one only Anakin had any memory of) but there was an undercurrent of
something, caused by the knowledge that this pantomime could become deadly serious if one of
them gave the other a reason for it to be.

The sun climbed higher in the sky, and Obi-Wan started to tire. Anakin could sense it and see it in
his old master’s movements. He did not have the stamina he once did. Even remaining on the
defensive, giving ground, being careful not to over-exert himself, Obi-Wan was faltering.

There came a moment when Anakin brought his blade up sharply, halting himself before he sliced
through Obi-Wan’s side, because the other had failed to anticipate his movements. For a split second,
he felt a spike of fear from Obi-Wan.

“You’re dead,” he said, decisively, and withdrew his blade.

This brought an end to the duel. Obi-Wan sighed and turned off his saber. Anakin could sense
something… relief, maybe… and he realized that he had perhaps thought, in that spike of fear, that
Anakin would follow through and take the killing blow.

“You have defeated me,” Obi-Wan said graciously, with a half bow, the way it was customary to
honor an opponent after a sparring session.

“I have,” Anakin said, inclining his head in response. “But if I’d been trying to kill you I could have
a long time ago. You’re slow and out of practice.”

“I have been without a sparring partner for a very long time,” Obi-Wan pointed out. “And so have
you.” Then, brushing a fall of hair from his eyes, “And if I had thought you were trying to kill me it
would have been a very different sort of fight.”

Anakin smiled. Obi-Wan had his pride, as un-Jedi like as such a thing was supposed to be. “They
say the best practice is teaching,” he ventured.

“And who would I have to teach?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Someone who needs to learn how to defend themselves.”

The quirked eyebrow he got in response forced Anakin to say directly, “The twins.”

“This is certainly a change,” Obi-Wan said. “Has Padmé spoken to you?”

Anakin frowned. “No.”

“Ah. I thought perhaps she had. You have been so adamantly against the idea for so long…”

“I’m not thrilled about it. But the twins will need some basic self-defense skills; I’ve never argued
against that,” said Anakin, wiping sweated from his brow and sinking down to sit on a boulder. He
was winded from their match, though he tried not to let Obi-Wan see it.

“And besides,” he continued. “It will help us keep ourselves sharp. To train them. Not with
lightsabers, necessarily, but get some staffs… teach them basic hand-to-hand maneuvers… how to
get free if someone grabs them. Maybe some blaster shot practice.”

At Obi-Wan’s sour expression, he amended, “Padmé can teach them how to shoot a blaster.”

Obi-Wan was still hesitating, and Anakin sensed he wanted to dive into his favorite lecture, about
how being mindful of one’s feelings and having a connection to the force was more important than
the physicality of combat training.
“And they need training in the Force,” Anakin conceded, responding to the unvoiced argument, and Obi-Wan’s surprise was palpable. “But,” Anakin quickly added, “I don’t want them to know why this has to be done. I don’t want them living in fear.”

Obi-Wan smiled faintly. “It is no way to live,” he said. “I wouldn’t wish that for them either. I don’t wish it for you.”

Anakin squinted up at Obi-Wan, who had remained standing while he lowered himself to the boulder, even though Obi-Wan looked even more tired. Perhaps he was trying not to show weakness. But his tone was uncommonly gentle. Anakin wondered if he was pitying him.

“I’ll bring them up here,” he said, ignoring whatever it was Obi-Wan was getting at about him. “I trust this is secluded enough that it wouldn’t arouse suspicion.”

Obi-Wan nodded. “If we refrain from using lightsabers there will be nothing to question, even if someone does happen by.”

“I agree.” Anakin stood, then nodded brusquely to Obi-Wan. He started to walk away, then had another thought. He paused and looked back. Obi-Wan had finally sat down, was cross-legged on the ground, preparing to meditate. Anakin opened his mouth but couldn’t remember what he had wanted to say. He shook his head and left.

“May the force be with you,” he heard Obi-Wan say quietly behind him. He might have missed it if the breeze didn’t blow it towards him, a murmur on the wind.
"Your highness, I have news of Anakin Skywalker's apprentice."

"Go on."

"She was tracked to the Osallao System by one of our finest assassins on retainer. The bounty hunter, Aurra Sing. But there, it would seem, our agent disappeared. We have not had contact with her since she reported that she had a lead on Ahsoka Tano. It is our belief that the Apprentice of Skywalker managed to defeat our agent."

"Curious," said Emperor Palpatine, but there was nothing that surprised him about the news. If Sing had found her way to Osallao, he had little doubt that Lord Vader had ended the bounty hunter himself, rather than Tano.

He looked down at the Inquisitor, tasting his fear like fine blossom wine through the Force. "Have you heard news of Tano since then?"

“No,” the Inquisitor admitted. “We only know of Tano’s last known whereabouts from Sing’s last report prior to our losing contact with her.”

"Your agents would do well not to underestimate Skywalker’s Padawan, in the future," said Palpatine. "She was trained well."

"Of course, your grace.” Then, he ventured to point out, “Sing was a skilled bounty hunter, but not one of our own. Her foolishness in pursuing Tano alone will not be repeated by my Inquisitors."

“See to it that it is not.”

“What of Osallao, my lord?”

“What of it?”

“We do not know why Tano went to this Star System. There may be a Rebel cell located there, or something else of interest. Would you like me to send someone to investigate?”

“No need,” Palpatine said, dismissing the idea with a wave of his hand. “I sense that too much time has passed for you to find anything of use there.” It was an easy lie. For all his agents knew, Anakin Skywalker was dead, and he preferred it stay that way.

“There is one thing, before you go,” he said. "Bring me the child."

“The child…? Forgive me, but which…”

“The sacrifice,” Palpatine clarified. “The time for her use has finally arrived.”

"Yes, your worshipfulness." The Inquisitor was clearly confused, as he should be, for he was not privy to any of his master's true plans. But he knew the girl the Emperor wanted, and that was
enough. He bowed and moved hastily away.

Darth Sidious thought nothing more of him after that.

Soon, a young girl entered the chamber. She was small, weak, a force-blind orphan one might think far beneath the notice of a Sith Lord.

"My dear child," he said, all kindness and gentility, "you are to have a new home. What say you to that?"

She looked up at him, trembling. "I am happy, my lord."

He chuckled indulgently. She suppressed a shudder. The scars on her skin crawled across her flesh, an automatic reaction to his laughter.

"Mara, come here," he said, and from the shadows behind his throne crept another girl, similar in age but with a confident air. She did not tremble but instead approached the Emperor's left hand and looked down on the second girl with disdain.

"I don't like her," she said, petulantly. "She looks like a mouse."

"Yes, my dear. I know." He stroked the child's long, red-gold hair and smiled. "For now, you must treat her like a sister. Your twin sister. Do you understand?"

Mara's lip curled. "She's too ugly to be my sister."

She winced as a tug from the Force warned her that her master was not in the mood for an argument.

"She is your sister," the Emperor said. "Your dear sister, Faisellu, whom you shall protect." The name fell sibilantly from his tongue. "Go now. Take her and do as I have instructed."

"Yes, my master."

"Be wary of Darth Vader," he gave her some parting advice. "Avoid him as much possible. If he senses your purpose he will destroy you with ease, my child, and I would so hate to lose you."

"I will not fail you."

Mara descended the steps, moving away from her master and the throne. She looked down at the girl who knelt, like the pathetic slave she was, on the floor. The girl was shivering as if the room were cold. But Mara did not feel cold. She was warm with excitement and purpose. "Come, Faisellu," she said, and held out her hand.

Faisellu looked up at her but cringed away instead of rising. Mara waggled her hand and fought down her impatience. "Come along, sister."

Faisellu glanced over to the Emperor, then back at Mara, and finally reached out her thin, limp hand. She was so pathetic. Pathetic and useless. A helpless failure who should have been thrown out with the other trash. But their master was wise; wiser than Mara.

She helped her new "sister" to her feet and steered her along, one arm across her slumped shoulders as they walked from the room. Mara looked back over her shoulder to where the Emperor sat, his face obscured by his cloak, his hands resting in his lap. She could see nothing but his chin, yet she could sense his pleasure and his confidence as he gave her a parting nod.

Mara felt a thrill of excitement at the thought of going on her first mission. She was only eight years
old. She hadn’t dreamed of being called upon to leave the Imperial palace for many more years. She had not thought she would be tested so soon. But her master believed in her and she was ready. She would not let him down.

Darth Sidious smiled to himself as he watched the young girls go, his lips curling over cracked and yellowed teeth. Mara had proven to be an exceptional find; cunning, driven, and proud. She was far above the other Force sensitive children he had attempted to train over the years. She had survived when others had not and she had thrived. Perhaps she would make a good apprentice someday, if she continued to prove herself, or if his plans for the Skywalker twins failed. But he was confident that he would have his way.

Darth Vader would rue the day he turned his back on his Sith Master.

Everything that Vader thought belonged to him would become the Emperor’s, in time.
“Class, please welcome our new students. This is Mara and Faisellu Sawain. They are twins who have come to us all the way from Coruscant! Imagine that. I’m sure they would love to get to know all of you.”

“Hello,” the class said in unenthusiastic unison. But their laconic response belied the very real interest in the girls who stood before them.

Luke and Leia exchanged glances at the mention that the sisters were twins. They were used to being “the twins” in their grade. They weren’t sure how the idea of another set in their class struck them.

Luke in particular perked up when he heard that they were from Coruscant. Coruscant! Even a planet from the Inner Core would have been exciting, but the Imperial Center itself? What were they doing all the way out here on this backwater planet far in the Outer Rim?

“Thank you, Miss Ognoyn,” said one of the twins with a cultured, sweet voice. “Our aunt speaks so highly of you. I’m so glad we get to be in your class.”

Miss Ognoyn, who taught galactic geography and navigation, smiled fondly at the girl. “Thank you, Mara. Now, girls, why don’t you go take those empty seats over there?”

She pointed to the seats directly behind Luke and Leia, who always sat side by side toward the back of the room. Leia was an eager student who was always popping up from her seat with her hand raised, but rather than sit forward she was happy to remain in the back. She needed to be seen when she wanted to be and ignored when she didn’t.

Mara gave the teacher one more polite smile and then tossed her long red hair over her shoulder and walked down the rows of students to take her seat. Everyone’s eyes were on her. But Luke took note of her sister, who had been silent and kept her eyes on the floor. She seemed very shy and unhappy. Faisellu followed Mara at a shuffle and sat directly behind Leia, while Mara took her seat behind him.

Miss Ognoyn dimmed the lights and placed a map onto the holoreader. Soon the classroom was filled with a shimmering replica of the galaxy. The star systems floated above their heads. The tiny pinpricks representing Hutt Space landed over Luke and Leia and their new classmates.

Luke set his mind to concentrate on the lesson for the day. He was not often the most attentive student, but Miss Ognoyn’s class was his favorite.

He loved learning more about the galaxy. This was much more interesting than math, or literature, or anything except maybe shop class where they got to work on building droids. (He was good at that class because his father was the best mechanic in all of Osallao and he had grown up around dismantled droids and speeders). Miss Ognoyn herself was his favorite teacher. She was a tall, dark, beautiful woman in her early twenties with long, twirling ropes of hair that were dyed a brilliant...
yellow like a cheerful sun. She was always a sparkle of bright colors in general, with make-up that stood out even in the darkened classroom with a faint shimmer. Her outfits, too, were never a dull gray or brown like the other teachers usually wore, but instead striking primary colors in geometric patterns.

Leia teased him about having a crush on their teacher, but she couldn’t deny that Miss Ognoyn was the best teacher, either. She wasn’t just pretty, she was kind and patient and knew everything about every star system in the galaxy. Name any moon however small and she could tell you exactly where it was and how long it would take to get to its star system from their current location.

He was listening to her lecture on the planets in the Alderaan system when he felt something ping at the back of his head. He raised a hand to absently brush at the back of his hair. There was a soft skittering sound of something small falling to the floor. After a moment it happened again.

He realized with irritation that the new girl, Mara, was tossing little particles of something at him. Pebbles or some other junk. He was surprised. It seemed like a very immature thing for someone from the Inner Core to do. He glanced down towards where the projectiles had fallen but couldn’t see them in the dark. And what was a new kid like her doing messing around with him, anyway? Everyone knew that if you joined a class late or moved schools mid-semester you kept to yourself.

He and Leia had once had to transfer between schools when their parents moved into a bigger house in a different district, when they had been in preliminary school. It had been easier for them because they were together. They had always been together, and would always remain together, while other friends came and went, subject to the whims of each school year. Now they were approaching their 11th birthday and in their sixth year at Northwest Breelden Academy.

Perhaps having her quieter twin sister faithfully bringing up the rear made this girl cocky, Luke thought. As another particle hit the back of his head he wondered if it was to be a sort of war between the two sets of twins for dominance. He thought it was a pretty silly thing but then he’d gotten into rivalries with other students for less. Some kids just wanted to fight and would find any reason.

He turned around a little, trying not to be too obvious, because he didn’t want Miss Ognoyn to notice and think he was being inattentive. It was a good thing they were in the back… he would have liked to sit closer to the front but Leia always insisted on being in the back of every class. It was a bizarre strategy she had. Leia had a strategy for everything.

The girl wasn’t looking at him. She was pretending to be absorbed in studying the stars that were clustered around her head. But he knew she was the one tossing things at him. He settled back into his seat. What was Miss Ognoyn saying? That the climate and mountainous terrain of Alderaan was similar to that of their home here on Osallao. He tapped the information into his datapad. This was the sort of trivia Miss Ognoyn liked to use on tests. She always liked to reinforce in her teachings how the galaxy was vast and full of innumerable differences but that some patterns repeated.

Plank plank.

This was getting really annoying.

He surreptitiously moved his foot around, feeling for the debris on the floor. Once he had pinpointed them, he very carefully began to levitate them up towards his hand with the force. Uncle Ben would be proud! (Well, maybe not, since Uncle Ben probably wouldn’t advocate using the force to fight with another student during class. But this was purely self-defense!)

He slowly collected the little bits that Mara had flung at them. They arrived in his palm and he felt
them, rolling them around between his fingers while keeping his face innocently and attentively pointed towards the front. They were little metal ball bearings of some kind. Something you might find if you took apart a droid’s joints.

Without turning around, he concentrated all his energies into slowly, very slowly, floating the little metal bullets backwards in the dark. Once they were past his own body he got ready to give them an extra push so they struck the girl in the face. (Not too hard, just enough to really surprise her.)

_Plink plink plink plink plink._ The balls hit an invisible wall, which he felt bounce back at him, and they all struck him in the back in quick succession before falling to the floor again. This time it didn’t just brush against his hair but stung the back of his neck. Luke sat up straight and frowned. She had sent them back! She knew how to use the Force!

No wonder she was so confident.

Luke gathered up the ball bearings again in the same manner as before. But this time he didn’t try to send them back, just tucked them into a front pocket of his jacket. (His jacket was a bright yellow, like Miss Ognoyn’s hair. He’d begged his mother for it and she got it for his last birthday, and he wore it every day, but especially on days when he had Galactic Navigation 101.)

Luke was still stewing about what he was going to do about this girl who already had it in for him, before they’d even spoken, when the galaxy winked off and the lights came up.

“Now, we’ll see who was paying attention,” Miss Ognoyn said, but there was a hint of humor in her voice. “Luke, can you tell us how many planets are in the Alderaan System and which ones are inhabitable?”

Luke blanched and then felt the blood rush back into his face all at once. He looked at Leia, but she was no help. Instead she actually looked primly satisfied and he knew she was in the kind of mood today which inclined her to back stabbing. “Um,” he said, miserably, “seven planets? And, uh, five which are inhabited.”

Miss Ognoyn shook her head. “Can anyone answer this?” she asked, and as her eyes left him he felt dismissed and reprimanded and awful.

Leia’s hand shot up and her body inched out of her seat. But Miss Ognoyn looked over her head and said, “Yes, Mara?”

Luke heard Mara from behind him proclaim in a pat little sing-song voice, “The Alderaan System has five planets and one moon. Two of these are inhabitable: Alderaan, and Delaya. Alderaan, also known as the Soul of the Old Republic, was the birthplace of the Galactic Republic ten thousand years ago and is currently ruled by the royal Or-

“Thank you, Mara,” Miss Ognoyn interrupted, not unkindly.

Mara plopped back into her seat and Luke thought he could feel her smile boring into his back, right between the shoulder blades.

It wasn’t fair. He had never done a single solitary thing to this girl. And yet within minutes she had apparently zeroed in on him to torment. Luke took a slow, steadying breath. He had no patience for bullies, whether they were targeting him or others. _It’s on_, he thought darkly, and for a moment he almost thought he heard a distant hint of the word, _Good_. But that was silly. Leia was the only person he’d ever felt a mental connection to in such a way. He glanced at her, and she looked back, and he thought she was also unimpressed by their new classmate. Well, maybe next time she’d think
twice before leaving him hanging in the hopes of getting called on.

When class let out, Luke skirted out of the classroom, carefully avoiding making eye-contact with the new girls. He didn’t have any problem with the quiet, mousey looking twin, yet, but she was a shadow to the other.

Lunch period was up next, and since the weather was good the children were sent outside to the playground with their trays. The Academy was very concerned with kids getting fresh air and sunshine. Luke remembered with some embarrassment how his mother, who was on the parent teacher board of trustees, had lobbied strongly from a remodeling project a couple years back which opened up the common areas to the outdoors. It made the school nicer and for that everyone was thankful, but it had still felt slightly embarrassing at the time because the other kids teased Luke and Leia about their mother giving speeches all the time.

To his chagrin, Luke saw Mara and Faisellu approaching the table where he and Leia sat. He groaned and Leia gave him an amused look.

“Hello,” Mara said cheerfully, helping herself to a seat without so much as asking. Faisellu peeked up at them through a flop of brown hair and then fixed her gaze on her food.

“Hi, my name is Leia,” said his sister pleasantly, like a traitor. “This is Luke.”

“Are you twins, too? Miss Ognoyn said that we should make friends with you,” Mara said, bold as can be.

“Yes,” said Leia. “You’re from Coruscant, huh? I want to go there someday. I’ve never met anyone who has lived there, before.”

That was, of course, a lie. But of their parents and Uncle Ben had lived on Coruscant before and Luke and Leia both knew it. But Leia enjoyed lying to people.

“Mmhm,” Mara said with a nod. Luke found himself mirroring Faisellu, poking at his food sullenly, not wanting to show that he was secretly very interested in what Mara could tell them about Coruscant. His parents were very withholding about their former life in the Inner Core worlds. He peered up at her through his own fringe of hair as Mara continued, “We lived there all our lives. I miss it already. It’s amazing, nothing like here.”

Mara threw Luke a smile, the same pretty dimpled simper she had directed at Miss Ognoyn. She was very freckled, Luke decided, and very full of herself.

“Why did you come here?” Leia asked mildly.

Mara turned to her, dropping the smile. “Our parents died.” She lowered her voice. “They were killed.”

Leia frowned skeptically, but then quickly smoothed her face into a sympathetic mask. “I’m sorry,” she said. But Luke felt it too. Mara didn’t seem particularly sad about her parents.

“Our aunt lives here, in Breelden,” Mara went on. “She’s the only family we have.”

Luke looked at Faisellu. The dejected way the other twin carried herself made more sense now. He felt a wave of empathy for her. It must be hard to have to leave home after losing your parents. He couldn’t imagine it. Even though he itched to leave Osallao someday and explore the galaxy, he couldn’t even let himself think about his father and mother dying, of him and Leia being alone in the universe without them.
And then he felt bad for thinking ungenerous thoughts about Mara. Maybe she was being strong for her sister… putting on a brave face about the whole thing. Maybe he shouldn’t judge her so harshly.

Leia also turned her attention to Faisellu. “I love your hair,” she said gently. “It’s so pretty.”

Faisellu looked up sharply, seeming shocked to be addressed directly. She lifted a hand and hesitantly touched the ends of hair that rested over her shoulder. She had loose twin ponytails draped on either side of her neck, with the rest of her hair braided and looped up in a bun on the back of her head.

“Thank you,” she said in a half whisper. “Mara did it for me.”

“You’re very good,” said Leia, complimenting Mara.

“Does your mother do you hair?” Mara asked. “I love it.”

Leia nodded. Her long brown hair was wound up in large buns that covered her ears.

“My mother used to braid my hair,” Mara said wistfully. “Faisellu can never do it right. She’s so clumsy.”

“Would you like me to do something for you?” asked Leia, eying the loose red waves of Mara’s hair with thinly veiled yearning.

“Oh, yes!” Mara brightened again. She hopped up and rounded the table, inserting herself between brother and sister, bumping Luke over. She put her back to Leia and stared, open-eyed and shameless, at him. He stared back for a moment before sliding further down the bench to get away from her.

Faisellu lifted her face to look at him fully, and for a moment he thought she was going to say something independently. But then she let her eyes slide over to Leia, who was already going to work on Mara’s hair with girlish glee.

Luke dug his fork into the shuura fruit slices in the corner of his plate with frustration. He didn’t like Mara, he just didn’t like her. Dead parents or not. She was so… so… something! The absolute nerve of her. First picking on him in class and then jostling him out of his seat and taking over his sister, claiming her as her new bestest friend and hair braiding buddy. And Leia was a rotten turncoat. No sympathy for him, no loyalty. It just wasn’t fair.

He suddenly remembered that he still had Mara’s missiles in his jacket. He set his fork down and reached in his pocket to bring out the handful of little metal balls. He turned to Mara, who was still staring at him as Leia tugged and pulled at her hair.

She wasn’t even eating her lunch. What a weirdo.

“What are those?” she asked innocently.

His mouth dropped open. “What are…? These are yours.”

“I don’t think so,” she said. She smiled, eyes freckles and dimples all mocking him in unison.


“Saw what? I was paying attention to the lesson.”

Luke could feel his face and neck turning red, but there was nothing he could do to stop it. He tried
to remember Uncle Ben’s teachings, the ways he used the force to calm himself and keep centered, but Uncle Ben had apparently never been mercilessly teased by girls before, because it just didn’t work.

He turned to Faisellu. She seemed like she might be nice, or at least might be sympathetic. Mara seemed a little mean to her, after all. He held out the incriminating evidence. “You saw, didn’t you?”

Faisellu froze like a small animal of prey, even twitched her nose up a little like the mountains voles when they peeked out between boulders to sniff the wind before diving down into safety again. Her face was as pale as his was red. “No,” she squeaked. “No I don’t know anything. About anyone. Anything.”

Luke felt his own anger drain away in reaction to the fear that was suddenly coming off of the strange girl in waves. She fixed her eyes on him pleadingly, as if the thought of him pressing the issue was downright terrifying. He withdrew his hand, confused. He didn’t know what to make of her, but somehow it made him dislike Mara even more.

Then Mara said, “Oh don’t be that way, Fai. Alright they’re mine,” she addressed Luke. “Can I have them back?”

“No!” he said, shoving them quickly back into his pocket. “You were throwing them at me! You made me look stupid in front of the whole class.”

“He’s in love with the teacher,” Leia said.


Mara laughed, the sound carrying clear and musically mocking across the open air. Children seated at other tables or playing games on the lawn stopped for a moment to look their way.

“The other day I heard him ask our mother about how much older she was than Father and how much older someone could be and still—”

Luke stood up abruptly and grabbed his lunch tray, stalking off without another word.

He could hear both Mara and Leia laughing at him. He could almost swear he heard tentative giggling erupt from the other girl as well.

“Do you think our parents are really dead?”

Mara glanced over at Faisellu, who was lying on her back staring at the ceiling.

“Does it matter?”

Fai turned her head to the side, looked on her with dark empty eyes that sometimes caught her by surprise and made Mara shiver. And it was hard to make Mara Jade shiver.

“Everyone has a mother but not me,” Fai sighed.

“That’s not even true. Lots of people don’t have mothers. Why do you care, anyway?”
“No reason.”
Mara huffed. “You’re so weird.”

Fai sniffed. “Are you going to kill those kids?”

“What? No. I’ve told you, we’re just supposed to be friends with them. That’s it.” Mara averted her gaze when she said this. It was easier to tell lies that way.

“I don’t understand. If they’re the enemy then we’re supposed to kill them. Isn’t that the way it works?”

“Even if that was the plan, there’d be no ‘we’ because you are useless and stupid,” Mara said harshly.

Fai issued a long, sad sigh. “Are you going to kill me?”

“What? No. Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Someone has to die.”

“No. We’re spies,” said Mara. “We’re spying on them. Well, I’m spying on them. You are just along to make it look like we’re twins so they like us. So we seem trustworthy. We’ve been over this. All you have to do is act normal.”

Mara paused, surveyed the girl with a sneer.

“I know that’s hard for you.”

“Someone always has to die,” Fai said flatly. Then, “I think my mother is dead. I think I remember her dying.”

“No you don’t. You don’t remember anything. None of us do, because it doesn’t matter. Nothing matters but what our master wants us to do.”

Mara stood up. She had been trying to do homework, dedicated to keeping up with her secret identity as a Coruscanti schoolgirl, even though she didn’t find much of what they were learning in year 6 on this backwater planet very challenging. She was pretending to be two full years older than she was, pretending to be the same age as the Skywalker twins, but even then she felt as if she were ahead of everyone here. They were apparently all ignorant hicks, which was only to be expected on the Outer Rim.

She wondered how Darth Vader lived in a place like this; Vader, whom her master spoke of as being this amazing, powerful, intelligent being who was his finest apprentice until his treacherous betrayal and defection. Mara was very curious about Vader, but she heeded her master’s words about him. She was supposed to avoid him.

His children weren’t much to write home about. They seemed mediocre, at best. The girl, Leia, she almost liked. The boy was too easy to mess with. Fun, admittedly, but easy. And he was sloppy. He’d started using force powers within minutes of meeting her, and they were supposed to be in hiding? Foolish. Like a little child. Mara wasn’t a child. She didn’t think she had ever been one. All she could remember was wanting to please her master, to excel at every test he gave her. To one day be his apprentice. These Skywalker twins knew nothing of that. Even if their father was supposedly Darth Sidious’s prized pupil.
They were weak.

She looked again at Faisellu. This girl, this fake sister of hers, was supposed to make them strong. Mara felt a tinge of resentment. Why did she have to waste her time preparing the twins for her master’s teachings when she was already so far ahead of them in every way?

But she knew the answer. It was all about Darth Vader, about Sidious’s obsession with him. She knew she shouldn’t question her master in any way, shouldn’t second guess his motivations, but really. He should just kill Vader and forget about him. That’s what she’d do if someone betrayed her the way Vader had betrayed Sidious.

“I’m not clumsy,” Faisellu said, sitting up and swinging her feet over the edge of the bed.

“What?”

“I’m not clumsy. I could braid your hair if you wanted me to.”

“Oh you are so stupid,” Mara burst out. “Why are you so stupid?”

She got up and left the room before Faisellu could respond.

They were living now in the home of Dredaxia Sawain, their “aunt.” She was a single woman who had been living here in Breelden for many years, and had been paid handsomely by the Empire to take Mara and Faisellu in complete with the fabricated story that they were the twin daughters of a brother and sister-in-law who had been killed on Coruscant. If anyone went looking into the records, they would even find the names and surface level information about that quiet, respectable family of four. This had been all done in case Vader or his wife looked into the friends their children made at school, and so that Mara and Faisellu could be enrolled in the Northwest Breelden Academy without any problems.

Mara didn’t care for Dredaxia, or “Auntie Dre” as she was to refer to her in public. The woman was sad, not melancholy sad but just pathetic sad. No friends, no living relatives, no one who would question why the family on Coruscant had never been mentioned before. She worked all day and then came home and watched HoloDramas before going to bed. It was literally all Mara had seen her do. But that made her ideal for their purposes. The less people to discuss her new nieces with, the better. The woman knew nothing, and cared not at all about what the Empire was trying to accomplish.

Mara marched up to dear Auntie Dre where she sat watching a bad romantic scene play out in all its room filling, three dimensional glory. She slapped a sheet of flimsiplast down on the table next to the holoprojector. “You need to sign this for me,” she ordered.

Dredaxia paused the holodrama, freezing the earnest face of a young man who was trying desperately and awkwardly to romance a woman who looked like she just wanted to get out of there. Mara could relate. She hated Dredaxia’s trashy taste in holodramas. It was all so gross and stilted and melodramatic. Mara liked a good action adventure herself. Dramatizations of the Clone Wars were her favorite.

“Dance lessons?” Dre asked, looking over the permission slip.

“It’s an after school activity.” It will make me seem more normal, Mara reasoned, it’s all part of the disguise, though she didn’t have anyone to argue with.

Dre fished a stylus out of her pocket and etched her name onto the flimsiplast. Part of her contract with the Imperial agents who had contacted her was that she should function as the girls’ legal
guardian in formality only. Mara was to be in charge. Anything she said was law. The woman must be desperate for money to agree to such a thing, Mara thought. While she thought herself competent, she was aware how strange it might seem to an adult to be told to obey the will of a child. Mara wondered briefly if she could order the woman to change her holodrama collection and only watch the films Mara wanted.

She decided not to bother, however. She had no plans to hang out in the living room with this woman. They just needed a place to reside, to come and go from as Mara pleased, and an adult to point to if anyone asked questions.

Dre leaned back into the couch, her hand hovering over the holoprojector control. “Do you need feeding?” she asked, as if the care of children was like watering plants. “Supper?” she amended, searching for the right word.

Mara looked at her thoughtfully. Her diet in the Imperial palace was strict and sparse, only what was needed for nourishment. Out here on her own, she was certain she was expected to maintain the same regime. But she was also in charge… it wasn’t as if Dre was an Inquisitor who would report back to the Emperor.

“Yes,” she said. “I want Firaxian shark fillets. With chaka noodles. And choclime twists for desert. Oh and sweetblossom brandy.” She’d never had alcohol before. She wondered what it was like.

The woman blinked. “I don’t cook,” she said. “I could order food.”

“Whatever it takes,” Mara said. “Do it.”

Dre stood up and left, and Mara sat down. She turned the holodrama back on, sneering at it even as she settled in to watch how the courtship played out. She had nothing to do with herself until tomorrow, when she would go to school and see the twins again. She glanced towards the bedroom where she had left Faisellu. Her pseudo-sister was standing in the doorway, watching her, with empty mournful eyes. Mara turned away quickly.

Luke found himself in a sour mood after school that day. The vexing new girl was one thing, he could have shaken that off, he felt, but Leia’s teasing was another. He sat down at his desk in their shared room and ignored her pointedly when she tried to talk to him.

“What are you sulking for?” she asked.

He declined to answer. Surely she could tell… Miss Oh So Perceptive.

“Are you still mad about lunch? That was hours ago,” Leia said airily. “Besides I was just having fun.”

Luke brought up a small holograph of the galaxy and stared at it intently, jotting notes into a datapad.

“No one cares about your crush on the teacher,” Leia went out. “Come on it was just a joke.”

She walked over to him and hovered over his shoulder. “I can help you with the hyperspace lanes report that’s due tomorrow, if you want.”

“I’m fine.”
“What about that History of Osallao essay you’re supposed to write?”

“I don’t need any help.”

The bedroom door opened and their father poked his head in. He balanced their training staffs across one shoulder. “Who wants to go visit Uncle Ben?” he asked, clearly expecting them to both jump up in excitement the way they usually did.

Only Leia bounced over to him this time, though.

“Luke?”

“Yes, Father,” Luke said with a sigh, slowly shutting off his holodesk projector and putting the datapad aside. He slid out of his seat and dragged his feet towards the door.

Father gave Leia a questioning look and she shrugged innocently. “He’s in a bad mood.”


“Did you upset him?” Father asked, as if Luke wasn’t standing right there.

“Maybe.”

“Wonderful,” Father said, unconcerned, and turned to walk down the hallway. “You’ll feel better after beating up your sister with a stick,” he called back to Luke.

“Hey!” Leia shouted, then ran after Father, trying to catch up to his long stride. She giggled when he teasingly gave her a gentle swat on the back of the head.

Luke trailed behind them, feeling as if Father never really understood how mean Leia could be. Whenever she upset Luke, his answer was just to dismiss it, oh that’s just Leia being Leia, your sister doesn’t mean any harm, that’s her sense of humor, etc. Mother at least made Leia sit down and apologize and would talk to her about treating other people with respect and kindness. But Father seemed to be proud of Leia no matter what she did.

She had been sent home from school once for cutting the braids off of another girl, and Mother had been horrified but Father had listened to Leia’s excuses and said, “Well, it sounds like she did what she had to do.”

Luke hadn’t liked that girl either; she was an awful bully… making the smaller kids cry and stealing their lunches and making them do her homework. An all-around unpleasant person. But still; Mother had admonished Leia for stooping to her level and answering violence with violence, while Father had barely been able to suppress his laughter when he learned that Leia had tacked the severed braids onto the Academy’s front lawn placard.

Father could be strict sometimes. If he told Luke or Leia to do something and they didn’t do it, his capacity for amusement or indulgence was non-existent. But when it came to disagreements between them, Father seemed to think they should know how to work it out themselves. Sometimes Luke wished he didn’t let Leia get away with quite so much.

And yet, his spirits rose despite himself as they made their way up towards the mountains where they met Uncle Ben for training. What they were training for, Luke didn’t really know. He had his suspicions, but Father never gave an explanation. Sometimes he just said it was for fun, exercise, learning how to use the Force, but other times he got so deadly serious about it that Luke knew there was more to it. But he knew better than to badger his father about things he didn’t want to talk about.
Luke knew all this had something to do with the Jedi. He knew his father and Uncle Ben had both once been Jedi, and that no one really talked about them anymore. The Empire had outlawed them and even out here, in a star system that wasn’t under Imperial rule, being a Jedi wasn’t something you wanted to be. Both of his parents were very secretive about their pasts, but Uncle Ben could be more forthcoming if Luke was careful to ask the right questions. He had begun to piece together what he could from things they let drop. Leia was especially good at gathering information, too, and when the two of them put their heads together they thought they had it all figured out.

Father and Uncle Ben had been Jedi. Mother had served in the Galactic Senate, but she had also once been the Queen of Naboo. (This was Leia’s favorite secret in all the world. Mother had been a Queen; that made her a Princess. And so she acted like one.) All that was long in the past, though. When the Republic became the Empire they fled the Core Worlds for quiet, faraway, Osallao, because the Emperor had declared all the Jedi to be criminals, and put a death warrant on their heads. Mother had of course sided with the Jedi so she had to leave, too.

That was all Luke and Leia needed to know in order to decide the Empire was bad.

It made him sad sometimes to think that they couldn’t go home to Naboo, or Coruscant; places he’d learned about in school and knew that was where his parents had once lived. But it was also exhilarating, in a way. They were fugitives! And his Father had fought in the Clone Wars. He’d been a war hero! A general! So had Uncle Ben, and their friend the togruta woman named Ahsoka. There was a bigger world out there besides the mountains and valleys of Osallao, the halls and classrooms of Breelden Academy, and he would see it all someday.

Leia too.

Over the past few months they had begun to learn how to duel. They weren’t allowed to use Father or Uncle Ben’s lightsabers against each other, though they were allowed to practice blaster deflection with a robot which shot minor sparks at them. To spar they were given the molded duraplast practice staffs, which Father had made to resemble the appropriate size, shape and weight of a Padawan’s lightsaber.

They both wanted to use the real thing, but Father seemed concerned that they would chop each other’s hands off. (Luke had acquired a few bruises that confirmed Leia was too ruthless with her staff to be trusted with a saber, yet.) Father did promise them that once they were ready they could build their own lightsabers, though they were still not allowed to show them around to anyone or use them in public. Luke had begun to daydream about that day. His lightsaber would be amazing. It would be better than Leia’s!

Today he decided that Leia wasn’t going to be allowed to win a single match.

He found himself wondering, briefly, what the new girl Mara would think if she knew that he was training to be a Jedi and could hold his own pretty well. She wouldn’t be so quick to throw things at him and shove him out of the way. She could use the force, sure, but she probably didn’t have anyone teaching her how to duel. She probably didn’t have anyone like Uncle Ben to teach her about the force, either.

He wondered about her parents. She said they’d been killed. Had they been Jedi? Coruscant was a bad place to live if you were Jedi. A terrible place to hide. That’s where the Emperor lived.

He didn’t want to be curious about Mara. But he was.

And Faisellu. She was easy to forget about. But she looked so scared all the time. Maybe that came from having Jedi parents killed on Coruscant. His mind started to run away with him the more he
thought about it. Maybe they’d seen their parents killed by Stormtroopers.

Leia smacked him hard across the back of his knees and he went down with a yelp.

“Leia!” Father said. “Not so hard, you’re not trying to break his legs.”

“Sorry,” she said, smirking as Luke got up with a scowl. “I’ll go easy on him.”

“You are distracted, Luke,” said Uncle Ben. He and Father were standing side by side, arms crossed, watching them. “You must clear your mind, let the force flow through you. Empty your head of all thoughts. Let instinct guide you.”

Luke sighed. It was so hard! His head was always a tumult of thoughts.

“Go again,” said Father, unrelenting. “This time, Luke, focus only on what is in front of you. Nothing else exists besides your combatant, your weapons, the force. And Leia…” he paused, “you’re doing well, but remember, he’s your brother.”

Luke felt a flush of shame creep over his neck. Fire burned in his cheeks and his heart was heavy.

Leia twirled her staff playfully, smiling.

He tried to heed their words about clearing his head, but the admonishments about being distracted stung. Leia was perfect even when she was doing wrong! She knew that she wasn’t supposed to really hit him with the staff, just tap him. When he won a match that’s what he did.

The more frustrated Luke got the worse he did. Every time he went down, they told him to clear his thoughts, become one with the staff, focus on the movements, let go of all his frustration and give it over to the force, but none of it worked. Finally, Father said, “That’s all for today,” and put out his hand to collect their staffs.

Luke stared at the grass as he relinquished the staff. “You did well,” Father said, then added, “It will get easier.”

Luke wanted to say that it wouldn’t. He was good at this, he knew it; he could beat Leia on other days. Easily! But she knew how to get inside his head and that just wasn’t fair.

The four of them headed back down to town. Leia skipped alongside Father and held his hand, which Luke thought she was too old to do. He felt Uncle Ben’s hand fall gently on his shoulder. “Be mindful of your thoughts, Luke. A Jedi does not give in to jealousy, or allow rivalry to guide their steps,” he said, his voice lowered. Father didn’t like it when he said the J word and he always dropped into a sort of whisper when talking about the Jedi way.

“Tell that to Leia,” Luke said, not even trying to keep the sullen edge out of his voice. Even the conspiratorial joy of knowing Ben was talking to him about the Jedi wasn’t enough to erase the sting of his very bad day.

Uncle Ben chuckled. “Your sister certainly does enjoy her successes,” he said, and the slight, if fond, disapproval in his tone warmed Luke’s heart. “But the ease she exhibits comes from a clear mind. You allow your frustration to rule you. The more you focus on your failure, the more failure you will have to focus on.”

“Besides,” Ben added, “it is not truly failure to lose a few sparring matches to a worthy opponent. You are learning. Every loss is a step in the right direction. Let mistakes teach you the way forward rather than block your path.”
Luke nodded. “It’s not that I lost,” he said. “I just… I know what you are telling me to do but I can’t do it.”

“Practice,” said Ben gently. “We will meditate later. How does that sound?”

Luke shook his head. “It’s not the same thing. I’m not getting beat when I meditate. It’s easy to be calm when Leia’s not dancing around showing off.”

“Patience,” Ben reiterated, stifling a chuckle. “You have only just begun your training. You will learn to master these challenges in time.”

“I hope so.”

Luke eyed his sister, still clinging happily to Father’s hand as they walked up ahead. She was chattering something, face turned up, and Father was bending down towards her a little to listen. He tried to suppress the envy he felt at how easily and presumptuously she could monopolize Father’s attention. Ben gave his shoulder a squeeze and a pat, as if sensing his unhappiness, despite Luke’s best efforts at keeping it down. But, thankfully he did not admonish Luke again about controlling his feelings.
Luke always spent his study periods in the flight holosimulator. It was a large spherical pod located in the Discovery Hall, which was a wing of the library furnished with a variety of workstations for children to study or experiment on their own. There were also collaboration stations where groups could work together. Northwest Academy had a state of the art Discovery Hall, and their flight holosimulator was better than the sort of thing you usually found in a school library. Some schools just had simulation goggles and hand held controls, whereas the holosimulator was a fully immersive, enclosed orb that shut out real world stimuli and also mimicked whatever cockpit the scenario loaded… down to the last detail.

Luke’s father had been contracted by the school to install the holosimulator, even before Luke and Leia had attended the school. He still came in to perform maintenance and updates on it. Luke had always felt a certain sense of pride and ownership over the holosimulator, and if he arrived in the Discovery Hall to find it in use he always felt a bit deflated. There were other things to do during study period, of course, but none that were so purely fun as flight simulation.

He walked past kids working on art, or music, building things, or just reading or watching holovids. He nodded to kids he was friends with, but didn’t stop to talk to anyone.

Sometimes, Luke would “fly” with a co-pilot or gunner, if there was a friend of his available who wanted to use the holosimulator with him. Other times he chose a single pilot aircraft from the list of available models, or selected the AI co-pilot from the menu.

When he selected astromech support he got what was basically a sanitized version of R2-D2. He didn’t actually care much for the holosimulator’s version of R2. It was kind of like if someone had wiped all of R2’s memories and therefore part of his personality. Luke found that he often thought of little Artoo more like a person than a droid, and the watered-down version he encountered in the sim felt wrong. Sad.

The co-pilot AI was better. It wasn’t supposed to be anyone in particular, wasn’t mimicking his father, but he could recognize his father’s hand in the design, could tell how the computer had been influenced by its creator. The AI’s name was Kitster and its hologram, which appeared to be in the cock-pit right beside him, looked like a young, black-haired human boy with brown eyes and skin… a friendly age-appropriate co-pilot for the children at Northwest Academy to learn to fly with.

Sometimes Luke enjoyed flying with “Kitster” more than with other students. The AI was a better pilot than his classmates. They caused him to crash or get shot down by enemy pilots more often than not.

As Luke neared the holosimulator he saw the new girl, Mara, standing next to it. She was leaning casually against the shiny black exterior of the chamber, reading the instructional datapad attached to the outside of the orb. Luke stopped, and began to turn around, feeling a mix of the familiar disappointment and surprise that came when the simulator was unavailable. But since it was… her… it was somehow worse…

She glanced up, and smiled at him. “Hey, Luke.”
He wavered, still half turned around to leave, but now that she had seen him he felt trapped. He couldn’t just walk away. “Hi,” he said, cautiously. He nodded towards the sim unit. “You like flying?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never tried it.”

“Ah… well, the sim has introductory programs,” he said, and found himself pivoting back around and walking towards her. “I’ve flown all the scenarios,” he added casually.

“Oh really?”

“Yeah.” He put out a hand to rest on the side of the chamber. The plastisteel exterior was cold to the touch. “There’s beginner, intermediate, advanced… and combat mode.”

“Combat mode? I didn’t know this was a military training school.”

“It’s not. The combat mode is just… well I mean…” Luke paused, feeling flustered. He didn’t want to say it was just for fun, because that seemed like admitting that its use wasn’t purely educational. “I mean,” he started again, “the programs are meant to be realistic as possible and lots of the ship models come with guns so that’s part of the programming.”

She nodded. “I’d like to try it out,” she said. “I think I’ll try combat mode.”

“Well you can’t just do that right away,” Luke said, shifting impatiently. His palm left a warm print on the surface that faded away as he waved his hands in an attempt to explain; “You have to create a profile with your school ID so that it can save your progress, and for new users it starts you out with simple maneuvers, learning the controls, how to take off and land and stuff. The AI co-pilot walks you through it.”

“That doesn’t sound like fun.”

“But you can’t just skip it.”

“Well why don’t you fly for me if you’re such a good pilot?” she suggested. “I’ll be the gunner.” She closed one eye and mimicked the shape of a blaster with her hands. “Pew pew pew,” she said, pretending to track an invisible target past Luke’s shoulder.

“I suppose that would work,” he said.

“Alright!” Mara said happily, and she hopped into the chamber. She plopped down in one of the seats and swiveled to look at him expectantly.

Luke climbed in after her and started pressing buttons. The orb, which was divided in half, began to close, its top half descending to meet the bottom. He set to work logging in and selecting the right program. The chamber whirred around them as it made the necessary adjustments, not only bringing up a hologram simulation of the right cockpit and exterior image out of the viewports, but moving around the physical controls and the seats as well. The seat Mara was in moved around so that it they were back to back instead of side by side, and she laughed a little in surprise and gripped the side of her seat as it pivoted and locked into place.

“Just grab the controls in front of you,” said Luke. “When an enemy ship comes into view use the auto-target to line up the shot and then press the trigger. Easy.”

“Where are we?” Mara asked, twisting around to look out the simulated viewport in front of Luke.
“We’re in orbit above Naboo,” he said. He often brought up that planet in the system because he liked looking down at it and thinking about how his mother had once been Queen. It was nice to look at from space, too, with swirls of green and blue.

“Where are all the enemies? And why didn’t you have to take off or anything like that?”

Luke rolled his eyes in the darkened cockpit. “I’ve mastered all these simulations so I can skip ahead to whatever part I want. And there will be stuff to shoot at, don’t worry. It’s on easy so they’re going to come one by--”

“Ah ha!” she shouted, suddenly seeing a blip on her screen indicating that an enemy was approaching. In a moment it was identified as an old Clone Wars era model Trade Federation droid fighter.

Luke was about to offer instructions on how to use the targeting system, but Mara seemed to have the hang of it already. She shot the incoming ship with precision and it exploded showily in the darkness of space, its debris hurtling towards the atmosphere below.

“Nice,” she said appreciatively, and Luke wondered if she was talking about her own shot or the animation of the destroyed ship.

“That was a good shot,” Luke said. “Are you sure haven’t done this before?”

“It’s easy, just like you said,” Mara answered. “Just line it up on the targeting screen and press the trigger.”

Luke wondered if he should have chosen a harder level, one where he’d have to be flying through a dogfight, maneuvering around other ships, avoiding return fire, and making it so she had to work to maintain a bead on the enemies. As it was, Mara kept lining them up and shooting them down, seeming a little impatient at the sedate pace which the ships approached. Well it wasn’t his fault; she’d told him she never used a flight sim before so he hadn’t been trying to overwhelm her.

“Can I try flying?” she asked.

“I suppose,” he said. They were already in orbit, so there really wasn’t that much to do. Taking off, landing, dodging through asteroid fields or engaging in battle with a squadron, those were the hard parts, and this scenario didn’t have any of that.

They got up and switched places. Mara grabbed the flight controls eagerly and Luke suppressed the urge to give her some tips. He got the feeling she wasn’t been forthright about her amount of experience. Was she showing off? Thinking she’d look smarter if she looked like a natural who could figure everything out on the first try?

Surely her school back on Coruscant had a holosimulator. Maybe she thought she’d show up their Outer Rim school.

“This is fun,” she said, holding the steering controls. The fighter dipped to the side, and she started to fly it erratically through open space.

“I still need to shoot down the enemy fighters,” Luke said. “You need to hold steady so I can target them.”

“Sorry,” she said, without making any effort to steady the fighter. If anything he thought she was starting to weave around on purpose.
He swallowed down his irritation and focused on trying to lock on to the enemy fighter. Since they had wasted some time switching seats, he was already at a disadvantage, and a second fighter entered the screen. This was bad. The more droid fighters that piled up the harder it would be to shot them all before they were shot themselves. There wasn’t any support craft programmed into this mode because it was supposed to be easy enough to take on each fighter one at a time.

Despite Mara’s crazy flying, Luke managed to shoot the first one down, but the other was quickly gaining on them and a third entered the radar. “Hold steady,” he said.

“Trying,” she said, as they took a sudden, jolting bank to the left. “But hey they can’t target us if we’re moving, right?”

“I suppose so, but they’re going to outnumber us if you don’t let me get a lock on them,” Luke said, trying to be patient, even as another fighter entered the screen. There were several blips coming in and every one was on Luke and Mara’s tail.

Eventually it became too much for Luke to handle. He did his best but just couldn’t get a lock on anything, and Mara’s evasive tactics weren’t enough to keep the increasing number of opponents from getting several shots on them. The simulation pulled no punches, flashing with red warning lights and sirens letting them know they were about to die and should eject.

Mara started to laugh, and Luke just crossed his arms and sighed. She didn’t show any intention of ejecting so he didn’t either. They hurtled towards the planet, with flames licking at the viewport, and they didn’t even make it to the surface below, burning up on a wild and uncontrolled reentry.

“Simulation failed,” the computer said. Then a readout of all their “mistakes” started to scroll on the holosim screen, which had ceased to look like the interior of the cockpit and reverted to its default state.

“That was fun,” Mara said. “The crash was very lifelike. Whoever programmed that added a lot of… flourishes.”

“My father programmed that,” said Luke. “Or, I mean, he adapted the original program. Improved on it. He installed this unit for the school.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “No wonder you think you’re so good at it.”

Luke bristled. “That has nothing to do with it. Anyway, now that crash is in my log,” he added. “So thanks. All my flight sim scores go on my school record.”

“Well, sorry,” she said, unapologetically. “Shouldn’t have let a newbie fly if you were so worried about your spotless record.”

Luke reached over and ended the session. The orb hissed open and light from the Discovery Hall flooded their eyes, making both of them blink and squint.

“Was that really your first time?” he asked, skeptically.

Sure, she had caused them to get shot down with her bad piloting, but it hadn’t really felt like the honest mistakes of a newbie. Also she had reacted to the crash simulation with amusement, not disappointment or fear. And what was that comment about flourishes? If she recognized that Father had added some personal touches to the programming it meant she’d seen a more basic version before. Somehow, he felt like she knew exactly what she was doing and had just been goofing off.

Mara twisted around in the seat and smiled at him. “Well, maybe not….”
“You lied,” he said flatly. “Did you fly a sim at your old school?”

“Something like that.”

“Why’d you say you didn’t?” he huffed.

She shrugged. “I don’t know? Curious, I guess.”

“Curious about what.”

“I don’t know. How you’d act I guess.”

Luke flushed. “You were testing me? I don’t get it.”

“I was just having fun,” she said, drawing away. “You were bragging about being so good at it I figured…”

“I am good at it,” he said. “It’s your fault we crashed.”

“Well you weren’t a very good teacher, then.”

“You didn’t need teaching. I could tell you used one of these before,” Luke insisted. “I knew you were lying.”

She smiled quietly and stood up, climbing out of the chamber. “So I guess you’re smarter than you look. But I was just having some fun. It was fun, wasn’t it?”

“It’s not a game,” he said truculently. “We’re supposed to use it to learn.”

“Uh huh,” she said, and he felt as if she could see right through him.

He climbed out of the chamber after her and said, “It’s not nice to lie to people.”

“Do you always tell the truth?”

“Sure.”

“No you don’t.”

She started to walk away from him, and he followed, unable to let it go even though he suspected she was just goading him. “I do. I try.”

“Well it’s impossible even if you try. And anyway, I already know that you have a secret.”

“Oh yeah? And what’s that?” He fell in step beside her, and she just glanced to the side slyly.

“You know.”

“If it’s my secret I should know,” he countered. “But if you think you know it you should say what it is. Otherwise you’re just tricking me into telling you something you don’t know.”

She laughed. Then she wiggled her fingers. “You can float things,” she said quietly. “You were using the Force yesterday. I bet you’d lie about that if someone caught you.”

“You were using the Force,” he said.

“Yeah and you know you shouldn’t do that where just anyone can see,” Mara said.
“I know. But what do you know about it?”

“About using the force? Or lying about it?”

“Both.”

She shrugged. “Why should I tell you?”

“Because you brought it up.”

She shrugged. Mara came to a stop in front of a computer station that was set up with a large touch screen for creating art. She tapped at the controls, bringing up a color palette, then began to lazily sketch on the screen with her fingers.

Luke pretended to be just observing her casually, but he said, keeping his voice low, “If you use it and the wrong people see, the Empire could come for you. Take you away.”

“Oh really?” She was painting something purple and abstract, just squiggles and shapes.

“Yeah, but you’re from Coruscant. So you know that already.”

“But you know it too, which means that you lie,” Mara said triumphantly. “If someone asked you about it and they were, like, an adult or someone you didn’t know, you’d lie. You’d lie to me too if I didn’t catch you in the act.”

“Fine, so I’d lie if it was really important. But you were lying just to have fun. I don’t do that.”

“You should try it sometime.”

“It’s not a good way to make friends.”

“We’re not friends?”

He stared at her in surprise. “No? I just met you. And you haven’t been very nice.”

“Being nice is boring. Besides, who says I haven’t been nice? We’re talking and we’re hanging out, isn’t that what friends do?”

He was silent. He didn’t know what to make of this girl. Was she just playing with him, having fun teasing him, or was this actually her clumsy way of trying to make a friend? He softened a little at the idea that she was being pushy and strange because she was new and didn’t know how else to get to know people. Maybe he shouldn’t be so judgemental, he thought. His mother would tell him to be kind first, and try to think the best of people; to give them the benefit of the doubt.

“What are you painting?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she said. She pressed her splayed out hand onto the screen, leaving behind a red handprint. She looked at it critically. “I’m just messing around.”

Luke stifled a frustrated sigh. Did she really want to be friends or was she just messing around there, too? He changed the subject. “Where is your sister?”
“She has class this period. Galactic Politics.”

“Really? So does my sister.”

Mara nodded. She switched off the art program without saving her work, and just leaned against the wall. “Sounds boring, to me. Who cares about the senate? Or the history of the Old Republic. It’s the Empire now. The Emperor is in charge. That’s all anyone needs to know.”

“I’m sure the senators care about the senate,” said Luke. He wasn’t that interested in the Galactic Politics class, which is why he hadn’t put it on his schedule, but he didn’t want to dismiss the importance of it. His mother had been a senator, after all.

Mara rolled her yes. “I’m sure nerf-herders care about what they do, too. But no one else cares.”

“I care.”

She just raised an eyebrow skeptically. “Don’t lie, remember?”

Luke frowned. He wanted to argue with her, but didn’t really know what to say. He couldn’t give away that his mom had been a senator, once, or that he respected what she had done… even if he didn’t really know exactly what that was.

“Well, Leia likes that class.” He was sure to let his tone imply that he didn’t want to hear her diss what Leia was interested in.

It must have worked, because she just smiled and pushed herself off of the wall. “I should go study for my next class. I’m behind on everything.”

“What’s the class?”

“Plant Biology.”

“Oh. That’s my next class, too.” He wondered if all their class periods lined up.

She smiled brilliantly. “Then you can help me get caught up. Because we’re friends.”

He hesitated, but she just kept smiling expectantly, with something like mischief sparkling behind the green of her eyes. He thought he should say no, but he didn’t. “I guess so,” he said instead.

They sat down to review the parts of the unit she had missed, but Mara seemed uninterested in plant biology. Luke couldn’t really blame her; he didn’t find photosynthesis all that compelling, either, and there were so many different kinds of plants all across the galaxy that they were expected to name, and categorize, and remember. Mara was bored and fidgety and yawning, so he said, “Imagine you crash land on a planet and you have to know which plants you can eat and which are poisonous.”

That always helped him focus. Imagining a use for the knowledge helped him remember it.

“If I survive the crash,” she said. “Have you ever flown for real?”

“Yeah,” he said. “But not into outer space. I’ve flown podracers and my father lets me drive his speeder sometimes.”

“A podracer?” Her interested was piqued, and Luke had a feeling they weren’t going to finish getting caught up on the wonderful world of plants. “You race?”

“No, not really. I mean, there are podraces held out near Shalla,” he said, naming a small city on the
far side of Osallao. His father would sometimes take him to view the races. “I’ve gone to see them,” he told her, “but I’ve only flown for fun. My father works on them. He’s really good at building things and flying things.”

“He made you a podracer?” Mara asked.

Luke nodded. “We built it together. I’ve taken it out on the alluvial flatlands,” he said. “There’s good open space out there. We’ve flown through the Shalla canyon track but only when it’s closed.”

“What, you sneak onto the track?”

“No. They let my father use the track because he works on the podracers.”

“Your father can do everything, can’t he?” Mara asked, and he thought her voice was mocking.

“Yeah, he does a little bit of everything,” said Luke touchily. “He’s good at a lot of things. People like to give him business cause they like things done right. He’s got contracts all over Osallao.”

“That’s wonderful. He sounds amazing.”

She still sounded sarcastic. Luke frowned. He bent his head to read over the datapad about Ungolian spider leaf trees, but he started to think about podracing. He and Father hadn’t been out to race for a while, now. Not since the training with Uncle Ben had begun. He missed it: flying fast across the green blur of the Osallan prairie lands or diving between cliffs in the canyon country. He was never able to beat Father, but he had promised himself one day that he would. Now he wondered if he’d get the chance.

Flying was just for fun, a pastime they could share as father and son. The training had an undercurrent of importance to it, a pressure to get things right, even if Father wouldn’t say why. Any time they had once spent on podracing was now devoted to the sparring with Leia and learning lightsaber forms and self-defense techniques.

Luke enjoyed the training, there was no denying that. But there was something different about racing. The simple, uncomplicated joy of it. And Leia had never been very interested in it, so it was always just him and Father. Just the two of them.

He sighed and glanced over at Mara. She was staring off into space, not even pretending to be studying the backlog of homework. He thought for the first time that maybe she did look a little sad. Was she thinking about her parents? Was she missing whatever favorite activity she had done with her father? Again Luke felt ashamed for his self-pity. At least his father was still alive and still did things with him, even if he had to share that time with Leia.

Mara turned to look at him and he glanced away hastily, embarrassed to be caught staring. Before she could say anything the period bell went off, signaling that it was time to head to class. Luke jumped up and she followed him without a word.
Politics As Usual

I have to tell you a secret that will see you through all the trials that life can offer. Have courage and be kind. [x]

Padmé looked into the mirror past her own reflection and smiled at her daughter, whose face was screwed up in concentration as her small hands tangled in Padmé’s hair.

Ever since going into hiding Padmé had largely given up the more elaborate hairstyles and headpieces that she had worn with the help of handmaidens throughout her political career. C-3PO had always been there for her, filling in as best he could, but the droid did not have dexterous enough hands to truly be of use when it came to hair. She missed her handmaidens for more than that… Dormé’s knowing laughter, Sabé’s crooked smile… the feeling of sisterhood that she had lost.

But Leia, ever since she was old enough to run a comb through Padmé’s hair, had delighted in seizing any opportunity to play her mother’s long curls.

And now that she was nearly eleven, Leia had gotten good enough at it to be able to style her mother’s hair when she was going out or having guests over.

Today was just such a day. Padmé sighed as she thought about the impending tea with the Koelsins. Entertaining guests was something she was very good at, and she could switch herself to autopilot these days whenever neighbors or members of the PTA came over to chat. She did not mind, exactly, but it lacked the same interest for her that, say, senatorial meetings or diplomatic missions had.

“You look so pretty,” Leia sighed appreciatively as she stepped back to admire her handiwork.

Padmé peered at herself, noticing the fine lines that had begun to etch themselves across her face, particularly at the corners of her eyes and the wrinkle of her brow. Curious how furrows that had flickered across her face when she was 17, or 27, now lingered on her skin at 37. She turned her attention to the coils of hair that Leia had piled on top of her head, reaching up to run her hand gently over the buns as she turned to get a better view.

“It’s perfect, thank you sweetie,” she said, then stood up and moved around, motioning for Leia to take her place. When her daughter plopped down into the chair Padmé picked up a brush and ran it through Leia’s hair, long and brown like her own. Like her mother’s, and Sola’s, and, she remembered, Shmi Skywalker’s had once been.

“Can I go over to a friend’s house today?” Leia asked.

“The Koelsins are coming over,” Padmé said. “You know how much they love to see you.”

Leia frowned into the mirror before schooling her face into something more pleasant… not quickly enough for it to go unnoticed. Padmé smiled quietly as she began to braid a crown into Leia’s hair.

“Yes, but, I said I would go over to my friends’ house today,” Leia said. “They’re expecting me.”

“Which friend is this?”

“Oh? And how are you getting along with them?” Padmé asked.

She had heard about Dredaxia Sawain’s nieces; something like that travelled quickly through the grapevine. Dredaxia was a curious woman. She lived just down the street and kept to herself mostly, but always showed up to weekly town hall meetings, so Padmé knew her despite her not previously having children in school. The arrival of the twin girls and the explanation that Dredaxia’s brother and sister-in-law had died in a tragic speeder accident had caused a bit of a stir, especially among those who whispered that Dre would never be able to handle two children suddenly dumped in her lap.

“Very well,” said Leia. “We have so many classes together! It’s fun. We are going to study for our Galactic Politics quiz together.”

“You may go over there,” Padmé told her, “but first I want you to say hello to the Koelsins, alright?”

“Yes, mother,” Leia said, resigned. Padmé thought it strange; it was unlike Leia to pass up the opportunity to say hello to her parents’ friends. Luke was usually the one who couldn’t stand to be forced to sit around while the adults talked. He couldn’t stand to sit around, in general.

“There,” said Padmé, placing one last pin into the finished crown. She put her hands on Leia’s shoulders and smiled, meeting her daughter’s eyes in the mirror.

“I wish I was as pretty as you.”

“What a thing to say!” Padmé exclaimed in surprise. “You are my beautiful girl.”

“I don’t like my nose.”

“I love your nose. But what’s brought all this on? Has someone said something?”

Padmé looked at her in concern. Leia was usually so confident that she was more likely to cause Padmé to worry by slapping a bully upside the head than taking their words to heart. But she was getting to be the age where girls became more and more concerned about their looks, and Padmé wondered.

“No.” Leia shrugged. “I just don’t think I’m very pretty. Not like you.”

“Nonsense. But, you know that what is on the inside is more important,” said Padmé. “Kindness and respect are far more beautiful than your nose or your hair or anything like that. Some of the most outwardly breathtaking people can be the ugliest inside, and that is what truly matters.”

Leia’s mouth quirked and her eyes rolled slightly. “Yes, I know.”

Padmé knelt down and playfully tapped Leia’s nose, saying, “You, young lady, need to stop worrying so much about being ‘the best’ all the time. Not everything is a contest.”

“I want to make you proud,” Leia said.

“You do make me proud.” Padmé stood up. “But you don’t need to be the top of every class or the most beautiful or win every fight to do that.”

“You would be proud if I was the worst at everything and the ugliest and a pushover?” Leia asked in breathless rush, which forced Padmé to laugh.

“What did I just say? Kindness, respect… goodness. These are the important things. I’m proud of
you for what’s in your heart, not in your mind or on your face. Do you understand?”

Leia slid out of the chair and stared at her thoughtfully before nodding.

Padmé let the matter drop, even though she wasn’t entirely convinced that Leia did understand. Her daughter could be incredibly stubborn and driven, and while Padmé didn’t want to downplay her accomplishments or damage her self-esteem, she could recognize the hints of vanity in Leia’s concerns. If her reports came in and she didn’t have the best grades she would scowl like a tiny, feminine version of her father.

The twins had the day off from school and Padmé wished for some quiet family time, everyone together in one place to catch up… but she had promised to have the Koelsins over a long time ago and Anakin was swamped with work orders. He had taken Luke along with him to the shop early and now Leia wanted to run off to her friends’ house. Ah well, it was good that Leia had friends. Sometimes Padmé worried that she and Luke weren’t socializing well enough with the other children their age, and the time away from extracurricular activities for lightsaber practice wasn’t helping any.

Yebzen and Parthique Koelsin were an elderly couple. They were highly civic minded, and had raised five children in Breelden while still managing to find time to be involved in local politics. Now that they were grandparents they lived in relatively quiet retirement, and they had befriended Padmé years ago when she was still new to Osallao with twin babies and an extremely troubled husband on her hands. She was indebted to them for being some of the first neighbors to extend hospitality to her and help her feel less homesick, overwhelmed, and afraid.

Leia stayed around just long enough to say hello before she began to impatiently edge towards the door, and so Padmé let her flit off to go visit her friends. After that she made small talk with her neighbors over tea and sandwiches, while C-3PO hovered solicitously nearby, but she knew something was up. The pair kept shifting in their seats and looking at each other as if they were deciding when to broach an issue; likely the real reason for their visit. Padmé had seen this behavior a hundred times over in her political career.

So, even as she asked about their children and grandchildren she eyed them with cool suspicion. These people were her friends, but she had learned to be wary of even the best of friends and mentors.

Finally, at a lull in the conversation, after pocket holos of the large Koelsin brood had been put away, she prompted, “You seem to have something on your minds.”

Parthique nodded. “It is nearing time for nominations to the congressional elections,” she said. “As you know. The deadline for our district to select its candidates is approaching.”

Padmé nodded. She was well aware.

She had voted faithfully every election season since moving to Breelden. She always made Anakin vote, too, and had to give him a list of who to vote for because he refused to do it otherwise.

She thought sometimes that he did that just because he knew it made her uncomfortable to engage in such underhanded politics… somehow it still brought a smile to his face when she told him he was turning her into his own personal dictator and that she was not amused. She had once been a firm believer in the sanctity of the individual voting process… young Padmé would have been shocked with herself for telling anyone outright who to vote for without going over the reasons why and explaining the positions of all the different candidates and encouraging them to pick the candidate whose values matched their own. Anakin didn’t want to know any of that. He just wanted to know who she thought was best.
Obi-Wan never voted because he had never become an official citizen of Breelden. Living in a cave on the outskirts of the city didn’t count as residency.

“Let us cut to the chase,” said Yebzen. “We are here to ask you to run for congress against Vor Truax, who is slated to run unopposed for reelection this year.”


“We’ve seen the way you handle yourself,” said Parthique, appreciatively. “You may not have the experience, but you are a born politician, my dear. We’ve seen many beings in our day and we are confident that you would do more than hold your own.”

“You should consider it,” Yebzen insisted. “A mind like yours is wasted at this level. No offense to other parents on the board, but you can do more than organize a bake sale. Look at what you accomplished with the Fresh Air Mandate and the petition to update the library databases at the academy.”

Padmé smiled. “You are flattering me.”

“Yes, but it is genuine praise.”

“You are essential, my dear. Osallao is in dire need of someone like you.”

“There has been talk of our star system joining the empire.”

“Surely not,” Padmé said with a little scoff, hiding her instant unease.

“It’s true. Truax believes the empire could help bring in new commerce… trade opportunities, infrastructure. Surely you are aware of the Expansion Coalition?”

“Yes,” Padmé said, with a quick nod. A large percentage of Osallao was underdeveloped, or not developed at all. The planet had few cities. Vast stretches of the planet’s surface were still comprised mostly of wilderness, and for centuries there had been debates about whether to tear down forests and level mountains in order to build cities, or to embrace the wild mystique of the hidden valleys and vast prairies. The Expansion Coalition was made up of beings who favored the former course of action.

“But that has never been affiliated with the Empire?” she asked.

“Not officially. But there have been rumors that the members of the coalition have met with emissaries from the Imperial Senate to discuss how joining the Empire might benefit their cause.”

Padmé smiled dismissively. “A few meetings here and there… by a group not even a part of the planetary government…”

“Now, Veré, don’t play at being naive! You know how these things work,” said Parthique. “This is an influential lobby group. And I have it on good authority that they have the ears of all the leading contenders for all the congressional seats. If the Expansion Coalition decides that joining the Empire is the best course of action they will not cease until the members of congress see things their way.”

“And you think that I can be the lone holdout against this pressure?” Padmé asked with an arched eyebrow.

“Not the lone holdout, if we have anything to say about it,” Parthique proclaimed staunchly, giving her husband a nod. “You are not the only person we are approaching, of course. It would be ideal if
enough conscientious candidates to fill all the spots would step forward.”

Padmé shook her head slightly. She wondered at their optimism, and thought back to her own naive belief in democracy in action. Maybe the Koelsins had never seen corruption as deep as the kind that had brought down the Republic, but at their age she wondered at the youthful conviction they had that a handful of “good people” could keep the inevitable march of the Empire at bay.

Then she wondered at herself for thinking such dreary thoughts. Had she lost all her hope? Was she the foolish one?

She had used to believe that even one solitary being could change the entire galaxy. She still believed that, in a way; only she had seen that that one person had turned out to be Palpatine. It hadn’t been her. She had lost, and this was her defeat.

It didn’t matter, though. Even if she sometimes felt like a wounded dog who had crawled into the corner to lick her wounds, she could not and would not get involved in politics again. Not at the planetary level, anyway. Being a PTA mom was one thing. Even attending town hall meetings and being visible in the neighborhood planning committee was small potatoes compared to what the Koelsins were proposing. No one paid attention to the goings on of a single tiny school district in the human sector of a small outer rim city.

But running for a seat on the planetary congress?

What was next, running for president of the planet? Joining the star system’s Council of Planets? Becoming Prime Minister of the Osallan System? She almost laughed at the hubris of such thoughts, but she had once been a queen; she didn’t do things by halves. And she couldn’t let herself get carried away and wave a red flag for the empire to see. “Here I am, Padmé Amidala; not dead, not gone, come and get me.”

If it was just her she would do it, she thought. Fight for this one small corner of the galaxy to remain free, whether it put her in Palpatine’s crosshairs or not. She could use a good fight. But not at the expense of her children.

“I don’t think this is a good time for me to tackle a political campaign,” Padmé said gently. She spread her hands apologetically. “My twins are still very young and there is the business to run…”

“Promise us you will at least consider it,” said Yebzen. “Discuss it with your husband.”

“Of course,” Padmé lied with a smile. She would discuss with Anakin the fact that the empire was now sniffing around the Osallan system, apparently, but the only decision to be made if that were the case would be how far to run, and how fast.
“I think you should do it.”

“What?” She turned around with an incredulous laugh. “Be serious, Anakin.”

“I am being serious,” he said, folding his hands behind his head. He lounged on the bed, propped up amongst the ridiculous amount of decorative pillows that always cluttered the bed before Padmé removed them in almost ritual fashion at night.

Decorative pillows. He’d never quite get used to them. They were not something that a slave, a Jedi, or a Sith Lord could ever really comprehend a use for. But he liked them all the same. They were comforting. They were a Padmé thing.

She sat at her vanity, pulling pins like secrets from her hair, gradually transforming for the night. She uncoiled a tight bun from one side of her head and ran a brush through the loosened waves. He smiled. Back in the early days of their marriage he had always loved to watch her dismantle the sculptures from her hair; removing headpieces and extensions and the myriad of clasps and combs and pins that it took to keep it all afloat.

Watching her now reminded him of a long time ago, when she had sat at a similar vanity in her Coruscant apartment. It had been the first day he’d seen her again after their initial meeting as children. After her handmaiden, Dormé, had helped to remove the conical, basket-like headpiece she’d worn that day, she had sat there brushing her hair slowly, thoughtfully, until she abruptly stopped, got up, and turned off the security cameras. He had felt reprimanded, at the time. He had only been watching because that was his job; he was protecting her from assassins, watching over her, making sure nothing happened. But somehow she had been able to sense his feelings. His longing. The forbidden thoughts...

“Are you listening? What do we do about these rumors that the Empire wants to take over this star system?”

He shrugged, drawn back reluctantly from pleasant reverie to annoying reality. The Empire. Always the Empire. Why couldn’t it just disappear into the supermassive black hole at the heart of the galaxy and leave him alone?

“The Empire isn’t coming to Osallao,” he said.

“How do you know?” Pins fell from her fingers, clattering softly onto the table below.

“It’s not part of the plan. That’s why I moved us here.”

“That makes no sense,” she objected, fidgeting with the ends of her hair. “You don’t know the Emperor’s plans anymore. And whatever he might have once told you doesn’t matter. He’s a liar.”
He hesitated. He’d never been up front with her about his former life, his double memory. He didn’t want to think about that life and so he pushed it down, avoided it, looked away. Now wasn’t exactly the time to rip open that particular secret. There were too many things he didn’t want to admit. How to say, “I killed you, in another life”? No.

“I’ll contact Ahsoka,” he said, dropping his hands from behind his head. He picked up a pillow and idly tossed it back and forth, thinking. “She should be able to ask Senator Organa about it. If the Imperial Senate has had any business out here, he should know. Or be able to find out.”

Padmé frowned. “I don’t want to put Bail in any danger. He doesn’t know where we are, for his own safety.”

“He’s put himself in danger by organizing a rebellion,” Anakin pointed out. “And besides, that’s not exactly the reason he doesn’t know about our location. He was kept in the dark so he couldn’t give up our secret if he was ever interrogated beyond his limits. But that’s where Ahsoka can do her part; ask Bail about Osallao without telling him why she wants to know.”

“Don’t be so callous. Bail is my friend.”

“I’m not being callous. These are the facts.”

“Talking about him being captured and tortured for information like it means nothing,” said Padmé. “That’s being callous.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say, Padmé. You know that it’s a very real possibility. And I’m sure Senator Organa knows it too.”

“It’s not that it’s untrue.” She stood up and paced for a moment before faltering into stillness, her back to him. He could see her nexu scars peeking out over the low cut of her nightgown. “I just don’t like how you say it.”

Anakin sighed, wondering how this conversation had so quickly turned into an argument. The pillow in his hands was small and cylindrical; the perfect size and shape to squeeze in frustration. “I’m sorry,” he drawled. “M’lady.”

She looked over her shoulder, unamused by his sarcasm. “I’m worried,” she said. “I worry about my old friends out there, starting a rebellion. I’d appreciate it if you weren’t so flippant. Don’t you worry, too? About Ahsoka?”

“She can take care of herself.”

“I hear you at night.” Padmé turned towards him fully. She came over and sat on the edge of the bed. “You say her name,” she announced, as if it were a triumph. “When you’re having one of your nightmares.”

He didn’t know how to respond to that bit of information, so he chose not to. “None of this has anything to do with you running for congress,” he said. “The rebellion, the empire, that’s all billions of light years away in the core worlds. And that’s exactly why we’re not there; so that we can live our lives here. I think you should live your life.”

“You don’t really think I should become a member of the planetary congress!” she objected. “It’s too high profile. It would draw too much attention.”

“From who? The Evil Expansion Coalition?” He tossed the pillow aside, dismissing it as lightly as the lobbyists of Osallao.
“Stop teasing me.”

“I have never teased you once in my entire life.”

She huffed and was about to stand up, but he reached out and grabbed her by the wrist. “I’m sorry, I’m very sorry,” he said, faking contrition very well, he thought.

She sat back down and stared severely at him. “This is an extremely serious matter. I thought you would be able to see that.”

“I do. But this is a good thing. Just think, if the Empire does send out feelers this far, you’d be one of the first to know about it. And it’s not like you’re sticking yourself too far out there, becoming an ambassador to the Empire or something like that. Congress runs the planet, not the whole star system. You should do this. It’s good for Osallao. It’s good for you.”

“You think I’m a bored housewife who needs a hobby,” Padmé said, shaking herself free of his grasp.

“That’s a very silly thing to say. But I admire that. I like a certain level of petulance in my bored housewife.”

She snatched the pillow from where he had discarded it and threw it at him. He laughed as it bounced harmlessly off his shoulder and rolled over the side of the bed to land on the floor.

“I can’t have a conversation with you tonight,” she said in a huff. “Not when you’re in this kind of mood.”

“I’m in a good mood.” And he was. It had been a good day. He’d been busy at the shop, his mind filled with the sorts of puzzles and problems that he could easily fix with focus and ingenuity. And Luke had had the day off of school and had spent it with him, an eager helper who was also pretty good company. (Not to discredit Artoo, who was always with him, a faithful assistant, but Luke was his son. Plus, he spoke Basic instead of Binary.) It was about as close to a perfect day as you could get.

Padmé shook her head. “You’re in a difficult mood.”

“Is there a difference?” he said, hoping to coax a smile back onto her face. He thought perhaps her mouth quirked ever so briefly. “Come here,” he opened his arms, beckoning with a wiggle of his fingers.

“No,” she said, tilting her face up and away.

“Yes.”

Silence.

“Please?”

She sighed, relenting, and leaned into his embrace. He was assured then that she wasn’t really upset with him. Her snappishness over Bail Organa and her other objections were all just a product of worry and stress over the rumors of Imperial interest. He thought if he tried to be less flippant she would understand that these things shouldn’t stop her from being involved with her new homeworld the way she so clearly wanted to be. He’d always thought that managing their small business must be incredibly dull for her, since she didn’t do any of the stuff that he considered enjoyable or relaxing.
“The Empire is billions of light years away,” he said into her ear, his breath brushing warmly against the tendrils of her hair. He held her close and traced the old familiar lines of battle that were puckered across her back. She could have had the skin repaired fully, but had kept the scars, just as he had kept the mark Asajj Ventress left on his eye.

“The Emperor is too busy running the core worlds and trying to squash the pockets of rebellion in systems he already controls to be concerned with expanding this far into the outer rim,” he continued. “There are many star systems he would have to gain control of first, in order to assure the safety of the hyper-lanes.”

They had talked all of this over with Obi-Wan ten years ago when making the decision about where to go. It was sound logic even without his future knowledge gained as Darth Vader. He was sure she hadn’t completely forgotten; probably whatever rumors the Koelsins had shared had just squashed reason with fear.

“So don’t expect a fleet to arrive anytime soon,” he concluded. “And I would be surprised if anyone from the senate is making serious overtures to the Expansion Coalition. Maybe some ambitious Osallans sent communications to a senator, but you know as well as I do how useless the senate really is. They don’t make any decisions about where the Empire goes or what plans the Emperor makes. But here it’s different. The local government does control this planet, and this system, still. You do have a chance to do some good here. You should take that chance. I want you to.”

He thought it was a pretty good speech, all things considered. He could have made a decent politician, if only every argument could be given to one particular colleague while cuddling her in bed.

“I don’t think you’re as confident about our safety as you say,” said Padmé, even as she relaxed against him. “I can tell. You’re pretending. I don’t like it when you pretend for me.”

“I’m not.”

“You are. You’re afraid. You joke and tease but you’re just as afraid as I am. Afraid that this life we’ve built could come crashing down if we do the wrong things. Or even if we do the right things.”

No, he thought. She was wrong. He wasn’t afraid. Filled with constant inescapable dread, yes, but not afraid. To be afraid was to be uncertain. He loved this life but the end was coming and he knew it. His nightmares told him this. She wanted to run from the Empire if it came to Osallao, but he knew that their days of running were over. It had always been her idea to run away from it all and he had gone with her, had done what she asked, but she couldn’t see what he knew. It would catch up to them. It would come for them. For him. If it didn’t catch them on Osallao it would do so somewhere else. And this was their home now, so it might as well be here where they dug in and made a stand. All he could hope for was that when it came, the twins would be ready for the darkness that their father had brought down upon them.

All that he could do in the meantime was pretend. Pretend that he was the same person who had fallen in love with Padmé as a boy, before the darkness crept in, and married her as a young fool, before the darkness took over. All he could do was pretend so hard that he made it real: to live in the now and to breathe in the light and laughter of their little family and believe that it could last. To believe that whatever evils visited them they could endure.

“Everything will be alright,” he whispered to her as she lay in his arms, and he tried to believe it as fully as he wanted her to.

He was conscious of her beating heart and the steady rise and fall of her breathing. He could feel the
warmth of her soft flesh through their clothes, but also each fragile bone stretched out against him, tenuously holding her together. How many bodies had he seen fall apart? How many beings and droids whose bones of brittle marrow or durasteel shattered into heaps of scrap? (Heaps that mingled together and burned into indistinguishable ash). Only droids could be put back together again… droids, and Darth Vader. He had been put back together again but had he still been a man at the end? He didn’t know. He didn’t remember. He didn’t want to.

He stroked Padmé’s small head with one hand, burying his fingers in her curls. But he could barely feel the softness of her hair because it was the mechanical hand, the droid arm, the part of him that was still a machine.
“I don’t know. I’ve got kind of a bad feeling about this.”

Leia worried at the end of her braid with nervous fingers, gazing down over the cliff’s edge.

Luke shrugged. “Looks doable to me.”

Mara cocked her head to the side and gave Leia a nudge with her elbow. “Come on. Are you going to chicken out now?”

“It’s way too far,” Leia said, raising a hand to shield her eyes from the sun as she gazed across the gorge. “This is foolish.”

“They wouldn’t call it the jumping point if it’s impossible,” said Mara. “It’d be the falling point.”

Faisellu, stretched out on her stomach with her head dangling over the rocky cliff edge, said with full seriousness, “I don’t see any bodies down there at the bottom.”

Somewhere in the distance a bird of prey screed long and loud in the clear afternoon air.

“Of course there wouldn’t be bodies. They would get cleaned up,” Leia pointed out.

“And,” she turned to Mara, “just because some people can make the jump doesn’t mean we will be able to. Anyway, who says humans can do it… maybe other species but…”

“No,” Luke said. He stood with his hands on his hips, looking out over the gorge with an appraising squint. “I’ve definitely heard that people can make the jump.”


Luke glanced at her. She was unusually nervous, and he wondered why. Sure, if they didn’t make the jump the canyon floor was far enough below that they’d fall to their deaths, splat on the rocks, but he was confident they could do it. Where was this doubt of his sister’s coming from? He’d expected her to be volunteering to go first, always eager to be the best.

“Well, get out a holorecorder,” he said, “cause I’m about to do it.”

“Luke, don’t.”

“He’ll do fine,” said Mara. “Just watch.”

Leia just crossed her arms and frowned deeply. Faisellu wriggled away from the edge and stood up, brushing dirt from her clothes and hair. Luke gave Mara a sidelong look, then backed up and hopped up and down a little, psyching himself up. It wasn’t that big of a gap. Easy.

He took off at a run towards the jut of rock that extended a little way out from the rest of the canyon lip (the so-called Jumping Point) and when he got to the edge propelled himself as high into the air as
he could. He cart-wheeled his arms and felt a moment of sheer exhilaration as he leapt across the gorge, soaring through the breeze.

It was over in an instant. He landed on the other side, still running as if his feet hadn’t left the ground. When he landed his momentum carried him forward and he rolled down onto one shoulder, but quickly popped back up again, brushing the dirt from the sleeve of his yellow jacket.

Someone was clapping for him on the other side. It was Faisellu. Leia just stood with her arms still crossed. Mara smiled, shooting Leia an I-told-you-so smirk. Luke bowed deeply, exaggerating the motion for his appreciative (and not so-) audience.

Faisellu hopped back and forth saying, “Me next!”

“No, I’ll go next,” Leia said, brushing past her. Luke grinned. He could sense the relief in his twin even as it turned to irritation that she’d been afraid at all.

Leia took off at a run, her long braid swaying back and forth as she barreled towards the precipice. “Oof!” she said as she slammed to the ground on the other side and toppled into a patch of grass.

Luke put out a hand and helped her back to her feet. “See? That’s wasn’t so bad,” he said.

“I used the force,” she said, as she brushed ineffectively at the grass stain that was now streaked across her white pants. “Did you?”

“I didn’t think about it.”

“I wouldn’t have made it otherwise. It’s too far.”

He shrugged. Despite Father and Uncle Ben’s training, he still wasn’t always sure when he was using the force and when he was just… doing what he’d always done. If the force was all around him and everything else all the time, like they said, wasn’t he always using it? All the time? There was stuff like floating objects, which he knew was unusual, because he’d been told all his life not to do it where other people could see. But giving himself an extra push to leap across Jumping Point… was that the force, or just adrenaline?

Now wasn’t the time to discuss it with Leia, though.

“My turn!” Mara called from across the divide. The twins turned to watch her.

She covered the distance easily and stayed on her feet, planting them firmly on the ground, spreading her arms in a triumphant V over her head. (Her clothes wouldn’t be marred by dirt or grass stains.) She stared at Luke with a proud smile and he wondered what she was expecting. He certainly wasn’t going to be like Faisellu and clap.

“Can I do it now?” Faisellu called from across the divide.

Faisellu had become more outgoing, a little less skittish around them, in the weeks since the Sawain twins had first arrived at school. But she still followed Mara’s lead in every way. At least, as far as Luke could tell.

“I’m not sure you can do it,” Mara called back, and Luke was surprised. Mara had been so adamant that it would be possible to make the jump before it came to Faisellu, and he couldn’t see any reason why she should put her sister down like that.

“Let her try,” he said. “We all made it just fine.”
“She won’t be able to,” Mara told him. Then, to Faisellu, “Just stay on that side! We’ll come back in a little bit!”

“We can’t just leave her behind,” Luke said. “That’s not fair.”

“Why don’t you think she can do it?” Leia asked.

“Because she’s not good at anything,” Mara said harshly. “She’s—”

She broke off abruptly, because even as she spoke, her sister was running towards the cliff’s edge, a look of determination screwed up on her face as she knotted her skirt up in one hand.

She ran as fast and hard as the others, but as soon as she jumped it was evident that she would never make it. Luke’s eyes widened as he realized what was about to happen. He scrambled towards the edge and instinctively reached out to grab her. He took hold of her, though he wasn’t touching her, wasn’t even anywhere near her. Faisellu dropped out of sight but it wasn’t the quick plummet of a freefall, and as he skidded to a stop near the drop-off he could sense the weight of her in his empty hands. He could almost swear he felt the woolen threads of her jacket.

Mara crouched over the edge, her arms outstretched towards the empty air. She moved her hands in a hauling motion, and Faisellu’s now limp body lifted up from the abyss and moved towards her. Luke released his mental grip and watched as Mara directed her sister’s body to rest safely on the ground.

“I told you not to try it!” Mara yelled. “You need to listen to me!”

Faisellu, eyes wide, sat up and said, “You made it look easy.”

"Of course it’s easy, for us,” Mara snarled. She reached down and hauled the other girl up by the collar of her jacket. “You can’t do anything you idiot!”


“There’s no need to call her names,” agreed Leia, stepping forward.

Mara glared at them both. “Don’t tell me what to do,” she said. “You don’t understand anything. She can’t take care of herself. She’s supposed to listen to me.”

“I’m sorry, Mara,” Faisellu said quietly, her head hung low and her eyes fixed on her feet. The ease which had gradually worked its way into her demeanor was gone in an instant and she was once again the downcast shadow who had walked into class the first day.

Luke and Leia exchanged a glance. Wordlessly, they agreed to let the matter drop. Luke thought he knew why Mara was suddenly so upset; her façade of carelessness faltering the minute she realized her sister had nearly died. He didn’t like the way she took it out on Faisellu, but in a way Mara was right… they didn’t understand what it was like to have lost their parents and have that burden overshadow every moment of their lives. So whatever they said now would just anger her further.

“Well,” he said, searching for a way to diffuse the situation, “are we gonna go ahead with this?”

Mara looked at him strangely for a moment, as if confused about what he was referring to, then she shook her head and her eyes cleared. “Of course,” she said. “Why wouldn’t we?”

“We’re already going to be in trouble for leaving the group,” said Leia pragmatically. “So we’d better make it worth it.”
“It will be,” Luke said, having no idea whether it would be worth any of it.

He didn’t know if the legends about the haunted caverns in the Shalla canyon country had any truth in them whatsoever. It was just stories he’d heard when Father had brought him out here to see the podraces. The racers had tried to frighten him with stories of ghosts that haunted the canyon and told him to watch out for them as they liked to jump out and cause crashes by startling the pilots.

Luke hadn’t seen any ghosts when he and Father went out on the track and sped through the canyons, but of course he had recounted the story to Leia. And when they found out that there was to be a school field trip to the Shalla canyon nature park, the idea to search out the caves was formed.

“So tell us what is out here,” Mara prompted. “You promised us something good, but I don’t see anything on this side that wasn’t on the other one.” She gazed around appraisingly at the boulders, scrubby pine trees, and hearty mountain bushes that populated the area around them. Far below and to the south stretched the grasslands, and Shalla City was visible, where it lay upon the prairie, looking like a miniature model version of itself.

“Yes,” said Faisellu, lifting her eyes from the shield of her bangs. “You promised to tell us once we were on our way. I want to hear the ghost story.”

Luke looked over at Leia. She nodded.

“Follow me, and I’ll tell you,” Luke agreed.

They had only hinted at the supposed wonders that were to be found once they broke away from the school group, but it had been enough. Mara had agreed easily to the invitation and Faisellu did whatever her sister bid.

Both Luke and Leia knew that at some point their absence would be noted, and that they would probably get into trouble. But that didn’t worry them much. Luke expected a stern talking to and some finger wagging from Master Voldere, who was their chaperon on this trip, but that was worth it to get away from the boring lecturing about plants and rock types that was going on back with the group.

He did his best to look confident as he led the way, even though he had never been up on the bluffs over the canyons before. This school trip was the first time he’d been on the trails that wound through the wilderness of the plateau above the canyons. The racetrack, which he had flown through, hugged close to the bottom of the canyons and the flatlands below.

He followed what looked to be an animal path, and said, “A long time ago, in the days before interplanetary travel, when there were no other species on Osallao but the native osallans, there lived a reclusive tribe in the canyons to the north of a village that would one day become Shalla City. Far away from the rest of the population, this secretive tribe built their home in the caverns that were hidden among the boulders of the great cliffs. Ancient monsters lived in the canyon below and at night would climb the rocky ledges up to hunt the osallans that were foolish enough to be out and about.”

“Some people say these were just regular wild animals,” Leia interjected. “But the hill tribe knew differently. They were pure evil.”

“Or maybe they were just animals,” said Luke. “Anyway, whatever they were, they were dangerous and everyone knew not to stay out after dark. But one day a young village girl got lost and wandered into the canyon.”
They came to a fallen tree which block their path, and Luke hopped up on top of it easily. Leia and Mara scrambled up after him. He turned to see that Faisellu was hesitating, her confidence in her abilities shaken from the jump before, so he reached out his hand to her and helped her up.

“For whatever reason, the villagers and the hill tribe didn’t get along. They were enemies,” he continued, once they were all on the other side of the tree and picking their way through rocks and shrubs. “So when the hill tribe noticed the lost village girl, they decided to just leave her to her fate, because she wasn’t supposed to be in this area at all.”

“What was she doing up here, then?” asked Faisellu.

“I don’t know.” Luke shrugged. “That’s not part of the story. She just ended up lost and alone out in the woods.”

“Didn’t her parents—”

“Shut up and just let him tell the story,” said Mara. Luke sighed. But he went on:

“One of the hill tribe, a young boy, decided to help her, because he thought it was evil and cowardly to let her die. His parents warned him not to go, saying that he would get caught outside after dark if he tried to help the girl get back home. But he didn’t listen. He climbed down the edge of the cliff into the darkness of the canyon below.

“Sure enough, night came too quickly and the boy and girl became lost together. They were devoured by the monsters.”

Mara snorted, but said nothing.

“The next day, the tribesmen found the bones of the children, and the boy’s parents wept bitterly over their disobedient son. The girl’s family came up from the village and accused the hill tribe of killing her. The tribesmen just told them to go back home because they were trespassing. This made the girl’s parents mad, so they went back to get more villagers to help them avenge their daughter. And that’s how there ended up being a war between the two groups.

“There was a bloody battle and it drew the monsters out from hiding, despite it being daylight. The villagers and the hill tribe ended up uniting to fight the monsters, but most of them were devoured, anyway. In a blood frenzy, the monsters entered the once safe caverns and ate everyone they found; all the women and children and old people who hadn’t been fighting in the battle.

“Those who survived fled south to the village, and no one ever lived up in the caves again, because it was said that they were haunted by the ghosts of all those who had died. The ghosts that people tell stories of seeing the most are that of the boy and girl who died the first night, because they were so upset that a war had been fought over their bones that they would never find peace, no matter how many centuries past.

“The racers say that if you get near the area they’ll appear to warn you away, and if you go out there at night, you might even meet the ghosts of the long dead monsters, who will try to devour your spirit.”

Luke finished his story with a flourish and waited expectantly for the response. He knew it probably wasn’t as scary as when the old podracer had told it to him, sitting in the dimly lit garage surrounded by scraped and charred remains of busted up speeders, but he’d hit all the major points… and he thought that being out in the actual wilderness where the story happened made it a little more intriguing.
“I think I saw a holodrama like that,” said Mara, when it became apparent that Luke didn’t have more to add. “Only the boy and the girl were star-crossed lovers, not children who got lost.”

“No, they were just kids, and they didn’t even know each other,” Luke insisted.

Leia chimed in, “The boy was selfless; that’s the point of the story. He helped the girl just because it was the right thing to do.”

“Clearly it wasn’t, though,” said Mara. “He just got himself killed too and then there was a war and everyone died.”

“The war happened because no one else would help the girl,” Luke disagreed. “If the other tribesmen hadn’t stood by and let the children die, they’d have all survived.”

“Not if the monsters were evil and unstoppable,” argued Mara. “Apparently the villagers who started the war were too stupid to understand that the tribesmen were right, the girl shouldn’t have been up there at all and it was her own fault she died.”

“No, that’s not the moral of the story at all,” Leia said, insistent. “The point is that if no one helps each other everyone dies.”

“But the boy helped the girl and everyone still died.” Mara kicked at a rock, which skittered along the path ahead before hitting a tree.

“Does there have to be a point?” Faisellu spoke up. “It’s just a scary story. Anyway, I liked the holodrama. The lovers died in each other’s arms.”

“How can you die in someone’s arms when you’re both being eaten by monsters?” Leia asked.

“There weren’t monsters,” said Mara. “They just died because they were sad that they couldn’t be together. It was a stupid drama.”

Luke shook his head. He’d never seem the holodrama they were talking about. “Well there are monsters in the folktale,” he said. “And it supposedly happened here.”

The racers had told him that the haunted caves were just north of spiral rock, which was a distinctive landmark along the Shalla racetrack. You could get there, they said, by following the nature trails to Jumping Point and then keep heading northwest until you found the caves.

“Do you think there are really ghosts out here?” Mara asked, skepticism evident in her tone. “You don’t actually believe in ghosts, do you?” She snagged a loose branch from a nearby tree and swatted playfully at him with it.

“No.” He dodged her blow and instinctively grabbed the branch with the Force, tossing it aside. She looked surprised for a moment, then reached out and pulled it back to her from the off the ground where it had landed.

“Guys, don’t do that,” Leia said. “You’re not supposed to play around with you-know-what like that.”

“Who’s gonna see, out here? Besides us, and we already know,” Luke replied, indicating the four of them by circling the air with one finger.

“No one told me I’m not supposed to,” said Mara carelessly, and to reinforce her defiance she twirled the branch idly without touching it.
“Your parents never warned you about the empire?” Leia asked.

“Maybe, maybe not. But they’re dead so it doesn’t matter.”

Leia’s mouth dangled open in shock at how callously she dismissed them. She looked over at Luke, who just shook his head. He wasn’t shocked. That was what Mara did, he thought. She pretended not to care. But he saw her. Buried underneath her flippancy she cared about something a very great deal. What it was, he wasn’t sure, but it was there, burning with a bright intensity in the force.

“I don’t believe in ghosts,” said Luke, “but I thought we might find some caves.”

“Well, I believe in ghosts,” Faisellu said. “But let’s look for caves. And bones.” She paused and a light came into her eyes. “Maybe we’ll find a cave full of bones.”

Luke wondered at her fascination with bones, but he was happy she seemed to have bounced back again from Mara berating her earlier. So if the prospect of finding bones cheered her up, he’d encourage it. “Sure,” he said. “Maybe we will.”

Mara Jade felt restless. In her heart she felt that she was failing her master even though she did not know how.

She had done nothing particularly wrong so far. There was nothing in particular that she was doing right, however. Darth Sidious had told her not to rush, or to worry about seeing results; he had told her that her mission would be a slow and deliberate one. She should be prepared to wait years for her goal to be reached. But still she felt the creeping certainty that she was not being the apprentice she should be.

I feel lost, she thought. Lost, without her master’s guiding hand. He had entrusted in her such an important duty. She had been so honored to be chosen, so glad that he believed in her, and so confident that she would live up to his expectations. But was she?

The first step of her task had been easy. Befriending the twins, gaining their trust. And she had gained their trust, hadn’t she? Mara looked at Luke Skywalker and thought about the way he always leapt to Faisellu’s defense. Don’t yell at her, don’t be mean, don’t say that, why do you have to be that way? Leia, too, though she usually waited to take her brother’s cue. It was irritating because Mara wasn’t even being unkind to Faisellu. She was always infallibly patient with her “sister.” If they thought that she was mean, then they had no idea what true cruelty was.

Life was very different out here, on her own. Very different.

Mara squared her shoulders. This was all part of the challenge; when she succeeded it would be all the more satisfying because she had settled her doubts. She would figure this out and she would be stronger at the end of it.

A small, cold hand slipped itself into hers, and Faisellu said quietly, “Don’t worry.” She gave Mara’s hand a reassuring squeeze.

Mara looked at her sharply. “Worry about what?”

Faisellu just smiled, then turned and pointed with the hand that wasn’t clasping Mara’s. “Over there,” she said for the Skywalker twins to hear. They stopped and turned back to look at her, and Mara followed the line of her finger to a jumble of rocks away from the path.

“A cave,” said Faisellu simply, as if it should be obvious. And maybe it should be. That was what they had been wandering around looking for, after all.

Luke and Leia exchanged a glance but said nothing, and promptly left the path, heading off towards the spot. Mara wasn’t so sure they should be trusting Faisellu’s judgment; the girl couldn’t sense a thing, no matter how cryptic she liked to be. She had proven herself a failure to their master and couldn’t even muster the self-preservation to get across the jumping point.

Mara shook herself free of Faisellu’s grip and followed after the twins.

They reached the rocks and Luke pulled a glowrod from his belt. Mara wished she had thought to bring one, but then, she hadn’t planned on going spelunking that day. Luke shined his light between the boulders, and revealed that what might have only been a shadow of the rocks was a hole which went deeper into the ground.

“It’s a cave opening,” he announced, excitement plain in his voice. “Good job, Faisellu! I would have missed it.”

“How could you tell?” asked Leia. Luke meanwhile turned sideways and slipped between the rocks, heading towards the sliver of darkness that led into the ground.

“Ghosts,” said Faisellu.

Mara rolled her eyes and was about to say something scathing, but Luke steamrolled over her with a friendly and appreciative laugh, as if he thought Faisellu was joking.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s explore.”

Mara stood outside and watched as each of them squeezed through the opening. Anger rumbled in her chest but she wasn’t sure why. She followed the flutter of Faisellu’s skirt as it disappeared into darkness. That was it, she thought. She was following Faisellu. She was supposed to be leading. She was supposed to be in control but she wasn’t… she wasn’t at all.

The rocks were cool and slightly damp to the touch as she wiggled through the cave opening. This couldn’t be a cave dwelling from Luke’s folktale, she thought. The opening was too small and difficult for anyone besides children of their small size to fit through. But then, maybe, if eons had passed since those days… She shook the thought from her mind. Ghosts. She had never seen or heard of such a thing and she was strong in the Force. Legends like that were just fodder for bad holodramas.

A few feet into the darkness the cavern opened up. Mara could see the light from Luke’s beam bouncing off the walls as he shined it around. She looked back and could see the daylight from the opening, a line of blue sky and a wedge of sunlight that was nearly blinding in contrast. She picked her way carefully forwards, trying to sense her surroundings through the Force.

This was just the sort of training she had excelled at. Blindfolded or disoriented by darkness she had always been able to deflect and dodge blaster bolts or best combatants that were sent to test her. The thought cleared her mind and she smiled a little as she probed into the mysterious unknown.

The cave went very far, she thought, reaching out as far as her mind could stretch. It angled downwards into the heart of the cliff, branching off into myriads of different channels and chambers. It was cold and dark and deep. Quiet. Peaceful. Mara stood with her eyes closed and her mind open. The frustration that had plagued her slipped away. Somewhere far away water dripped in a steady rhythm and living beings moved slowly in the perpetual night.
Rocks skittered nearby and she heard Leia’s voice say, “Careful!”

Mara opened her eyes. It was easier to see, now. Luke had handed off his glowrod to his sister and was climbing down into a hole in the cavern floor as she shined the light down on him. Faisellu stood watching.

Mara approached them, picking her way across the uneven flooring. Faisellu turned her head in the dark and Mara could see, somehow, the black saucers of her eyes that always sent shivers down her spine. I am not afraid, she thought, though she could not even comprehend what it was she was not afraid of. I am Mara Jade, I am strong in the Force, I am a trusted servant of Darth Sidious, Dark Lord of the Sith, Emperor of the whole galaxy. I am not afraid.

She stepped up to the edge of the hole and looked down at Luke. He squinted back up at the group, then grinned, and let go of the rock. He fell a little ways and landed on his feet at the bottom. Leia drew a sharp intake of breath, then shook her head.

“He likes show off,” Mara observed neutrally. There wasn’t anything wrong with that. It was a promising thing about him, in fact.

Leia handed her the light and said, “He says I’m the show off, but he’s wrong.” She crouched down and lowered her feet into the hole, and sat there dangling them for a moment. Then she eased over the edge and began her climb downwards.

Mara shone the light after her. Faisellu stood next to her quietly for a moment as Luke shouted something encouraging up towards Leia. He was telling her to go ahead and jump, but she didn’t seem game. Mara had the sudden desire to reach out through the force and push her. But she didn’t.

“We could seal them both down there,” said Faisellu quietly at her shoulder. “You could push some rocks over the opening.”

“And why would I do that?” Mara responded without looking to the side, her hand unwavering on the grip of the glowrod as she monitored Leia’s slow descent below.

“So the master picks you,” said Faisellu.

Now Mara did turn her head, just slightly. “They’re nice to you,” she said. “Why would you want me to hurt them?”

“They’re not my friends.”

“I’ve told you before that we’re not here to kill them.”

“The master wants them for apprentices,” Faisellu said. “I know. But—”

“But nothing,” Mara hissed. “We obey our master, no matter what. Now get down there,” she ordered, jerking the light towards the cavern below, where Leia had joined her brother. There was laughter down there, as if the twins were congratulating each other on successfully climbing down some rocks.

She tried to swallow down the frustration that had come circling back. She had felt so peaceful and centered for those few moments before… before Faisellu opened her mouth.

What did she have to do to get it through to Faisellu? They weren’t here to kill the Skywalkers. They were here to do their master’s bidding, and he wanted the twins for himself. No matter what Mara thought about her own potential as his apprentice, she was not to disobey.
Besides, Faisellu was a fool if she thought that burying Luke and Leia in a cave would do the trick. If Mara could move the rocks over the opening all by herself, they could certainly combine their strength to push them aside. And then things would just be awkward.

She shook her head and focused on making sure Faisellu didn’t slip and fall. The twins would probably catch her—Luke had leapt to stop her from falling into the canyon even quicker than Mara had been able to react—so there really was no danger. But it was not good for them to save her. It was Mara’s responsibility to keep her alive long enough to serve her purpose. She was Mara’s dead weight to carry.

When Faisellu was finally down at the bottom, Mara took a moment to assess the area, then leapt feet first into the darkness below. She fell for several meters before landing in a puff of dirt, bending one knee to steady herself. As she stood she looked into the faces of the twins and couldn’t help but smirk at the reactions she got. They were clearly impressed, though Luke, as always, tried to hide it.

She tossed the glowrod back to Luke and said, “Lead on, storyteller.”

The cave went on and on, and they kept going on and on with it. They found no monsters, bones, or ghosts, but each new tunnel branch or mysterious drop off seemed to beckon them onwards.

Luke was conscious of the fact that Mara was competing with him each time they came to a difficult spot. He was used to Leia pushing him during their training, but apparently without Father or Uncle Ben to impress she was not interested in risking her safety to one-up him.

Mara, however, seemed most concerned that he himself should know exactly what she could do. If he jumped across a gap or down into a hole she made a point to be even more reckless with it. And every time she did, she shot him a look as if to say, “your move next.”

Well, he wasn’t about to disappoint. Part of him thought it was silly. Part of him relished the challenge.

Finally, they came to another opening, this one further down the cliff face. They walked to the edge and found themselves gazing across the canyon. They were about midway down, the cliff-tops looming above them and the canyon floor sloping down below.

Leia plopped down on the outcropping of rock that extended a little way beyond the cave. “Dead end,” she announced. “Unless the two of you decide to try out flying each other this time,” she added. Luke reddened.

“Wouldn’t be that hard to get down to the bottom of the canyon,” said Mara unironically. She braced her hands against her knees and looked down at the distant ground below. “The trick would be to fall for a ways and then lift yourself up just before you hit the ground. Then land… gently.”

Surely she wasn’t thinking of trying that, Luke thought. Leia had been mocking them, not making a suggestion.

“And what would we do when we got to the bottom?” he asked. “Climb all the way back to the top?”

“No,” said Leia, cutting off Mara’s response. “It’s already going to take forever to get back up to the top. We’ve been gone too long. It’s past lunchtime and you know that Master Voldere did a headcount and knows we’re gone, already.”

“So we’re in trouble no matter what we do,” Mara said coolly. She turned back to Luke. “We could
walk to Shalla City. It’s not that far.”

“Walk to—are you serious? And what then? The school group is up at the nature reserve.”

“I’m sure we could find out a way home somehow,” said Mara with a shrug.

“What about me?” Faisellu asked. “I can’t jump down there. Not like you can.”

“Well then I guess you can’t come with us. You can go back to the group by yourself.”

“No she can’t,” Leia said, “She’ll need our help to get back up through the cave and over jumping point. We all have to stay together.”

“So that’s it? We just turn around and go back?” Mara affected a yawn. “That’s boring. You said we were going to go exploring and have some fun and all you did was lead us to a dead end.” She waved a hand towards Luke that extended to sweep over the canyon. “There’s no ghosts or bones or monsters out here.”

“I didn’t say there would be,” Luke objected. “I said there’d be caves and we found a cave.”

“Big deal. That’s nothing. I don’t want to turn back now. Let’s go into the city and find something to do.”

“That wasn’t part of the plan,” said Luke. “We need to get back to the others before we’re in serious trouble.”

“We’re already in serious trouble.”

“No…”

“Yes! Do you really think Master Voldere is just going to smile and shake his finger at us for disappearing for a couple hours?” Mara snorted. “No way. We’re all getting detention and angry calls to our parents… sorry, your parents, our aunt…. Might as well enjoy ourselves for as long as we can.”

“No. This is a moot point,” Leia said. “I’ve been in detention before. It’s not the end of the world. But we’re not just leaving your sister here and jumping to what could be our deaths because you’re bored.”

“Don’t you trust in the Force? There’s no danger.”

“I’m tired of this conversation. I want to go back.” Leia got up and brushed her no longer white pants resolutely. She gave Luke a pointed look and turned back toward the cave mouth.

Luke shrugged at Mara and turned to follow his sister. Mara crossed her arms and frowned, showing no signs of budging. Faisellu hovered in between, glancing back and forth as if torn about what to do. Luke didn’t understand that. Sure, she usually followed Mara’s lead, but Mara was literally talking about abandoning her.

He paused on the edge of the shadows leading into the cool darkness of the cavern tunnel. “Are you coming?” he asked.

Mara’s response was to smile thinly, almost bitterly, and then she let herself drop backwards over the cliff.

Luke gasped and ran to the edge. He looked down just in time to see Mara do a somersault and
lightly land on her feet on the rocks below. She looked up, but he couldn’t see her face, just the tilt of her head and the red wave of her hair blowing in the wind that swirled through the canyon.

“See?” she called back up, her voice echoing off the canyon walls. “Nothing to it!”

“You’re insane!” Luke shouted back down at her. “What do you think you’re gonna do now?”

“Wait for you to work up the nerve to jump down here!”

“No!”

Luke felt a surge of irritation course through him. Maddening girl! Did she think he was that easy to push around? Did she think that a few insults would force him to do whatever she wanted?

Luke looked from Leia to Faisellu. They had come up beside him and now flanked him on either side as they also peered down at Mara. “No,” he repeated, and stepped back from the ledge. “She can do what she wants but she’s not getting her way just because she won’t take no for an answer.”

Faisellu’s eyes widened. “We have to follow her. We’re not going to leave her down there!”

“She left us,” said Luke. “I don’t have to follow her anywhere.”

He looked to Leia, expecting that she would agree with him, since she had been against the idea of cliff-jumping to begin with. Instead she wavered, looking back towards the canyon below and then to Faisellu. He could sense her growing uncertainty and knew what she was about to say before she said, “Well we can’t just leave her alone down there.”

“We can and we will,” Luke said.

“No,” Faisellu said in the staunchest tone he had ever heard from her.

“She wanted to leave you behind,” Luke pointed out. He started to walk back towards the cave again. “And besides if we follow her we have to leave you up here by yourself. You don’t want us to do that.”

“You don’t have to,” she said, following him. “If you take me down with you…”

“That sounds too risky,” said Leia. “I’ve never done anything like this. We could hurt ourselves and kill you!”

Faisellu shook her head. “If Mara can jump down there I’m sure it’s no trouble for you two.”

“Thanks but are you sure you want to stake your life on that?” Luke asked.

“If we all jump together we’ll be fine,” Faisellu insisted. She reached out and took the twins’ hands in her own, pulling Luke back towards the edge of the precipice. She swung her arms back and forth, swinging the twins’ arms with her. “We all jump at once and you hold onto me like this and both use the force and we’ll be fine!”

Leia cocked her head to the side, clearly thinking about it. Luke resisted, rocking back on his heels and planting himself firmly where he stood. He didn’t shake Faisellu’s hand free, but started to pull her and Leia up towards him. “Let’s go back,” he said.

“Hellooooo?” came Mara’s voice from far below. “What’s going on up there?”

Luke sighed heavily. “Faisellu,” he said, “come on. This is too dangerous.”
“No it’s not. And you would do it, too, if I wasn’t here.”

“No, I wouldn’t.”

Leia tugged at her hand. “He wouldn’t,” she said. “He hates it when people try to tell him what to do.”

“It’s not that, it’s…”

“You don’t want to follow Mara because then she’ll win the argument,” Leia insisted. “And I agree that what she did was rotten… but well now we can’t just leave her all by herself down there. What if she gets lost? What if there are creatures down there? And what will Master Voldere say if we show up back at the group without her?”

Luke really didn’t give a flying womp rat what Master Voldere said about anything, at any point, ever.

At this point he wasn’t even sure he cared what Mother or Father would say when their teacher reported their sins. He already had the parental discipline routine mapped in his head. There was always a fifty-fifty chance that Father would either find their escapades amusing, or become extremely stern, and Mother would no doubt lecture them on good behavior and respecting authority.

If Father was amused, he would just tell them that if they were in the Imperial Navy they’d be ejected out an airlock for this kind of insubordination. If he was not amused, he would probably follow that up by making them run laps and do push-ups. Either way, they’d end up grounded for a while. Mother would say she was disappointed.

No, what really mattered was that… was that… oh bantha fodder, Leia was right; he just couldn’t stand Mara getting in the last laugh by forcing them to follow after her. But it mattered. It mattered a lot.

“She’s always so nasty to you,” he said to Faisellu, a last ditch effort to convince her to leave Mara to her own devices. “Why don’t you let it catch up to her for once?”

Faisellu shook her head so hard that her twin ponytails flopped back and forth, and her arm swayed, shaking Luke’s hand in her clammy grip. “If you go back I’m going to stay right here. I won’t go with you.”

Luke thought briefly about seeing if he could drag Faisellu along behind him with the Force while he climbed back up through the caverns. But a pointed look from Leia discouraged this line of thinking. He exhaled a long suffering sigh and prepared himself mentally for Mara’s gloating.

Mara stood at the bottom of Shalla Canyon and shivered. Wind blew down the gorge in roiling gusts and the shadows were long and heavy. She craned her neck back to look up at the ledge she had plummeted from. She couldn’t see the others anymore. They had pulled back and she couldn’t hear anything; if anyone was still there the sound of their voices were carried up and away by the wind.

This is fine, she thought. I’m fine.

At first she had thought that Luke would immediately follow, not content to let her demonstrate far greater bravery and daring. But his irritation was clear, radiating down from the cliff like a gust of hot, dry air. His forceful negation echoed around her as he drew back from the cliff’s edge and did not reappear.
She waited for several long, quiet moments. She began to think that perhaps she had miscalculated.

Fine, then. Fine. She was alone. She liked it that way. In fact, she preferred it.

If they were going to be wet blankets she would go to Shalla City all by herself. Let them drag Faisellu back to their schoolmaster and apologize for being naughty. They were silly children and all they cared about were silly, childish things. She didn’t care if they didn’t come after her. She didn’t care at all.

She looked around at the floor of the canyon. A few shrubs grew amongst the boulders, but mostly she was surrounded by rocks and hard packed dirt.

She started walking. She stalked through the tumbled rocks and dared any snake or scorpion to mess with her.

Then she heard the thud of feet landing on the ground behind her, and turned to see Luke and Leia with Faisellu held up between them.

She allowed herself a broad smile. She skipped back over to them. “I was wondering if you were going to show up,” she said brightly.

Luke met her eyes, let go of Faisellu’s hand, adjusted his jacket, and then walked past her without a word.

Her smile faltered a little, but she shook it off and looked towards Leia with a resolute grin.

“That was fun,” said Faisellu, bounding over to her. Her eyes were full of light, somehow closer to golden brown than their usual near black, and she smiled with face flushed.

Mara told herself that she’d known the twins weren’t going to leave Faisellu behind. Probably they should have. That’s what her master would have wanted them to do. But it was too soon. Too soon for all that.

She shrugged off Faisellu’s excitement and looked back towards Luke, who seemed intent on getting halfway to Shalla City without them.

Leia stepped up beside her and said, “You don’t have to try so hard.”

“What?”

“To impress Luke,” said Leia with cool indifference. “You don’t have to try so hard.”

“I don’t… that’s… what? Gross,” Mara shot back. What a stupid, shallow thing for Leia to think. Luke Skywalker was the last person in the galaxy she needed to impress.

Mara reached out and grabbed Faisellu’s hand. “Come on,” she said abruptly. “Let’s go.”
The walk into the city took far longer than Mara had predicted. By the time they made it into Shalla City it was mid-afternoon. Their school group was supposed to have gone back to Breelden hours ago. Luke wondered just how upset Master Voldere was by now. He wondered if their group was still up there, searching the cliffs for signs of them, or if they had taken the other children back home. He wondered if their parents had been notified and just how angry they would be that their children had somehow been lost.

It occurred to him that until they showed up, Master Voldere would bear the brunt of Father’s displeasure, because no one would know if something bad had happened to them. That made Luke feel much guiltier about this whole thing.

He hadn’t meant for this to happen. They weren’t supposed to be gone for hours and they weren’t supposed to end up in Shalla City all by themselves.

He blamed Mara.

He had managed to not speak a word to her the entire time they walked into town. It was actually very easy. When she spoke to him he just didn’t respond.

They were tired, hungry, and thirsty when they got to the city. The first place they came to was the Shalla racetrack stadium, where people could gather together to watch giant holo projections of the podraces that ran through the canyons. The track they were walking on led into the arena, where the start and finish line of the racetrack was located. It was deserted that day, with no races running on a quiet weekday afternoon.

“Didn’t you say you’ve flown podracers?” Mara asked, and he wondered when she was going to get the message that he was upset with her and didn’t wish to talk. She had remained utterly undaunted so far.

Luke walked over the maintenance garage and looked around for someone he had met before. There were a few mechanics of varying species working on vehicles and sweeping up the shop. They stopped and gaped at the group of dirty children who had just ambled into their workbay.

“HI,” said Luke, walking up to an old osallan male who was elbow deep in a gutted racer. His name was Brontan and he’d been friendly whenever Luke accompanied his father to the track. “I’m Luke Agolerga. Do you remember me?”

“Ay, Set’s boy,” said Brontan. He turned off his hydrospanner and set it on the edge of the racer. “What are you doing here, Luke? Where’s your father?” he asked, looking around.

“Oh, I don’t know. Home, probably. I was wondering if you would comm him for me, actually.” Brontan stared at him. “Where’d you come from? The track’s closed today. Gates are locked.”
“Oh, we came from the track out there,” Luke said, waving back toward the canyon. Brontan continued to stare in disbelief. His eyes wandered over to the girls, and Luke could tell without looking that Leia was giving the osallan her nicest, politest, most innocent for-adults curtsey and smile.

He risked a sidelong look at Mara. She and Faisellu stood holding hands, gazing placidly at Brontan. But Mara caught his eye and smirked. He turned away.

“Let me get this straight,” said Brontan, jumping down from the racer. He brushed his long silver hair out of his eyes and peered at Luke. He jabbed one fur covered hand towards them. “Your father is home in Breelden and you’re out here all by yourself with a passel of other younglings, just going for a stroll on the racetrack?”

Luke nodded. “I need to call my father to come get us but I don’t have a comlink on me.”

“We were on a field trip with our class and got separated,” Leia said. “Can I have a cup of water?”


“We are also thirsty,” said Mara.

“Of course, of course, water for all the children,” said Brontan, still laughing, as if the absurdity of it all was too much to question further.

He led them into a dingy lounge area off to the side of the garage. There was a water cooler in the corner and they made a bee-line for it. The water burbled as each child took turns filling foam cups and tanking up. Luke hadn’t realized just how thirsty he was before the first drop of cool water touched his lips.

Brontan, meanwhile, was muttering and chuckling to himself about the wonders of children just showing up out of nowhere like birds dropping from the sky. “Wait right here and I’ll go comm your father from the office,” he said, shaking his head. “Don’t go wandering off or I’ll think I imagined you lot.” He paused and winked. “Don’t want to have to quit my drinking over a thing like this.”

Mara laughed, Faisellu echoing her with a giggle after a moment, but Leia looked shocked. Luke wouldn’t have thought twice about it if it wasn’t for Leia’s reaction: he was used to the humor of the racers and mechanics, who didn’t care about swearing or making off-color remarks around children.

Luke flopped down on a dilapidated couch covered in burn marks that slouched in the corner of the room. Leia wrinkled her nose, but sat down next to him, sighing a little as she released weight from her tired feet. Mara and Faisellu soon followed suite, Mara throwing herself down carelessly on Luke’s left, since Leia had taken the right side.

“So this is what we’re going to do?” asked Mara. She nudged Luke’s side, and he responded by scooching over closer to Leia.

“Are we just going to sit here and wait for your father to come get us?” Mara persisted.

“Yes,” said Leia.

“I think that—”

She listened to him, for once, and settled back against the couch in silence. Luke looked towards the office, in the direction where Brontan had gone, and thought about how hungry he was. They had all missed lunch; their neatly package travel meals left behind at the nature center where they were supposed to have reconvened with the class group. The water had refreshed him considerably, but he still felt the dull ache of an empty stomach along with sore limbs.

Brontan returned shortly, and he seemed even more mirthful than before, as if he’d stopped to indulge in some day drinking on the way. He told them that their father was on his way and that he was angry.

Brontan uttered a genuine belly laugh and said, “Sounds like he just about murdered your teacher for letting you get lost. Oh, that Set, such a temper!” He wiped at the corner of his eye. Luke was sure now that the osallan was tipsy, at least, because he didn’t see anything funny about that.

“I’d like to comm my aunt,” said Mara, standing up. “I know her number if you’ll just let me borrow a link.”

“I don’t see why not,” said Brontan genially. Mara held out a hand to Faisellu. Her sister rose instantly and clasped the outstretched hand, following her out of the room. Luke thought it was strange that they both had to go make that call, but he said nothing.

The number of pfassks he gave about those two were dwindling rapidly.

Soon he and Leia were alone. “Do you think Father is actually angry?” Leia asked.

“He’s probably furious.”

Luke had to reassess his earlier lack of concern over the amount of trouble they were in. Perhaps if they could pass off their excursion as being an accident, saying they got lost instead of purposefully leaving the group, it wouldn’t be a problem. But he couldn’t imagine successfully lying to his father.

Leia rested her chin in her hands glumly. “This idea was terrible,” she said. “It stopped being fun a long time ago.”

“Some of it was fun.”

Luke felt the need to defend it because it had been his plan, even if it had gotten away from him. And then, because Mara wasn’t around, he said, “Jumping like that… falling… using the Force to hold up Faisellu with us… that was incredible. I wasn’t sure we could do it.”

“I thought I was going to drop her,” admitted Leia. Her eyes widened at the thought. “If we had dropped her…”

She didn’t have to say it. Splat, on the rocks.

“Well we didn’t.”

“No, we didn’t.” Leia ventured a smile. “I think we’ve both gotten so much better at using the Force, lately. Uncle Ben would be impressed.”

“Uncle Ben would be horrified that we were using it to ‘play games,’” Luke corrected, mocking Uncle Ben’s crisp and disapproving Coruscanti accent. “The Force is not a toy. Be mindful of your actions.”

Leia giggled appreciatively at the impression.
A few minutes later, Brontan returned, alone. He had plastic wrapped ration sticks from a vending machine in hand and offered them to the twins, saying, “Thought you looked a bit peaky. Wouldn’t want you to pass out on my watch, no indeed.”

“Um,” Luke said, reaching out to take the ration stick.

Leia articulated his confusion better. “What happened to Mara and Faisellu?” she asked.

“Who?”

“The girls. That you just took to call their aunt.”

“Oh, oh yes, how could I forget?” Brontan said with a worried little frown. He paused thoughtfully, brushing at his fur. “They… er… well they left.”


“I’m not sure,” said Brontan. “I just know that they left.”

“Did they comm their aunt?” Leia asked.

“Yes, yes I suppose they did,” he answered slowly. Luke decided to take that as a definite no, they did not.

“Are you sure they left?” he said, looking at Brontan with new suspicion. The osallan nodded, looking back at him with guileless eyes, but Luke still felt something was off. This was his father’s friend, he thought, surely there wasn’t anything to worry about… but still the feeling persisted.

“Where did they go?”

“I don’t know. They just had to leave.”

Luke looked at Leia, and he thought she was thinking the same thing he was. Stories of children being kidnapped and sold into slavery… given to the Empire or the Hutts… raced through his mind. He narrowed his eyes at Brontan. “Which way did they go?”

“Now, you’re not thinking of following them,” said Brontan. “Your father will be here soon. He’ll skin me alive if you go missing again.”

“What about our friends?” Leia asked. “I can’t believe you just let them leave.”

Brontan looked around helplessly, as if someone would appear out of thin air to explain to him what was going on. “They seemed to know what they were doing,” he said.

“They don’t,” said Luke.

Brontan sighed. “I don’t know what happened. The little red haired one just told me she was leaving and I said… it was fine…..”

“You should show us which way they went,” Leia said. “They can’t have gotten far.”

“You stay put,” said Brontan. “I’ll go fetch them back.”

Luke glanced frustratedly back at Leia. Brontan was too big to overwhelm without it being suspicious, he thought, but he had no intention of staying put if the osallan was up to no good with Mara and Faisellu. Leia met his eye and nodded slightly. She got up from the couch and walked
purposefully towards the door.

“Please, little one, your father won’t be happy if you’re gone when he gets here,” said Brontan, putting out a hand to stop her.

“Hey, don’t touch her,” Luke exclaimed. Leia, however, just responded by shrugging his hand off of her shoulder and kicking him in the shin, then rushing past him out the door. Brontan yelped in pain and turned to follow her, but Luke sent a push towards him with the Force. Brontan fell backwards and crashed heavily onto a table, which collapsed under his sudden weight with a loud crack. Luke streaked past him and slammed the lounge door shut behind him with a backwards push of the force.

He figured the osallan would be up and following them soon, so he and Leia ran as fast as they could through the garage. The other mechanics just stared at the children going past and did nothing to stop them.

“Where are we going?” Leia asked.

“Either they actually left or he locked them in the office or something,” said Luke.

“What? Why would he lock them in the office? I thought Mara ditched us because she wants to go out and explore Shalla City,” Leia said as they ran outside. They ran across the arena towards the entry area, where tickets and concessions were sold on race days. Beyond that lay the gates.

“Maybe?” Luke shot back, even as he kept running. He glanced over his shoulder to see if Brontan or anyone else was following them, but no one was. “But what if they grabbed them? What if—”

“Huh? Are you serious? That guy?”

“Wait, I thought you were thinking the same thing,” Luke said, slowing to a jog. “He was acting really suspicious.”

“I guess. But this is Mara we’re talking about. She already said she wanted to have fun in the city, not wait for our parents to pick us up.”

“Then why did you kick him?”

“I don’t know. It seemed like the thing to do. We were escaping.”

The two of them came to a stop outside the main gates. The road that lead into Shalla City stretched out before them, but the gates were closed and locked. Luke suddenly felt foolish. His instincts had told him something was off, but now he really didn’t know what he was doing.

“Should we wait for Father?” he suggested.

Leia looked back towards the racetrack. “We could probably climb over the gate.”

“But should we?”

“Mara’s a fool if she actually left to go wander around Shalla City by herself,” said Leia, then amended, “dragging Fai along with her.”

“They could get in all sorts of trouble,” Luke agreed.

“But we’ll get into even more trouble if we go after them.”
“What if Brontan kidnapped them?”

“I don’t sense anything like that,” Leia said. “He seems harmless. And besides even if that did happen, what good does us leaving do?”

“But—”

At that moment, Brontan came angrily limping into view. “You two!” he shouted. “Devil children! What in the blazes do you think you’re doing?”

Luke turned back to the osallan. “We were going after our friends.”

Brontan uttered a string of osallan curse words, then said, “You are staying put until your father comes and strips the fur off your hides.” He paused, flustered, and corrected himself, “Or whatever you humans do! I don’t care.”

His jovial mood seemed to have soured completely. Luke stared at him, eyes narrowed, trying to sense treachery or malice. Leia was right, though, he thought. The osallan was very irritated, but that was the only thing he sensed. That and fear.

Luke sighed heavily, trying to release his own frustration. He thought about what Uncle Ben had tried to explain to him about the force; how if you opened yourself up to it and listened, you could sense things, but that these feelings could be unclear and you must be mindful about how you interpret them and how you act upon them.

The instant he’d thought he sensed something treacherous going on, centered around Brontan and the girls, he had leapt to the very worst and most lurid conclusion. Uncle Ben would probably be shaking his head right now at the rashness Luke had just exhibited. Just the very idea of something sinister happening to the girls had made him lose his head, leaping into action like he was about to take down the Hutt’s crime cartel or something equally foolish. Now that he took a moment to analyze the situation more rationally, it made far more sense that Mara was continuing to be impetuous and headstrong, than that a friend of his father’s was engaged in child trafficking.

“They could get into a lot of trouble,” he said, eyeing the osallan’s limp ruefully.

Brontan snorted. “You could get into even more trouble by running after them, and me with you! You two are going to march your little hairless butts back into the shop and sit quietly and wait for your father. Then he can decide what to do about your little friends because I wash my hands of all of this nonsense.”

Luke and Leia exchanged another long look, but this time they went quietly back with the osallan, who continued to mutter colorfully about demonic human spawn the entire time.

“And then this one just up and kicks me! She kicks me so hard I go flying into that table and just look at it. Broken! Like my poor back.”

Leia cast her eyes downwards. She stood very still with her hands folded.

Luke swallowed nervously. Brontan didn’t understand that what had knocked him over and broken the table wasn’t Leia’s kick but his force push. But Father could probably figure that one out. The
question was only if he’d think it was Leia’s doing or Luke’s.

Father just shook his head as Brontan recounted the twins not-so-daring almost escape. He had been shaking his head almost continuously since he had arrived. For the most part he was quiet. Very quiet. Too quiet. The kind of stony silence that could only mean they were in so much trouble they may never not be in trouble again.

When he talked, it was only to Brontan. He apologized for the broken table and the injury. Thanked the osallan for looking after the children, for making them stay put. Offered Brontan some credits to replace the table. (Which Brontan refused graciously, saying it was just an old piece of junk anyway).

Then Father motioned curtly for the twins to follow him and left.

Luke and Leia trailed after their father, who was exuding so much controlled anger that it felt like walking after a tightly spinning tornado.

“Father,” Luke said, “our friends…”

“What about them?”

“They’re out in the city by themselves…”

“Get in the speeder.”

Luke and Leia piled into the back of their father’s speeder and waited to see what he would do. On a normal family car ride, the twins would vie for the honor of sitting up front in the passenger seat, but instinct had told them to stick together in the back today.

As they settled in, Artoo beeped at them from his spot in the back hatch. Luke felt like the droid was tsking at them.

Father jumped into the front seat and then turned around, fixing them with a long stare.

Finally, he asked, “What were you thinking?”

“We weren’t,” said Leia diplomatically. She was very good at contrition. She’d have to be; she got in a lot of practice. Luke was glad about that, for once.

“No, you weren’t. Do you have any idea how worried I was? Do you have any idea at all?” He turned back around, revved the speeder on and threw it into gear. “They called me and said you disappeared into the wilderness.”

“We’re sorry,” said Leia.

Father didn’t seem to hear her. “You should just be thankful I didn’t get your mother involved. I almost did. I almost dragged her away from her campaign meetings when I heard you were missing, but I thought better of it, I thought, ‘no, I can handle this,’ and you know what? I handled it.” He took off in the speeder, still ranting, “Your mother is running for congress. Congress! How do you think this is going to go over? Hm? I can just see the headlines now… ‘Congressional candidate’s family assaults teacher and mechanic.’ All because you thought it would be fun to have a little adventure all on your own.”

“You assaulted our teacher?”
He waved one hand dismissively. “That’s beside the point. You should not have left your school group to go cavorting through the canyon without a single thought for how it would affect anyone else. My gods. Obi-Wan was right.”

Luke didn’t bother to ask what Uncle Ben was right about. He just scooted forward in his seat. “Father... Mara and Faisellu… our friends… are we going to look for them?”

“Why? Don’t they have parents?” Father asked irritably.

“No, actually. They have an aunt, but…”

“I don’t like these kids,” said Father. “I don’t like the sound of them. They’re a bad influence on you.”

“But we can’t just leave them,” Leia said. “They’re just kids. Like us.” She met Father’s eyes in the rear view mirror and gazed into them pleadingly.

Father scowled, but turned away from the road which lead towards Breelden. He steered the speeder back towards Shalla City. “After today you’re not spending time with these girls anymore,” he said. “Is that clear?”

Luke and Leia exchanged glances, agreeing silently not to press the matter. It wasn’t like Father could really control who they spoke to or hung out with at school, anyway.

“Yes, Father,” the said in unison.

“Whenver you do that at the same time I know you have no intention of listening to me,” said Father, and Luke blanched. Leia simply smiled. Father just sighed and said, “So where were they going?”

“I don’t know. They didn’t say they were leaving. It was so strange. They left the room to go comm their aunt but then Brontan came back alone acting all strange like he didn’t even remember them. He just said they left.”

Father narrowed his eyes. “Who are these girls again?”

“Mara and Faisellu. You know, the new girls? The twins?”

“...The orphans?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm. You haven’t known them very long.”

“Not long,” said Luke. It had been a little over a month since the twins from Coruscant had first walked into Miss Ognoyn’s galactic geography class.

“And now you’re best friends? Run off into the woods together best friends?” Father was looking back at them through the rear view mirror, curiosity in his eyes though his voice was still thick with ire.

“They’re like us,” Leia said. “I think their parents might have been… you know… Jedi who were killed.”

“What?” Father snapped, and Luke swore for half a second that he almost lost control of the speeder.
“They won’t talk about their parents,” said Luke. “But we just think maybe they were like you and Uncle Ben. Because they know the Force like we do. So we became friends.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about them?”


They didn’t make a habit of talking about the other kids at school. Not to Father, at least. Mother was more closely involved in the school and was friends with the other children’s parents. Luke wasn’t sure why he had felt the instinct to be silent about Mara, but he had. Maybe he had been personally pretty iffy on whether or not he considered Mara and Faisellu actual friends. They hadn’t been over to his house and Luke hadn’t been over to theirs, though Leia had on a couple of occasions. She had told him that the house was full of empty take out containers.

“You didn’t tell them about yourselves, did you?”

“No really,” Luke said slowly. That was sort of true. It wasn’t as if he had talked to them about the force, really. And he at least hadn’t shared their own family history, or told them about the lessons with Father and Obi-Wan.

“And these kids, they use the force? They don’t even try to hide it?”

Leia shook her head. “Not from us. But that’s because we’re the same.”

Father just scowled. “Reckless,” he said. “I’ve told you not to let anyone else know about the fact that we’re teaching you about the force. I’ve told you how dangerous it is.”

“But they know that too,” said Luke defensively. “Their parents were killed by the empire!”

He didn’t actually know this for a fact—but it sounded better than saying he thought that maybe that’s how and why they had died.

“Sounds like they don’t know it well enough,” Father muttered. “Now I have to hunt down two force sensitive children and keep tabs on them from now on.”

“One force sensitive child,” said Leia. “It’s just Mara. Her sister can’t use the force… I don’t think.”

“What a relief.”

Luke sat back and concentrated on looking around the streets to see if he could spot the girls. All this sarcasm coming from Father was a good thing. It meant he couldn’t be all that angry.

“They can’t have gotten far,” he said. “It hasn’t been that long and they’re on foot.”

“Which direction do you think they went?” Father asked. “A guess.”

Luke was about to reiterate that he had no idea, but then he thought of something Uncle Ben always said… that if you put your trust in the Force it would guide you. He closed his eyes and reached out with his thoughts. He could feel Leia’s presence beside him, and Father in the front seat… his anger now subsided into irritation but most of all, curiosity. Leia was talking, speculating that Mara liked dancing and watching holodramas, so maybe she’d gone to a dance hall or a holotheater. He could sense Leia’s strong desire to please Father, to happen upon the right answer and earn some approval. But he didn’t know if the force was telling him this, or if it was just because he knew his sister too well.
Still, he could feel both of them in a way that was different than simply knowing they were near him. There was also the distant certainty that Mother and Uncle Ben were connected to him through the living force as they went about their day half way across the planet. He already knew that Mother was with her politician friends, immersed in important meetings because she was running for office, and he thought he could feel the busy thrum of her thoughts, mixed with the familiar contentment she radiated whenever she was busy about some sort of work. Clearly she hadn’t heard about the trouble they’d gotten into or he suspected she might not be feeling so mellow.

Uncle Ben was more nebulous, but he was there all the same, a pinprick of light wherever he was. Luke thought about Mara, about the bright shining intensity that radiated from her in the Force. He tried to feel out the sense of need and want that she tried to hide under all that careless bravado… and it occurred to him, suddenly, that this feeling was the same he often got from Leia. Except that he knew what drove Leia; with Mara he did not understand who it was she was trying to impress, whose approval she yearned for.

Maybe he had it all wrong. Maybe he didn’t understand anything. Maybe these vague insights into Mara’s mind that he thought he felt were nothing but confused imaginings or wrong conclusions.

Mara was still nearby, though. He felt her, then, as he concentrated all his thoughts onto her. She was not far. And he didn’t sense that dancing or holodramas were on her mind. What he felt was fear. She was afraid of something drawing near to her.

He opened his eyes. “That way,” he said, shooting out an arm, pointing down the road.

Father was momentarily startled by his outburst, but immediately jerked the speeder to the right and followed the direction Luke was pointing.

They found Mara and Faisellu standing at the bus terminal. Father pulled up alongside the curb and parked his speeder, but then just sat there wordlessly gripping the controls. Luke jumped out of the speeder and jogged over to them. Mara had seen them, and she and her sister both stared saucer-eyed at him, as if they didn’t think they could have possibly been found.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

Mara’s eyes shifted between him and the speeder. “Going home,” she said.

“I don’t understand. Why did you leave like that?” Luke almost added that she had worried him, but thought that would only give her cause to mock him.

“I called my aunt and she said to take the bus home,” Mara replied, but her voice was oddly monotone and she wasn’t even looking at him. She was staring over his shoulder.

Luke glanced back, already aware that Father and Leia were walking up behind him. It was Father who Mara seemed fixated on, so Luke said, “This is my Father. He can take you home. You don’t have to take the bus. Why didn’t you just wait with us?” He was genuinely confused now; if Mara and Faisellu just wanted to go home, and not run around Shalla City looking for excitement, why run off like this in the first place?

“This is them,” Father said, a statement not a question, but Leia answered “yes” anyway.

Luke turned around fully. “Their aunt told them to take the bus, I guess, but we can take them home, can’t we?”

Father didn’t respond for a moment, just stood there flexing his right hand, and Luke frowned. Everyone was behaving so strangely. Except for Leia, who he looked to for a moment for some kind
of explanation or insight. She shrugged at him, a movement so quick and slight that the others would probably miss it. But to him it said, “I know, I don’t understand it either.”

“Yes,” said Father. “Get in the speeder, all of you.”

“I don’t think that—” Mara began to protest, but she fell abruptly silent when Father lifted his hand and swept it back toward the road.

“I insist,” he said.

Mara started to inch backwards, and Luke got the feeling that, absurdly, she was about to bolt.

“Don’t be foolish,” said Father, and that was Mara’s cue to turn and run.

“What is she doing?” Luke asked, watching her barrel through the other beings waiting at the station. Faisellu started to follow her, but she was too slow, and Father just reached out and grabbed her arm.

“Go get in the speeder,” Father repeated. “Now.” Faisellu had gone completely quiet and limp, her eyes wide and dark with naked fear. Luke didn’t know what to make of it. Father wasn’t that scary, even in a bad temper.

“What is going on?” Leia asked.

Father just turned and stalked back towards the speeder, dragging the terrified Faisellu behind him. Luke and Leia scurried after, though they shot glances back towards where Mara had disappeared.

Father deposited Faisellu into the back seat of the speeder and motioned for the twins to follow. Leia slid in next to the frightened girl and said, “Are you alright?”

She got no answer.

Father shut the door and activated the convertible top to close.

“Stay with them,” he said to Artoo, after the droid beeped questioningly at him.

Luke realized that he meant to lock them in the speeder and go after Mara. “Let me come with you,” he said. “I can talk her into coming back.”


“But—”

“Stay. And don’t let her leave.” He jabbed a finger toward Faisellu.

Luke didn’t think that would be an issue. Faisellu seemed to have retreated inside herself and was an inert lump on the seat. Leia putting a comforting arm around her shoulders did nothing to bring her back. Father didn’t seem to notice what he had done to the girl.

Luke watched him go, and he didn’t need to reach out to the force to get a very bad feeling. Something wasn’t right. Something was very wrong.
A failure.

That’s what she was.

She didn’t know how, but she was sure that she had done something terribly wrong, had botched everything up, because he knew her.

She had seen the unmistakable shock of recognition on the face of Luke’s father. And what’s more, he looked angry about it. She’d known then that she screwed up, somehow. She’d done something to give them away.

*You shouldn’t have left Faisellu behind.*

That was bad. Now Darth Vader had her, and… and what? What would he do to her? The Emperor had said that he would not hesitate to destroy them if he felt threatened. And she didn’t know how or why, but he definitely felt threatened.

She felt a grim certainty that he knew exactly who they were, why they were there, and that he wanted them dead.

She shouldn’t have left Faisellu.

Master would have left her there, of course. Faisellu was nothing to him, nothing at all; she was weak and the weak were only there to be used and discarded.

It wasn’t supposed to happen this way. But he’d understand, wouldn’t he? He would see that Mara had done what she had to do. He would understand. She needed to look after herself first. Master would say she was right to do that. She was right.

*She trusted you.*

*You were supposed to take care of her.*

*You’re a coward.*

She shouldn’t be so afraid. After all he was just a man, no matter what Darth Sidious said. She had the force, she could defend herself.

Faisellu did not, could not.

*She wouldn’t have left you behind if it was the other way around.*

How did he know?

*She wouldn’t have abandoned you.*

Was he just that powerful? Really?

*She’s a fool. Not wise. The master is wise.*

Mara slowed to a walk and darted furtively down unknown streets. She didn’t know where she was going… there was nowhere to go, but away.

She became aware that she was being hunted. Fear prickled at the back of her neck as her senses
told her that she was being followed. He had come after her. Of course he would. She’d known he would.

She turned down an alley, seeking shelter in the dark.

*I am not afraid,* she told herself. *I am the best student my master has ever taught. I am strong. I am not afraid.*

“Where are you going, Mara?”

He stepped out from the shadows in front of her. She skidded to a stop and tried to turn back, but he had her in an invisible grip. She struggled against it but found to her chagrin that she was no match for his power in the force. She had never before felt so helpless. It was like… it was like being… like Faisellu.

Weak.

She was so tiny. Of course she was. She was very young; younger than the twins, even. In his memory of her she was older. A teenager. Still too young to do the things the Emperor expected of her. But taller.

Anakin crouched down so that he was at eye level with the girl. “Do you know who I am?” he asked, holding her by the shoulders so she couldn’t bolt away again.

She nodded, and said, “Luke and Leia’s father.” She was consumed with fear but she was trying her hardest not to show it, not to feel it. She was almost doing a good job, considering she wanted to run and couldn’t.

“Where were you going?” he repeated.

“H-home. To my aunt.”

“You don’t have an aunt.”

“Yes I do. Aunt Dre,” she insisted. “My sister and I were orph—”

“You don’t have a sister.”

Her eyes went wide. “What did you do to her?”

“She’s not your sister.”

“Let me go.”

He shook his head. “I don’t think so, Mara. I think you should come with me.”

“I’m not afraid of you.”

“You are. But you’re coming with me.” He stood up and transferred his hold on her to one arm.

“I’ll scream,” she threatened as he pulled her along.
“Go ahead.”

“I mean it. I’ll scream that you’re kidnapping me and everyone will come running,” she said, all puffed up and full of bluster. “You can’t fight off a whole bunch of angry people!”

“I can.”

“What are you going to do to me?” she asked, her voice going as tiny as she was.

“I’m going to find out what you’re up to.”

“Are you going to kill me?”

“No.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Anakin just shook his head. He didn’t have time to think through all the implications of Mara’s presence on Osallao, but he knew that he had to get back to the speeder, to where Luke and Leia were waiting with the other girl. He had to get back to his children. He had left them alone too long already.

He sensed something… and looked over his shoulder to see the little brown haired girl come running at him. Faisellu, that was her name. Her face was contorted in terror but she was barreling towards him as fast as a child’s legs could carry her. She flung herself at him, hands outstretched as if to claw at him, and Anakin reacted instinctively, stopping her in her tracks and pushing her backwards with the force. She fell to the ground with a cry, but immediately scrambled to her feet and resumed her advance with a desperate look in her eyes.

“No!” Mara cried.

Anakin reached out with the force again, this time lifting her off the ground to make sure she stayed put.

She gasped and flailed as she struggled in vain, kicking her legs uselessly in the air.

“Stop!” Mara cried, kicking him viciously. “Leave her alone!”

Anakin looked back and forth between the two girls, frustrated. “You will come with me,” he said. “There is no point to this struggle.”

“Father? What are you doing?”

Luke was there, the light from the late afternoon sun silhouetting him as he stood at the edge of the alleyway.

Anakin faltered, and dropped Faisellu. She collapsed onto the ground and scurried backwards until she bumped up against the wall. Mara took advantage of his lapse to rip her arm free. Instead of running away she went over to the other girl and knelt down, putting her arm around her and looking back at Anakin with a mixture of hatred and trepidation.

Luke walked down the alley slowly. Anakin saw that Leia and Artoo were not far behind him. The looks the twins were giving him were strangely cautious. He didn’t care for those looks.

He pointed at Luke. “I told you stay in the speeder!”
“Faisellu was too upset,” said Luke. “She was afraid. She was crying and she kept saying you were
going to kill Mara. We thought it would calm her down if we followed you so she could see
everything would be alright.” His tone was accusatory.

“Everything would be alright if any of you would just listen to me,” said Anakin, flustered. He
looked down at the girls and then back to his own children.

He had a sudden and disorienting feeling of déjà vu, surrounded by younglings who were looking at
him with new mistrust and fear. He could feel the memory of the lightsaber in his hand, and the
robotic fingers clenched reflexively.

No. He shook the memories away. That was a long time ago. He had to focus on now, not dwell on
the past.

“No one is killing anyone,” he said, trying to force some patience into his voice. “We are all going
to go home to Breelden.”

“He’s a monster,” said Mara, to Luke. “I’m not going anywhere with him.”

Leia and Artoo had caught up with them. “Don’t be ridiculous,” Leia said. “My father would never
hurt anyone. You’re both being overdramatic.”

Anakin looked at his daughter gratefully. Her loyalty was reassuring. No matter that she was wrong
and her trust in his goodness was misplaced…

“You saw what he did to Faisellu,” said Mara.

Leia hesitated, then shook her head, doubt clouding her eyes.


Faisellu nodded. “He was hurting Mara,” she said. “I had to stop him.”

"I was not hurting anyone,” Anakin protested. This was ridiculous. Why did he have to argue with
these children?

“You frightened her,” said Luke. “You're scaring them both. You should have let me come with
you, like I said.”

Anakin stared at Luke in surprise. Luke just returned his gaze steadily. He had never been lectured
by his son before and it was a singular experience. The shock of it made him say to Faisellu, “I’m
sorry, little one. There’s nothing to be afraid of. No one is going to hurt you.”

He knew that was a lie. Mara knew it too. He could tell by the way she looked up at him with a
particular sort of wisdom in her eyes that was too old for her years. There was a boldness to her
mixed up with the healthy amount fear that came from understanding what he was capable of, but
more importantly, knowing what Palpatine was capable of. Anakin didn’t know what she knew
about him and his past with the Emperor, but he could hazard a guess that it was enough to make her
very dangerous to his family.

He did not like seeing her next to Luke and Leia. He didn’t like thinking that a child brought up by
Sidious had insinuated herself into their lives right under his nose. But here she was; here they all
were.

He remembered Mara Jade well, and she was no different now than when he had known her in an
alternate life. She had been the most promising of force sensitive children that had been gathered up by Palpatine in the early days of the Empire. While most had been killed outright or had not survived Palpatine’s experimentations, the Emperor had taken a strange liking to the girl and had raised her up to be loyal and devoted to him.

As Vader he’d been acutely aware that if he was not careful, Sidious would look to this child as a replacement for him. In fact, he’d thought at one point that killing her would be inevitable. The Emperor talked of designating her as his Hand and unleashing her on the galaxy as his trusted assassin, and this was too much like taking her as an apprentice for Vader’s comfort, even though his master had stuck by the Sith rule of two and had never trained Mara in the arts of the dark side.

At the age she was now, Mara had still been kept on Coruscant, in the Imperial Palace. She had not been an agent of the Empire, not yet; just a student. Something about the idea of her being sent to Osallao now, so young and unprepared, seemed absurd to Anakin. He didn’t sense the dark side in her, so she was still not being trained as a replacement apprentice, despite his long absence. What was Sidious thinking? Was Anakin supposed to be the target of a child assassin, or was this part of a plan for Luke and Leia?

The fact that his master knew where he lived and about his children made Anakin feel sick. All this time he thought that he had been in hiding. He had been a fool. How long had Palpatine known? And how long was he planning on waiting before making his move?

These would be good questions for Mara. But not now, not here. Not with his children standing there, already shaken by what they had witnessed.

He looked from child to child and realized that he had to admit he was unable to do this on his own. He needed help.
Orphans of the Empire

It was a pale white horse
With a crooked smile
And I knew it was my time
It was the raging storm
Of a foreign war
And a face I'd seen before [x]

Obi-Wan inhaled the earthy aroma of the tea that bubbled reassuringly over the low fire. His cave was festooned with clusters of dried herbs dangling from stalactites like garlands. He had gathered quite the collection over the years. Combing the mountainous regions of Osallao for the natural bounty had become something of a hobby. He enjoyed his hikes and had cultivated a collection of over 80 native flora (herbs, berries, nuts, and fungi) which he carefully stored in the cavern he now called home.

Though the events which had brought him here were devastating, Obi-Wan found he liked Osallao very much. The varied climate and beautiful natural landscape was a pleasant change from the cityscape of Coruscant that he had once called home, though it was only as a youngling that he had lived there permanently. As a Padawan and later a Jedi Knight he had seldom spent more than a few weeks in one place, travelling the galaxy on peacekeeping missions long before the Clone Wars had taken him further away from stability. While the Jedi Temple would always linger in his heart’s memory as “home,” he sometimes thought that it would have been better for everyone if it had been located on a less developed planet, away from the politics of the Inner Core. He imagined the Temple rising above the tall trees of a forest or perched on a windswept cliff and thought that that would be perfection.

Thinking about the Jedi Temple for too long brought sadness, and Obi-Wan tried to remind himself that dwelling on the past and weeping for things lost was not the Jedi way. It was not the Jedi way to give in to nostalgia. Or regret.

His master had always chided him for not living in the present; for worrying over the future. And yet he now spent most of his days thinking about just that. Hope for the future helped to prevent him from becoming mired in thoughts of the past. Hope allowed him to value the present as it was, though it was very different than what he wanted it to be.

What DO you want the present to be? came the voice of Qui-Gon quietly into his mind.

Isn’t it obvious? I would wish for the Jedi Order to be alive and well, for the Republic and Democracy to stand.

And, since it was Qui-Gon to whom he confided, he added, For the ones I loved most to still be alive. You. Satine. Siri. Other names and faces paraded before his mind, but he did not send these thoughts to Qui-Gon. He didn’t really need to.

That is not the present. That was the future of a past long gone, Qui-Gon admonished.

Obi-Wan smiled ruefully. Still a Padawan learner in his master’s mind, even when that mind was long dead and preserved as an invisible part of the Force. This was how he knew that he spoke to
Qui-Gon; that his master had indeed discovered a way to preserve his spirit and personality rather than becoming one with the Force.

*Alright, I will be more reasonable,* Obi-Wan thought, and he chuckled out loud as he poured out a mug of hot ruwurt tea. He took a sip, and found himself talking out loud despite the unnecessary nature of speech when communing with a ghost of the Force.

“I would wish for more clarity of purpose,” he said. “I would wish for this struggle between myself and Anakin to end, though I realize that may never be. Sometimes I think that I am getting through to him, but there is still such a wall around him, one I fear that not even Padmé has breached. The children…”

*Your struggle is over more than simply the children.*

“My struggle is born of an inability to put the past behind me,” Obi-Wan said frankly. “I realize that Anakin is not, and perhaps never was, the person I thought him to be. But I cannot let go of… my attachment to him. I want… to return to the past.” He hung his head in shame. “I want things to be the way they were.”

*You should not be ashamed of hope or faith,* Qui-Gon said with the sort of serenity only the dead could master. *Nor should you be ashamed of love and compassion.*

“I am ashamed only of my naivety. Despite everything, I cannot let go of the idea of the boy.”

*You don’t actually think that way. You have real faith. You know that your faith is not misplaced.* Qui-Gon refused to entertain his self-pity for even a second.

“I have hope for the children,” said Obi-Wan. “When I look at Luke, I am reminded of the pure-hearted boy I thought I knew in Anakin. I have faith that there is still a chance to preserve that goodness, to not lose him the way I lost Anakin.”

*You haven’t lost him.*

Obi-Wan took a sip of his tea. “Have you been able to speak to him?” he asked mildly.

*No,* admitted Qui-Gon. *But there are barriers there. He cannot hear me.*

If it were not for Master Yoda also being able to commune with the spirit of Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan might be tempted to question his own sanity. He had once tried to broach the subject to Anakin, in hopes that speaking to him about it would make him more open to hearing Qui-Gon’s voice. But Anakin had simply looked at him strangely and told him that he shouldn’t mention this ghost business to Padmé because, “she’s worried enough about you as it is.”

“Anakin is unpredictable,” said Obi-Wan. “He has turned away from the path of darkness the Emperor set for him, this is true, and I am thankful every day for that. But I can no longer trust in his inherent goodness the way I once did. I have seen too much of what he is capable of.”

*It gives me all the more hope. The evil of the Dark Side is not eternal. It can be undone. It can be forsaken. No one is ever so far gone that they cannot chose to turn away from it.*

*Even the Emperor?* Obi-Wan asked wryly.

Qui-Gon ignored this jab and maintained, *I still believe in Anakin. I believe he is the Chosen One.*

*Even Anakin will agree that he failed to live up to the prophecy,* Obi-Wan said. “And no offense,
my old master, but perhaps the weight of expectation upon his shoulders made it all the easier for Palpatine to seduce him.”

Obi-Wan had spent a lot of time turning over the events of the past in his mind. He had thought long and hard about where he had gone wrong. He held Anakin responsible for the destruction he had caused, but hadn’t he been Anakin’s master? I should have raised him better. I should have seen Palpatine’s true nature. I should have been the one Anakin confided in about his worries for Padmé. I should have done more to prevent everything that happened.

You are losing yourself to regret again, came Qui-Gon’s gentle prodding. Have faith, my still young padawan. All is not lost. Do not ask yourself what could have been. Look to what can be.


Just then, his old commlink flashed and beeped. Obi-Wan reached over and plucked it off the rock ledge where it sat gathering moss. “Yes?”

“Oh-Wan,” said Anakin’s voice, crackling over the disused speaker. “I need your help.”

Obi-Wan lifted his brows in surprise even as his heart leapt. It wasn’t like Anakin, these days, to utter such a phrase, or to use his real name over a comm. There was an abruptness behind the words, an impatience that told him something was quite wrong.

“What is it?” he asked, standing up, already moving toward the mouth of the cave.

“He knows we’re here,” Anakin said. “I’ve found one… maybe two… of his agents.”

He didn’t need to say who “he” was—there was only one being in the galaxy who “he” could be. “Where are you?” Obi-Wan asked grimly.

“At home,” said Anakin. “I have the agent here.”

“What?” Obi-Wan faltered. He had automatically assumed that the Imperials Anakin had found were dead, or at the very least, not kept prisoner where the children slept. “Have you lost your mind?”

“It’s complicated.”

“I’m on my way.” Obi-Wan tucked the commlink into his robes and went over to a cluster of bushes near the cave where he kept an old speeder bike. He rarely ever used it, preferring to hike the mountains or stroll down to Breelden to visit the family, but he kept it in working order in case of an emergency. This fit the bill.

He didn’t care for speeder bikes. He found them to be an undignified mode of travel. But landspeeders couldn’t handle the steep, rocky terrain, and to keep a small aircraft would be a bit much. He climbed astride the bike and took off, his mind filled with busy thoughts about what this meant. The Emperor had tracked them down. Surely they must leave that very night, or prepare for the onslaught of the Imperial fleet. Unless the agents Anakin had captured had not had the chance to report back to the Empire, Palpatine would surely waste no time in coming after his former Sith acolyte. He’d probably take great pleasure in killing Obi-Wan, too, in order to destroy the last vestiges of the Jedi Council.

He would probably try to get Master Yoda’s location out of them. Anakin would be of no help there, and Obi-Wan was confident in his ability to withstand any mind probe.
But Padmé and the twins. They could not be allowed to fall into the Emperor’s hands.

This was the one thing he and Anakin had agreed upon for years.

When Obi-Wan arrived at the Skywalker residence (or the Agolerga residence, as it was known to everyone else) he stifled an impatient sigh at having to ring the front doorchime. Whenever Padmé tried to slip him the keycodes for the house, Anakin would change them.

The door opened remotely. Obi-Wan found himself looking into an empty entryway, not even greeted by the protocol droid. But after a second the astromech came wheeling towards him, blooping and borping as if he was supposed to understand what it was saying.

“Where are they, Artoo?” he asked, following the droid as it waved one metal pincer in a beckoning motion.

The droid led him into the living room, where he saw four children (the twins and a pair of girls) seated in a semi-circle, quietly watching what appeared to be a holodrama being projected from the table at the center of curved couches.

He cast about for Anakin for a moment before noticing him in the doorway that led to the back hallway and the staircase to the bedrooms. At the same time, Luke glanced over his shoulder and caught sight of Obi-Wan.

“Uncle Ben!” he exclaimed, and moved to pause the holodrama. Absurdly, in the back of Obi-Wan’s mind, he remembered that Padmé didn’t like for the children to watch holodramas. She thought they were frivolous and were full of problematic messages. He’d always agreed with her, especially these days when every holodrama that was released came from the Empire and was full of Imperial propaganda.

Concurrent to this musing, he also noticed that the children were eating ice cream.

Where were the Imperial agents? What of the urgency to escape before the Emperor could send more after them? Was this some sort of prank? he wondered. He could not imagine Anakin pulling a prank these days. Maybe once, back when he and Ahsoka were thick as thieves and acted more like irrepressible siblings than master and padawan. But it had been a long time since Anakin had been so carefree.

“Hello, Luke,” Obi-Wan said as the boy jumped over the back of the lowslung sofa and came to stand before him. The other children turned to look at them. Anakin, from the doorway, nodded.

“Have you come for dinner? Mother isn’t home yet. But we have friends over,” Luke chattered, sweeping one hand back toward the girls. They stared back impassively at Obi-Wan. One, with flame red hair, set her ice cream dish aside and moved to stand beside Luke.

“Hello there, young one,” said Obi-Wan. “I’m Ben.”

“You’re Luke’s uncle?”

“Yes.”

It was an easy lie. If anyone asked, they were told that he was Anakin’s older brother. It had begun as an assumption on the part of one neighbor that went uncorrected and became the official story. Those who were acquainted with him thought his last name was Agolerga as well. He’d taken to introducing himself as Ben Agolerga to people he came across independent of the Skywalkers, such as the village of osallans who lived a few hours north of his cave. He sometimes stayed at the village...
inn when his travels in search of wild produce took him too far from home to return to his rocky bed. If it bothered Anakin that he had co-opted his fake name, he had never mentioned it.

“I’m Mara,” she said. “That’s Faisellu. Will you take us home, please?”

“Excuse me?”

“I’d like to go home. My aunt is expecting us. She’s probably worried. He says we can’t go home.” She jerked her head back towards Anakin.

“Ummm, I ah…” Obi-Wan stammered. This, he had not been prepared for. In the least.

Anakin came into the room. The girl who sat on the couch visibly cringed as he neared, and Obi-Wan suddenly realized the reason Anakin had been lurking just outside of the room. The girls were clearly afraid of him.

_Oh dear_, he thought. _Oh dear._

“Finish your holo,” said Anakin in the same tone of voice one might tell a prisoner to sit quietly in their cell and make no trouble. “Your ice cream is melting.”

“We were getting to a good part,” Leia piped up, waving her spoon. “I want to see what happens next.”

“Please, sir. We don’t want to be here.”

“You need to stay. I called your aunt. She says she’s not at home tonight and you should stay here,” said Anakin.

Mara looked at him, then back at Obi-Wan. “He’s lying,” she said. “He never called her.”

“Please, Mara, stop doing this,” said Luke. “He called your aunt. We were all standing right there when he did it.”

“No,” said Mara, shaking her head. “That wasn’t our aunt.”

“This isn’t funny anymore,” said Leia, standing up. “If you don’t want to be here, leave, but stop making up lies about my Father.”

“Leia, let me handle this,” said Anakin, and she looked at the floor, her cheeks flushed. He turned back to Mara. “Your aunt doesn’t want you to be home alone, so you’re staying here. I can’t let you leave because I promised her I would look after you.”

Mara gave him a long look, then spun around with a twirl that seemed, to Obi-Wan, to be insolent somehow. She went back to the couch and threw herself down.

Luke looked at Obi-Wan and shrugged apologetically. “That’s Mara,” he said, as if the girl’s name should sum up everything Obi-Wan needed to understand about the situation.

The other girl had not moved this entire time, nor taken her eyes off of Anakin. She seemed frozen in her spot. Her ice cream sat untouched, a puddle of cold soup in its dish.

“I’m going to go talk to Ben for a little while,” said Anakin. “Behave yourselves.”

Luke nodded. “We will,” he said, then sat beside Mara on the couch and gave her a pointed look before he reached to unpause the holodrama.
Obi-Wan followed Anakin out of the room, feeling as if he were floating, because the entire situation seemed surreal. He dreaded what Anakin was about to say to him, because he was forming an idea of it in his mind already.

“Should we be leaving them alone?” he asked. “I have a feeling that they won’t stay put.”

“The doors are locked,” said Anakin. “And Artoo and the twins are there. Also, I can sense everything going on in that room.”

“Of course you can.”

“It’s not ideal, but I don’t want them to hear us.”

“Anakin—”

“In here,” Anakin said, and led him into the kitchen.

“You said that you had captured Imperial agents,” said Obi-Wan. “Please do not tell me you were talking about those children.”

“I don’t know about the quiet one, for sure. But Mara is definitely an Imperial agent,” said Anakin. “She’s a personal servant of the Emperor.”

“Anakin…”

“Don’t underestimate her because she’s a child,” he said, holding up one hand to silence Obi-Wan’s protests.

“Is that why you’re showing them a drama and feeding them ice cream?” Obi-Wan asked, then added, “…before dinner?”

“I didn’t know what else to do. I wanted them to remain calm while we figure this out.”

Obi-Wan sighed and rubbed his temples. “And the call to their aunt?”

“I called Ahsoka.” Anakin paused. “Well, first I transmitted a binary text message to Artoo which he translated and beamed to her encoded frequency, so that she would know to play along when I contacted her. She did very well.”

“Oh, it seems so, considering the child didn’t buy it for a second,” said Obi-Wan drily.

“The twins believed it,” said Anakin with a shrug, as if their ignorance was all that really mattered.

“Where did you find these girls?” asked Obi-Wan. “And, if I may ask such an unreasonable question, what makes you think they were sent by the Emperor?”

Anakin began to pace the length of the kitchen. “They go to school with the twins. But they first arrived here only about a month ago. From Coruscant. The story was that their parents died in a speeder accident and that a woman here in Breelden is their next of kin.”

“That seems reasonable,” said Obi-Wan. “And you suspect them because they came from Coruscant?”

Anakin shook his head slightly, pacing past the conservator. He rounded the island counter. “It is very convenient,” he said. “But there is something off about the one girl, Mara. I sense the Emperor’s influence on her. Also, she can and has used the Force in the presence of the twins.”
“Interesting,” said Obi-Wan. “How exactly can you sense the Emperor’s influence on her? I sense
nothing. No hint of the dark side.”

“She doesn’t use the dark side. At least not yet. But I just know.”

That’s convincing, thought Obi-Wan with an audible sigh. “Anakin. Have you considered that the
Emperor would not merely send a pair of children here if he knew that you lived here?”

“I have considered a lot of things,” Anakin retorted. “But I know for a fact that’s what he did.”

“Why?”

“To corrupt the twins,” said Anakin with exasperation. He shot Obi-Wan a glare but continued to
pace.

“I thought you said she isn’t connected to the dark side.”

“Does that matter? Not everyone in the employ of the Emperor is a Sith.”

“Forgive my skepticism, but so far it seems that you are convinced of the child’s involvement with
the Emperor purely because you sense… his presence… on her? Like a bad smell?”

That got him to stop in his tracks. “I didn’t ask for your help so that you could be sarcastic and
quirky,” he spat.

“Why did you call me?”

With a sigh, Anakin sat down on one of the stools that dotted the length of the island. He drummed
his fingers on the countertop. “Assuming your acceptance of the fact that these children were sent by
the Emperor, I wanted to… know… what you thought.”

“About what?”

“About what to do with them.”

Obi-Wan gave him a measured look. That question carried an ominous undercurrent; as if Anakin
could have easily asked what he thought they should do to the children. “I am still having trouble
accepting your assumptions,” he said. “However, hypothetically, if you are right…”

“Yes…?”

“Let’s consider the implications behind the Emperor knowing that you are here and choosing not to
send bounty hunters, assassins, or stormtroopers… but a pair of young girls. You believe they are
here to corrupt the twins. How? Why? If the Emperor knows about the twins, wouldn’t it be simpler
to attempt a kidnapping?”

“This sounds like you’re trying to reason me out of my ‘assumptions’ rather than entertain my
hypothetical rightness.”

“I’m working towards it,” Obi-Wan said patiently. “So. Perhaps they are spies. But what are they
spying on? Either you are here or you are not. The Emperor can only have one goal and that is to kill
or re-indoctrinate you and to capture or kill the children. So, four goals, really. The only thing he
could hope to learn from spying on you would be the location of Master Yoda. Hmm, that is a
possibility.”

“There’s also the rebellion,” Anakin pointed out. “He’ll want to ferret out the locations of their
operations and discover the identities of Imperials who are secretly members of the rebellion.”

“So he thinks you’re involved in the rebellion?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Or he just thinks that I know something. And of course, he’s right.”

“You know very little.”

“Thanks.”

“I’m serious. You know a name or two… but not locations.”

“Well, we know that. But does he? Perhaps he thinks I’m a font of information. And there’s Padmé to think about. If anyone could be suspected of being in thick with the rebellion it would be her.”

Anakin shifted in his seat and began a thoughtful drumming of the countertop again. “Mara was trained as a spy. Assassin, spy, judicator.”

“Impressive for a child of ten.”

“Eight.”

“Even more impressive.”

“I don’t know what training she’s actually received. She could be different now… There was more time last time.”

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow. Anakin had slipped into talking more to himself, and his musing words made very little sense. “Last time?” he asked. Anakin glanced at him half in surprise, as if he had forgotten who he was talking to.

Instead of responding, he stood up. “Padmé is home,” he announced, and moved towards the door.

When Father and Uncle Ben left the room, Mara stared after them before turning back to Luke. She disregarded the holodrama that had been put on to distract them, but Luke hadn’t been watching it either. None of them had, not even Leia, despite her claims to be interested in the plot. It was hardly an interesting film under normal circumstances… it was in fact not even a drama at all but a documentary on the history of gungans and they’d already seen it.

They didn’t have much of a holofilm collection to begin with and Father had pulled one out at random without even checking to see what it was about or if it was something likely to interest them.

Leia was the only one actually eating her ice cream. Mara and Faisellu looked at theirs suspiciously, like they thought it was poisoned. Luke didn’t have any appetite.

“I suppose if we try to leave you’ll go tell your father,” said Mara, her green eyes boring into him with an intensity that made him shift away from her.

“Of course I will.”

“You don’t believe anything I say.”
“Because everything you say is preposterous,” Leia shot back, though Mara had been leaning towards Luke.

Mara’s eyes flashed angrily as she snapped her head around to look at Leia. Her hair flew out in a whirl and slapped against Luke’s face. “I’m not lying,” she insisted. “That wasn’t our aunt he called. It was someone pretending to be her.”

“Do you expect us to believe that our father had a decoy set up to have a fake conversation with him?” Leia scoffed haughtily. “Why would he even need to do that?”

“Because our aunt wouldn’t care if we stayed home alone. In fact she’d think we were safer doing that than staying here.”

“How are you not safe? Why would he hurt you? What is the big deal about you that he would even want to keep you here unless it was for your own good?” Leia became increasingly heated and began to wave her arms around. “Do you think he feels the need to kidnap our friends for fun?”

Mara gazed at her with her chin thrust out, waiting for Leia to finish before she said, “You don’t know your father like you think you do.”

“Oh and you do? You never even met him before today.”

“I know he’s a liar who hurts children.”

“You’re a liar!” Leia rose halfway up from her seat. “He’s never even so much as spanked us.”

“Please,” said Faisellu in a small voice. “Stop shouting.”

Leia sat back down. “I’m not shouting,” she said with forced calm. “But I cannot believe your sister is sitting here slandering my father when he’s done absolutely nothing wrong.”

“You and your big words,” Mara said with a sneer. “You always think they make you sound so smart and so mature. You are such a child.”

Leia was right back on her feet, fists balled, and Luke leapt up to position himself between her and Mara. He knew his sister well enough to expect Mara was about to get herself punched in the face.

“Stop this,” he said, hands out.

“She’s being disrespectful,” Leia protested, but sank back down to the couch.

Mara looked up at Luke calmly. She hadn’t even flinched at Leia’s advance. “I’m only speaking the truth,” she said. “You’ll see.”

The watery cities of the gungans floated by him and the singsong voice of the narrator droned on as Luke stood in silence for a moment, trying to understand what was going on. He didn’t understand why Mara was so intent on vilifying his father. It seemed nonsensical. What was her purpose? She couldn’t hate being with them that much, could she? After all she’d chosen to spend time with them at school. Why she’d reacted to being at their house so vehemently was beyond him.

Maybe Father had been unnecessarily stern in Shalla City and had frightened Faisellu, but he had good reason to be short with them. All of them had been behaving very badly, causing trouble with the school group and with Bronton. He couldn’t really be expected to just shrug off the fact that two kids were running around Shalla City unsupervised and leave without them. Luke knew enough about adults and their worries to understand that this was only reasonable. He’d even pushed for
Father to go pick the girls up. So really, Mara had no reason to act like they’d been kidnapped, especially when Father had literally made a point to comm their aunt before taking them away from Shalla City.

This fake aunt routine was just nonsense. Utter nonsense. But he had to believe that there was something genuine behind Mara’s behavior, otherwise he was almost inclined just to let Leia fly at her in a flurry of rage.

He sat back down next to Mara and tried a different approach. “Tell us what you are afraid of,” he said gently. “What do you think that our father is planning on doing to you?”

Mara cocked her head to the side thoughtfully. But Faisellu responded first.

“He’s going to kill us,” she said.

Leia rolled her eyes expressively and made a big show of picking up her ice cream dish and shoving a gigantic spoonful in her mouth. She had given up. It was all up to Luke now.

“Why do you think that?”

“It’s my nightmares,” Faisellu said. “I have dreams about him.”

“How could you? You’ve never met him.”

She shook her head. “But I have dreams.”

Okay, I believe that you have dreams. But I think you’re confusing my father with some boogeyman that isn’t real,” said Luke. He turned the volume down on the holodoc and gave her his full attention. “Tell us about your dreams.”

Faisellu looked to Mara, and she just shrugged. So Faisellu took a deep breath and said, “I dream that I’m dying. I dream… I dream about my mother. She’s dying. And I’m dying too. And he’s there. He’s the one killing us. He kills us with a laser sword. And we’re dying. Always dying.”

Leia’s spoon drooped from her hand.

Luke got up and went over to sit next to Faisellu, passing through the silently moving holodoc on his way. The image of Nubian waterfalls shuddered a little as his disturbed the energy field.

“That’s sounds like a terrible dream,” he said.

His father did have a lightsaber, though how Faisellu would know that he couldn’t guess. Maybe she had something of the Force about her, after all. Something that didn’t let her move objects or leap great distances but gave her a sense about people. Maybe she sensed that his father wielded a lightsaber and connected him to the monster in her dreams. Or maybe she just feared him because he was a tall and imposing man who triggered a memory of someone else. Luke didn’t know what had all happened to her back on Coruscant. But if he was right in his suspicions that her parents were Jedi who had met a bad end, it was possible both Mara and Faisellu had good reasons to be paranoid about strange men.

“Whoever it is in your dream, it’s not my father. Alright? You don’t have to be afraid of him. I will tell you a secret. He does have a laser sword. But he would never use it to kill children. That’s just not who he is. I know him.” He reached out slowly to put a hand on her shoulder, ready to draw back if she flinched away. But she didn’t. He smiled at her reassuringly and even chuckled a little as he added, “I’ve known him all my life.”
Mara snorted. “You’ve known him all your life but have you known him all his life?”

“Have you?” Leia said, ice in her voice, her words, her eyes. Luke swore the room got a little bit colder.


“That’s impossible because he’s never been on Coruscant,” said Leia. She and Luke both knew better, but she gave Luke a pointed look as she lied. He could tell that she was not happy with him for spilling the secret about Father owning a lightsaber, which pretty much went hand in hand with being a Jedi. “Our parents are from Naboo. They moved here to get away from the Empire. But they’ve never been to Coruscant.”

“That’s what they tell you, maybe.”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe it’s true. But maybe the person I know is also from Naboo. Maybe that’s how he knows your father.”

“Maybe maybe maybe,” Leia parroted, her face screwed up in disgust. “Who is this person? Speak plainly.”

Mara cocked her head to the side and narrowed her eyes, then opened her mouth to speak. But then she snapped it shut again, because at that moment, Threepio came shuffling into the room, with Mother, Father, and Uncle Ben close on the droid’s heels.

Anakin opened the door just as Padmé was reaching out for the keypad. She stopped in surprise but then smiled at him. She looked tired but happy, and he felt a pang of remorse that her return to politics would have to be cut short because of the Emperor. He had encouraged her to act without fear of the Empire, and now here he was, about to tell her that they couldn’t stay on Osallao anymore.

But first, what to do about the girls?

Obi-Wan was being infuriatingly obtuse. But that didn’t shake Anakin’s conviction that Mara was sent here on some nefarious purpose. He had, of course, entertained the possibility that in this new reality she had never been taken by the Emperor and raised as his servant. But it was too much of a coincidence that she would just show up to his twins’ school if that were the case.

No, they had to leave.

But what to do with the girls?

They were dangerous.

He should kill them. An old instinct rose to the surface, telling him to show no mercy, take no prisoners, leave no room for mistakes.

But they were children.
He’d sworn to himself, to Padmé, to everyone, that he would never do that again.

A new idea suddenly came to him. Palpatine so loved ordering the death of children. Maybe that’s exactly why he had sent them here. Perhaps in this reality he did not value Mara so much. He had sent her here half trained and too young, after all. He couldn’t expect her to succeed in whatever it was she believed she was supposed to do.

Perhaps he expected Anakin to kill them. Perhaps he desired it. It made a sort of Palpatinian sense. It would alienate Padmé and Obi-Wan if he did so. It would upset Luke and Leia.

It would upset him.

No. He had killed enough children for the Emperor already. He was not the Emperor’s wind-up toy any longer.

Still, Mara was dangerous. He wasn’t totally convinced that she was just spying on them in hopes of finding out information on the rebellion. His instincts told him that her friendship with the twins was more than just a convenient way in. Her presence here was about the twins, whether she was meant to die or not. This was about his children. It was always about the children.

These thoughts raced through his mind as Padmé made her way into the living room. She would soon see the girls. He hadn’t contacted her or told her what to expect. He had wanted to wait as long as possible.

As long as possible before pulling the rug out from under her. Again.

He expected Mara to try the same plea for freedom on Padmé that she had on Obi-Wan, but to his surprise, she didn’t. She looked Padmé up and down, then gave him an unsettling look, and turned away.

Padmé eyed the ice cream but didn’t say anything. She also gave Anakin a slight look that indicated she wasn’t the happiest that he’d allowed the children to have friends over on a school night, but otherwise she did not seem overly suspicious of the presence of the two girls. She smiled pleasantly at them and told C-3PO to pull out some leftovers to heat up for dinner, then said she was going to head upstairs to change out of the formal clothes and hairpiece she had worn all day while campaigning for congress.

Anakin leaned close to Obi-Wan and said, “Stay with the children. Watch them,” before turning to follow her. He only hoped that Padmé would accept his suspicions with less skepticism than Obi-Wan had, and that she had something actually useful to say about the situation.

“I have to tell you something,” he said, taking a deep breath as he closed their bedroom door.

Padmé, already shedding the heavy outer robe she’d worn over her dress, half turned to look at him with a raised eyebrow. “Something bad?” she asked, instantly looking even wearier.

“Something very bad.”

She groaned a little and bent her head to shake the headdress free. Pins shuddered to the floor as she tilted the metal contraption into her hands. “This thing gives me a headache,” she muttered, then straightened and ran one free hand through her curls.

“Padmé…”

“Let me guess,” she sighed. “Leia did something. Though why you let them have friends ov—”
“It’s not the twins,” he said. He wished he was just there to tell her that the twins had been epically naughty and they would never be allowed back to Breelden Academy because he was forbidden from being within fifty feet of Master Voldere. That was all almost funny in retrospect because of how little it mattered.

“Those girls,” he said. “They belong to the Emperor.”

Padmé stared at him with uncomprehending eyes. “Belong?” she echoed, as if the idea was foreign to her.

Of course, he thought ruefully, it was. She was from Naboo, not Tatooine. She still thought of slavery as a distant and strange thing. Even after all these years, she didn’t understand. She never would.

“How much do you know about their aunt?” He changed his tactic. Straight up saying that Mara was an Imperial agent had made Obi-Wan treat him like an imbecile and he wasn’t going to go through that argument again.

“Dredaxia? Oh, well….” She fidgeted with the headpiece in her hands with a puzzled furrow to her brows. “I suppose I don’t know her terribly well. She’s lived here for almost as long as we have. She has an interest in civic matters, but before now we didn’t have all that much to talk about. You see she didn’t have children and I… well I’ve been so caught up with the twins, with the school, with…” her voice trailed off and she looked at him with a new dawning recognition of horror. “You think that she’s an Imperial agent? But why? Why wait all these years? And those girls, they’re just children. What could be the point?”

“I am not sure. But it’s a trap of some sort,” he said.

Her fingers closed into a tight grip. Steel came into her eyes. “Tell me everything,” she said. “Tell me what happened.”

_I need to tell her the truth_, he thought, but something rebelled inside him. Something that had been refusing to tell the truth for all these years. She could never know about his other life, his life without her. She wouldn’t _understand_. She did not understand what it was to be a slave. What it was to have to do your master’s will no matter how terrible. No matter how unforgivable.

She had forgiven him for the crimes she knew about because she was able to think of them as aberrations, moments of madness, of misguided passion, but how would she ever be able to look at him again after knowing he had spent years doing those same things over and over again, with measured, premeditated intent? That he had woken every day knowing he would destroy the innocent? That he walked through life crunching the remains of her beloved Republic beneath his boots? Worst of all, that he had killed her, killed their unborn children, snuffed out Luke and Leia’s lives before they had even begun?

No. It hardly mattered that he had erased that life from reality. If he talked about it, he brought it back, he made it real again. If he told her about Vader’s knowledge he resurrected Vader from the ashes of a buried timeline.

He couldn’t.

He wouldn’t.

And so he told her the same thing he had told Obi-Wan. That he simply put it all together because of Mara’s sudden presence in the twin’s lives, her ability to use the force, the intangible sense of the
Emperor’s hand upon her. He briefly explained the eventful day they had had, from the calls he received from the school up until he’d tried to discuss the matter with Obi-Wan.

Perhaps it was because she didn’t know the Force, but she accepted this nebulous explanation of Mara’s connection to the Emperor when Obi-Wan had not. He felt almost guilty playing upon her ignorance, but it didn’t matter, in the end. Because he was right about Mara. And that was all that mattered.

“Dredaxia will become suspicious,” she said. “We have to contact her.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Why not? She already knows that the girls are missing. It’s late. She’ll be looking for them, or she’s a lousy agent. Even if she were really just their aunt she’d be looking for them. Didn’t the school call her when they went missing today?”

“They did, actually, but they told me that they couldn’t reach her. Something about her being at work, them not being able to get her to respond to any of the comm numbers they had for her.” It was with some difficulty that he called to mind the things Voldere had said to him, since he had been so angry with the incompetent schoolmaster at the time. He hadn’t even understood why he should care about the guardian of the other children whom he didn’t know and it had all come to him as meaningless chatter from the blabbering lips of the sweaty man.

“But she should be home from work by now and expect to see the children home from school,” Padmé mused. “No. I have to call her. Act like nothing’s wrong. Ask if the children can stay the night. That will buy us some time before she suspects we know anything.”

“And then what?”

“Then we prepare to leave. We need to get our things in order. Find a ship. Decide where to go. But we must leave as soon as possible… before the end of tomorrow.” She took a shuddering breath. “Even if he has known for years that we’re on Osallao, we must disappear now, before he can see whatever plot he’s developed through to its completion.”

She spoke in that deadly serious way she had when her mind was made up, even though her hands shook as they clasped the edges of her hairpiece. He felt relieved. He had worried that she had grown too attached to Osallao and would try to think of ways they could make staying here work, but that had been foolish of him. Padmé was a woman of action, not indecision. It was one of the many things he loved about her.

“And what about Mara and the other girl?” he asked.

“We take them with us,” said Padmé, seeming surprised that he should ask. “They’re children. They need to be rescued from the Emperor.”

“They don’t see it that way. They’ll resist us.”

She dropped the hairpiece and waved her hands impatiently. He noticed that the soft metal was bent and twisted as it fell to the floor. “We’ll do what we have to.” She looked at him pointedly. “People who think that Palpatine is their friend are always mistaken.”

“I agree.” He hesitated before adding, “However… I don’t want Mara around the twins any longer than necessary. She’s been with them too much already. I don’t want her to influence them.”

“How do we work that out, though?” Padmé said, and as she spoke she walked purposefully over to
the door that led to a small adjoining study. “We need to keep her close. For her own safety and so that she cannot return to the Emperor and tell him where we’ve gone. And I don’t see how we can keep her close to us but separated from the twins.”

“I have an idea about that.”

He followed her into the study. The room served as an office where Padmé did datakeeping work for the business and the household. She went to her desk and picked up a datapad and began scrolling through it. He watched her silently for a moment, before she looked up and asked, “Well? What’s the idea, then?”

“There’s only one person I can think of who I would trust to keep Mara away from the Emperor.”

She looked down again with barely any reaction. “I see. And do you think Ahsoka will be willing to take on the care of two children? I assume you want her to take the other girl as well. Faisellu. If Mara is connected to the Emperor then Faisellu must be as well. That’s twice the trouble.”

He smiled because Padmé didn’t need to ask who he had in mind. “I think she’ll do it for me.”

Padmé sat down and shook her head, but he could tell that she believed him. They both knew that Ahsoka would do it, despite the huge inconvenience and the great risk.

“I’m going to call Dredaxia,” she said, reaching for the communications unit built into her desk. Her hand hovered over the button, her eyes strayed to the datapad, where she likely had stored the contact information.

Her conviction wavered. He could see the exact moment it happened. The weariness clouded her eyes.

“Are you very sure?” she asked, fixing him with a look that made him think, You need to tell her the truth, the whole truth, you deplorable piece of bantha poodoo.

But he just nodded.

And that was enough.

She dialed in the number and waited for Dredaxia to respond. Anakin wondered for a moment if the woman even would respond. The school had been able reach her. Maybe something had happened to her. Maybe… and here he wondered if Padmé had seen or heard from the woman since Mara had arrived on Osallao. Maybe she wasn’t an Imperial sleeper agent. Maybe she was just a name to use. Maybe—

“Hello?” said a voice on the other end, and Anakin banished the image of child Mara ruthlessly murdering an unsuspecting citizen from his mind.

“Dredaxia? Hello. This is Veré Agolerga speaking. How are you?”

“Veré, what a pleasure,” the voice said cautiously. “I’m fine. How are your twins?”

“Wonderful,” said Padmé sweetly, as if nothing had shaken her recently. As if nothing ever could. “I was actually calling because my twins brought your twins over for dinner tonight. I wanted to check in to make sure this was okay with you.”

“Oh, yes. I was wondering what was taking them so long. But children these days have so many extracurricular activities, of course, I thought I had gotten my scheduling mixed up,” the woman
babbled inanely. “I do hope they are behaving themselves?”

“They are perfect,” Padmé said. “So well behaved. You should be proud.”

“Well I can’t really take credit. My brother and his wife, rest their souls….”

“Of course. Anyway, I was thinking, it’s getting rather late. A sleepover might be in order. I hope this isn’t too presumptuous?”

“No, I think that’s a wonderful idea,” Dredaxia agreed. “I hope it’s not too much of an imposition, though?”

“Not at all. And don’t worry about tomorrow morning, I’ll have them ready for school and take them along with the twins. How does that sound?”

“You’re the expert, Veré. I’m still so new at this. I appreciate your flexibility.”

“It’s no trouble at all.”

Anakin was torn between being nauseated by the staggering levels of faux politeness, and admiring Padmé’s coolness under pressure. When Padmé hung up she said, “If I wasn’t sure before, I am now.”

“Why?”

“She didn’t mention the field trip. She didn’t mention getting any calls from the school. No messages to alarm her. What kind of guardian doesn’t care at all about anything that happened today? She’s playing ignorance or apathy because she’s not actually concerned about that stuff.”

He nodded. The woman on the other end had sounded incredibly fake. Far too obliging. She was likely happy to learn that the girls were cozying up to their family. That was probably part of the plan.

Maybe part of the plan was to alarm them and get them to do exactly what they were doing, though. He shook his head as if cobwebs would fall out. He wanted to believe that he had interrupted something, but Palpatine had always been one step ahead of him before. What if running away with the girls in tow was actually what Palpatine expected? Maybe he should just kill them. Maybe he had it all wrong and Sidious was counting on him going soft and allowing them to live.

“I don’t like this softness, Lord Vader…” a voice echoed down to him from a past that no longer existed. He wondered at that memory resurfacing now but pushed it aside. It was one of the bad ones, and they were pretty much all bad, so that was saying something.

“I need to go,” he said. “I need to check on them.”

They were with Obi-Wan, but then, Obi-Wan hadn’t really believed him.

She stood up. “I’ll come with you.” She hadn’t changed her clothes, but she didn’t seem to remember her original purpose in going upstairs.

They went downstairs and found Obi-Wan seated cross-legged on the table, the holoprojecter switched off. He had the seemingly rapt attention of all the children and he was telling them a story.

“...and then the beautiful duchess said—”

“Time for bed,” Anakin interrupted.
“But we haven’t had dinner yet.”

“Too bad.”

Padmé swept in behind him with a forced chuckle and said, “Don’t be silly, darling. Luke, Leia, come along, we’ll go into the kitchen and see what Threepio is making.”

“What about us?” Mara asked.

“You’re going to stay in here with us,” Anakin said, in a tone he meant to be non-threatening yet authoritative.

Luke started to stand up and Mara reacted by grabbing onto his arm. “Don’t leave me,” she said with an impressively wide-eyed look of distress.

Anakin sighed. Luke stared at her hand and then looked up at his father helplessly.

“Why can’t we all go into the kitchen together?” It was Leia who asked this, standing, crossing her arms.

“Leia, just do as you’re told.”

“No.”

“I’m not in the mood for this.”

She jutted her chin out like the muzzle of a blaster. “You want to send us away so that you can talk to Mara and Faisellu about something important and I want to know why we can’t hear it.”

“He’s going to hurt us and he doesn’t want you to see him do it,” Mara said in a rush, digging her fingers into Luke’s arm.

Anakin sighed with the exasperation of two lifetimes.

He noticed that Faisellu was now cowering behind Leia with small fingers clutching her skirt. It was just the sort of thing he had dreaded. They both had their claws in his children.


He felt as if he were going mad. There was no way out.

Just like in the alley. Luke and Leia were there. Watching him. And now Padmé and Obi-Wan were there, too. Everyone was watching him. Everyone was looking at him like they were afraid of him, like they thought he was an animal ready to snap, to lash out, and force if he didn’t feel like he might, like he could just reach out and choke someone, anyone…

Get ahold of yourself, Anakin, said a voice in his head, suddenly, and he released the breath he didn’t know he’d been holding. For half a second he thought it sounded like Qui-Gon, but that was absurd.

He took several steadying breaths, alarmed at how close he was slipping towards Vader. How the Dark Side sensed his turmoil and reached up to meet him, to remind him that if only he let it all flow through him, he could be unstoppable, he could do anything.

He would have thought Mara would look pleased with how he was losing his control, but she
didn’t.

And he thought for the first time that maybe she was right to beg Luke not to leave her. Perhaps without his family he was still the monster the Emperor had made him.

“Alright,” he said. “We’re all going to stay here together. We’re all going to talk about this together.”

“Ani,” Padmé said, slipping, not using his fake name, “Do you want the twins to—”

“To know who their friends really are? I suppose I do.”

Anakin crossed his arms.

“Mara Jade,” he said, “you were sent here by the Emperor. You think that you’re his Hand, that you’re special. He gave you nice things and a comfortable home and special training, and he gave pretty speeches to you about destiny and loyalty and the glory of the Empire so that you’d do anything to please him. What you don’t know is that you’re just one of many children he kidnapped.” He glanced at Faisellu. “Or maybe not. Maybe you’ve gotten the idea. Either way, you thought I wouldn’t know who you are, but I do.”

He was distantly aware of Obi-Wan arching an eyebrow and narrowing his eyes, but he focused on Mara, who said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. My name is Mara Sawain. The Emperor killed my parents. I hate him.”

“Do you? Your statement lacks conviction.”

She looked a little doubtful. Perhaps she hadn’t expected him to be so direct. He pressed ahead. “You are right, though, that the Emperor killed your parents. Or rather, he ordered the stormtroopers to shoot them after you had agreed to go with him. The Emperor took you away, in a private shuttle, but even though you went willingly and your parents let you go, he couldn’t have those sorts of loose ends lying around. So they each got a blaster shot to the head.”

“You’re lying. How would you even know any of that?” she said, but he could see that she was shaken. It wasn’t even that hard. So she was a child after all.

“I made it my business to know your history,” he said, truthfully. The Emperor had not formally introduced him to Jade until she was a teenager and he was ready to send her on missions. Palpatine had been so proud of her, had called her his Experiment, had explained why she was different from the Inquisitorius, how she was his special, versatile spy, assassin, thief, judge, jury, executioner. He’d assured him he need not think of her as a rival because she was no Sith, that she was not his heir but his tool. That hadn’t stopped Vader from doing just that. He knew that he was a tool, as well. Anyone could be the heir to the empire. It wasn’t as if Palpatine had any loyalty.

Mara gave him a long, hard look, and then made her decision. “You lie,” she announced. “My parents aren’t dead.”

“Tell me what the Emperor sent you here to do, Mara.”

She just shook her head. “My parents,” she said, her voice dropping, “are not dead.”

“She’s not dead. Because I told them not to fight. I told them to let me go. And I went with him because I knew it was my destiny. He didn’t have to tell me that. And he was kind,” she hissed. “He
took me to the palace and—"

“And the stormtroopers made your parents get down on their knees in your old home and they shot
them—"

“Anakin,” Padmé said.

“—in the base of their skulls—"

“I think that’s quite enough,” said Obi-Wan.

“—and I know because I interviewed the troopers who did it. Personally.”

Palpatine had not kept any records of Mara, because he didn’t want anyone to trace her identity, or
understand her purpose. But that didn’t matter, because Vader had wanted to know exactly what he
was up to, exactly what sort of an Experiment the girl was. He could take nothing that Darth Sidious
said at face value. He’d found out everything he could, which admittedly wasn’t much, just that
unlike the other Force sensitive children the Inquisitors located for him, this one he had gone to
retrieve personally. And after he’d had her parents killed and disposed of, ensuring he’d never have
to deal with divided loyalty, he’d raised her up in the palace and groomed her to be a special sort of
pet. The kindly grandfather routine. Anakin remembered it well. It was only remarkable now
because all of the other children he’d gathered up over the years had not been treated so kindly.
They’d been treated like animals, like droids, taken apart, put back together again, tossed into the
scrap pile. They’d seen the true face of Darth Sidious, as he had. But they were only children. They
couldn’t survive. Not like he had.

“But I don’t really need to tell you this about your parents, because you sensed it, didn’t you?” he
went on. He bent down with his hands resting on his knees to better look her in the eyes. “You know
he killed your parents. You just didn’t want to believe it. It was too hard to think about so you didn’t.
You made yourself forget because it was easier that way.”

Now he was just guessing, perhaps he was projecting, but he didn’t care. It was working. Mara
looked like she was going to be sick as she held onto Luke and Luke, well… he looked angry. He
was angry at Anakin, for saying all these terrible things, and that was unfortunate. But he would
come to understand that Mara wasn’t his friend. Mara was the Emperor’s pet.

“So tell me what the Emperor sent you here to do,” Anakin said, conversationally.

“If you know everything why are you asking me?” Mara spat. “Tell me about it.”

“I would prefer it if you told me.”

“I can tell you,” spoke Faisellu, peeking out from behind Leia.

“No you can’t, you don’t know anything,” Mara said harshly.

Obi-Wan shook his head. “Tell us what you know, child,” he said to Faisellu in his gentlest of
voices.

“We’re here to make you suffer,” she said to Anakin. She looked at him with large brown eyes that
unsettled him. They were the eyes of a child who had seen too much, who understood too well what
it meant to suffer. They were the eyes of a slave child. “The Emperor is very upset with you. You
disobeyed him. You betrayed him. You ran away. You have to be punished.”

Padmé, standing beside him, drew a sharp intake of breath. He could sense the protest on her lips.
She was going to say this had all become too much, that no one needed to hear this. But before she could vocalize it he said, “And how does he plan on doing it? How are you two going to help him?”

She looked to Mara. “He wants your children, of course. He wants them to come to him, though. Like Mara did.”

“And what about you?”

She looked at the floor. “He doesn’t have any use for me. He’s done with me. I’m just here to die.”

“That’s not true,” said Mara.

“Who is supposed to kill you?” Anakin asked.

She shrugged. “Whoever is worthy of being his apprentice,” she said.

Luke shook Mara’s hand free of his arm, shedding her with a violent shudder. “Is that true?” he asked.

“No.”

“I’m weak,” said Faisellu. “The Emperor hates weakness. The weak are of no use to him.”

“Stop it.”

“He told me so himself.”

“Be quiet!”

“So I understand why you hate me, Mara. I don’t blame you. You hate me because you’re the one who’s worthy. Not like them. They pity me, they’re soft, they’ll never be strong like you. No one here deserves to be the master’s apprentice except for you.”

_I don’t like this softness, Lord Vader…_

“Do you want her to die, Mara?” Anakin asked. No one stopped him or reprimanded him for being too cruel this time. They just looked at Mara.

She looked around, made uncomfortable by the weight of the stares leveled at her. He knew how she felt.

“I want what my master wants,” she said, and her voice was flat and empty. Distant.

“Do you want her to die?”

“It’s alright,” said Faisellu, “if you say yes.”

Before Mara could answer or make another protest, they were all startled by a musical chime which sounded throughout the house. Anakin jumped. He was angry with himself for not sensing this. And for half a second he didn’t even register what the chiming meant.

It was the doorchime.

Someone was at their front door.

“I’ll go see who it is,” said Padmé.
“No,” Anakin reached out a hand to stop her. “I’ll do it.”

He shifted his hand so that it was beckoning to Artoo to follow him. The droid, who had been surreptitiously monitoring the situation from the corner, chirped and was at his heel in a moment. He rolled along behind down the hallway and into the front vestibule.

Anakin opened the viewport shade and saw, narrowly, a plain, unremarkable woman standing outside. It could be anyone, he thought. One of the neighbors who he wasn’t good at recognizing. Someone to bother Padmé about her election. A wayward customer looking for the shop. A solicitor. Anyone.

But the Force told him it wasn’t anything that innocuous.

“Yes?” he said, holding down the intercom.

“Hello! It’s Dredaxia? I thought I would stop by with a few things for the girls. Some clothes?” She lifted a bag and dangled it in front of the window.

*Feed me to the sarlacc and let me enjoy a good long death*, he thought darkly. There was something extremely off about this woman. Even just looking at her through the window, hearing her voice crackle through the speaker, made his skin crawl. And he didn’t know why. He didn’t need his senses to tell her that she was an Imperial, that she wasn’t just some clueless citizen. But the Force was trying to tell him something.

“So, you’re here with clothes?”

“Artoo,” he said, and the droid popped open its compartment. The lightsaber flew into his hand.

He unlocked the door. Opened it. Gave her a wide smile, all teeth, and she had trouble smiling back.

“Come on in.”

She didn’t move. He didn’t make a space for her to walk in past him.

They stared at one another, and Anakin tried to figure out just what it was about her that made him feel so… nauseous.

And then he remembered.
His mechanical breathing filled the prison of his helmet and the cell in which he stood.

She was seated on the low bench along the back wall, clutching the expanse of her womb. She looked at him with fear, because that is how everyone always looked at him, but it was only secondary. She had hope. She thought he would save her. She thought, for some reason, that he was a man of his word.

Despite everything, he had thought so, too. But the Emperor had disabused him of that fantasy. Like every fantasy.

“I have spoken to the Emperor,” he said flatly, each word transforming as it traveled through the vocabulator until it spoke to her in that other voice.

“And?” Her fingers trailed over her belly. The life within flared briefly in response. The child was strong in the Force.

He didn’t have the words.

He ignited his lightsaber and she jumped, startled. Her wide eyes traveled the length of the blood red blade and then met the lenses of his mask.

She didn’t look like Padmé, he told himself.

Her face was too thin, too angular, her skin mottled and sallow. She was no beauty. Not like Padmé. But she had brown eyes and long brown hair and that was enough. It was more than enough.

He had no desire to kill her.

But that didn’t matter, did it.

“You said the emperor would be merciful,” she whispered.

“I am the Emperor’s mercy.”

“Please,” she said.

It was the last thing that she said.
“You have cut down many Jedi without hesitation,” said the Emperor. “Why bring me this woman?”

Vader stood beside his master, staring at a security holo of the woman in her cell. She lay on the low bench, her feet propped up against the wall, a spill of brown hair falling over her shoulder. Her eyes were closed. She might be sleeping, but for the slow, gentle movement of her hand stroking the distended stomach which marked her advanced pregnancy.

“I thought you might find her more useful alive,” he said, his voice within the helmet distant and unconcerned. His words rumbled from the vocabulator in a clipped baritone.

“Did you?”

“I know of your interest in the next generation of Force sensitives,” Vader replied. “The child she carries is strong with the Force.”

“Perhaps. But she is a Jedi. Your orders were clear.”

Show no mercy.

“She is not a Jedi,” he said carefully. “She forsook the Order years ago.”

“A trivial distinction. She was an anointed Jedi Knight in her time. The ways of the Jedi live on with her.” The Emperor sneered. “This is not a conversation I thought needed to be had with you, Lord Vader.”

“Very well. What of the child?”

“What of it?”

Vader ground his teeth together and did not try to hide his frustration from his master. “You are not interested in the child?” he responded. “What of the missions on which you have sent the Inquisitorius? Is this not the very thing you have been looking for?”

“Those missions are not of your concern, my apprentice,” Palpatine said icily. “That is something I have entrusted to the Grand Inquisitor. Not you. Your task was to root out the hidden Jedi and exterminate them.”

“I merely thought—”

“I did not ask you to think.”

Vader clenched his fist. “Yes, my master.”

“When I gave the order for you to purge the Jedi Temple of the traitorous Jedi, you did just as I asked,” the Emperor said, turning away from the holo of the woman in the cell. He walked slowly back to his throne, though Vader was the only one present, and certainly did not need to be subjected to the weak old man routine. The slowness, therefore, was to allow him time to stew in memories.

“You cut down every last one. Even the younglings. I was very pleased with your obedience. Your ruthlessness. Your understanding of what must be done.”

“Yes, my master.” Vader turned from the holo as well and stood before Darth Sidious. He might have knelt. He didn’t.

“I do not like this softness, Lord Vader.” The Emperor waved one hand back toward the disregarded holo. “I know that you promised this woman mercy. For her and her child.”
“Only if she would be of use to you, master.”

Softness? Is that what he called it? Softness would have been let the woman escape, to let her remain in hiding, to allow her to give birth to her child and live with her husband in peace. To let her have the family that she had forsaken the Jedi Order for. Instead he had taken her from her husband and put her life and her child’s fate into the hands of his master.

He allowed his frustration to flow freely, let it radiate towards his master. The Emperor was being foolish if he dismissed the usefulness of the woman and her child. What’s worse, he was being petty. What did it matter if it was Vader or one of the Grand Inquisitor’s lackeys who brought the Emperor a valuable gift?

And weren’t many of those lackeys, not to mention the Grand Inquisitor himself, made up of former Jedi who had agreed to serve the Empire and forsake their former masters? This woman would gladly serve among their ranks if her child was spared. Her sentiment could be exploited. She could be forced to do any number of things with the lingering threat of her child’s wellbeing dangled over her head. And the child… well the Emperor could do whatever he wanted to with the child.

He had explained all of this already. There was no softness in this proposition.

“It is foolish of you to offer me a child strong in the Force,” Palpatine said, resting his hands on the arms of the throne languidly. “Do you not fear that I would grow too fond of such a child? Maybe such a promising child could serve as a replacement for my… damaged… apprentice.”

Vader made no response besides that of his even breathing. He could sense a trap behind these words. The Emperor was trying to get him to say something that he would regret.

“You should have cut the woman down immediately, all the more because of the child she carries. Suffer no rivals, Lord Vader.”

“Yes, my master.”

“The fact that you did not think of this indicates softness. Either of spirit or of mind.”

“Yes, my master.”

“Go now and complete the task I set for you,” the Emperor said, flicking one wrist carelessly toward the security holo. “See to it personally. I will be watching.”

“Yes, my master.”

Vader turned and walked away.

“I should think this would be easier for you, Vader,” said the Emperor to his back. “After all it will not be the first time you have killed a pregnant woman.”

Most people would not be perceptive enough to notice the slight hitch in Vader’s step before he resumed a deadly, purposeful stride. The Emperor was not most people.

“Please,” she said. It was the last thing that she said.

He stood over her body as her soul departed, dissipating into the Force. The acrid odor of burning flesh filled the room and snaked through his respirator, clogging the air inside his helmet with the nauseating stench. It reminded him, as it always did, of the Jedi temple. Of Mustafar. Sometimes he
thought it was the only smell that was left in this world.

Life still flickered within her womb. He felt it reaching out in the Force, shocked and uncomprehending at the life of its mother disappearing into the void. The mind behind the reach was barely sentient. Like an animal or a low level droid not gifted with a complex AI. The mind of a baby not yet ready for the world.

A mind that could have been ripe to be shaped into anything the Emperor willed.

It was a waste.

It was a waste and the only reason for it was a demonstration of Darth Sidious’s power over him, to show him once again that he was a slave, that whatever he willed was not the will of his master. To prove to them both that no matter how senseless an act, he would do it. He had no choice. He was only a weapon.

Everything that Palpatine had promised with his smiling human face and this was the truth of it all. This was Lord Vader’s reward for faithful service. A lifetime of faithful service without reprieve.

And he was still a fool who needed to be reminded. Again and again.

When the life inside the corpse was silenced he stood perfectly still, unmoving, for a very long time.

A black rage billowed inside the heart at the center of the cyborg and blinded him to everything. Outside he was a still dark statue. Inside he was a sandstorm that swept every last thought away.

Anakin was far, far away.

When he came back to himself he turned on his heel and left the cell. He left what was behind for someone else, some poor low level Imperial, to clean up. He stalked through the halls of the Imperial Palace and every being and droid knew not to get in his way.

The Emperor smiled to himself. The rage pleased him, even if it was directed at him. All the more, in fact, since it was an impotent rage. Vader raged because he knew his place.

He had been right, of course. The prospect of an unborn child given over to the Emperor was tantalizing. What could have been done with the child? All manner of ideas rushed through his head. The mother, too. The pair could have been a novel experiment.

But it was not the time to allow Vader his sentiment. For it had been pure sentiment, Sidious was sure of it. His apprentice was still very young. A child of only 25, a man somewhere still underneath the Sith Lord. No doubt he looked at the pregnant female and remembered Padmé… always that infernal Padmé Amidala.

She had been the key to stealing Vader away from the Jedi, but even her memory was a threat to Sidious’s ultimate control over his prize. Her death had been necessary, and the irony of allowing Vader to believe that he himself was responsible for killing her was delicious. Still, there was a sense of martyrdom about her memory that was unfortunate. He wished that things had been slightly different. He had originally planned on her living just a bit longer, long enough to truly betray her husband, in so unambiguous a manner as to make Vader have no remorse over her death.

Either way, he couldn’t let some pale imitation of his dearly departed child queen let Vader think there was hope for him yet.
There would be other interesting opportunities. This one was a loss but not a great one. It was a big galaxy. His Inquisitors would bring him something else he could use, sooner or later.

In the meantime, he was very pleased. Vader could throw a fit all he liked. The fact that he had obeyed his orders despite his anger proved that he was indeed broken, that he belonged to Palpatine. Forever.
Compassion of the Damned

My past has tasted bitter
For years now [x]

Dredaxia reached inside the travel bag and suddenly a line of blue energy flared, cutting through the fabric. It fell away onto the ground.

Anakin ignited his own lightsaber and took a step forwards. Fear and determination radiated from Dredaxia in equal measure, but she took a defensive stance and stepped back as he advanced.

“Really?” said Anakin. “You want to do this?”

“Release the children,” she said. Her voice shook.

“I think not.” He walked slowly down the front path. She kept backing up, lightsaber hovering in front of her, the vibration of the energy pulse doing little to hide the shakiness of her grip.

“I won’t leave without them.”

He pointed his blade at her steadily. “You come into my front yard, waving that thing around? Do you have a death wish?”

The yard was enclosed by a tall stone fence, with a singular exit to the street, not a gate but an open archway. Anakin knew that someone passing by was bound to see them, but in that moment he forgot to care.

“I have to protect them,” she said, knuckles white on the saber grip, the blue sheen of the blade lighting her hands and face in the darkness of the night.

“They’re in no danger.”

She shook her head. “Don’t act innocent. I know who you are. I know what you do.”

“Then put that away.”

She responded by instead lunging at him, sweeping her saber in a wide arc. He deflected the blade easily and sent her stumbling to the side, carried wayward by the momentum of her own swing.

She regained her footing and swung back. He leaned away from the arc of the blade and reached out to force push her. She went flying backwards into the vines that crept up the wall, her head hitting the stones beneath with a loud crack.

Her lightsaber fell from her hands, the blade dying midair, and he pulled it to him.

Now he had a saber in each hand and he stalked down the path to where she was struggling to her feet.

Dredaxia lifted a hand as if to use the force against him, but he pushed back and she was flattened
against the wall before crumpling downwards.

“Stay down,” he ordered, pointing his blade at her once again. “You are beaten. Don’t force me to kill you.”

“Do what you have to, Skywalker,” she spat, hatred in her eyes, even as she winced in pain and cradled her elbow in one hand. She sank down to the grass and rested her head against the vines. “Kill me like the monster you are.”

The anger that blazed up within her was strong, but she wasn’t trained in the dark side. She had not been taught how to use her anger; there was no control over it, no purposefulness.

Sidious had given her no tools to fight him. Just like Mara.

“How long has it been since you were a Jedi?” he asked, shaking her inert lightsaber. “Have you even used this in the past decade?”

“What do you care?”

“I’m a very curious person,” he said. “I have a lot of questions for you.”

He knew that Obi-Wan had come outside, even though the older man was silent on the front steps. He turned his head to the side, not taking his attention fully from Dredaxia, and said, “I have this under control.”

Obi-Wan walked down the steps cautiously, taking each one with measured words, “Who is she?”

“Another one of the Emperor’s servants,” Anakin told him.

“I am the girls’ protector,” Dredaxia said.

“You can’t protect them while serving Darth Sidious,” Anakin said. “You’re serving the person they need protection from.”

“I was tasked with protecting them from you!” Dredaxia spat. “Youngling killer!”

Obi-Wan was circling them warily. Anakin shut his lightsaber off and looked down at her for a long moment, trying to remember her name. Her real name. He remembered the faces of people he had killed, but not always their names. “Trying to get yourself killed by goading me?” he asked finally. “Are you that afraid of him?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t bother lying to me...” It began with an N. Ner something. Ner...ella? Nerellu? That was it. “I could help you, Nerellu, you know. It doesn’t have to be this way.”

Her reaction hearing her name was violent revulsion, so sudden that he could feel it like a slap in the force. “Don’t call me that. That’s not my name. Not anymore.”

“Fine,” he agreed, “I don’t care what you call yourself. But you don’t have to fight me. You don’t have to die.”

He had said the same words to her in a different life. They had turned out to be false, of course, but then again this wasn’t that life, was it?

“I’m not the Emperor’s toy anymore,” he said. “You don’t have to be either.”
She just shook her head.

“You could have your daughter back.”

Her eyes widened and her mouth fell open for a moment, but then a grim expression clamped down over her face and she shook her head even more vehemently. Angry tears fell onto her cheeks.

“She’s dead,” she whispered. “Dead.”

“We both know that’s not true,” he replied, turning to point with her saber back at the house. “She’s inside, and she’s the one you came to get. Mara means nothing to you.”

“He killed her soul.”

He noticed a trickle of blood running down the back of her neck, circling around her throat and collecting in the dip of her collarbone.

“Then why are you here? Trying to save a girl you think is dead inside?” he asked, allowing the first creep of frustration to enter his voice. Everyone was always trying to play games with him.

She didn’t answer, only pressed her lips together and squeezed her eyes shut.

Obi-Wan approached her carefully, and though she cracked open her eyes and shied away, he knelt down and put one hand on her shoulder. With the other he tipped her head to the side to inspect the injury on the back, where she had hit the stones. The fact that she allowed this with minimal cringing surprised Anakin, but then, Obi-Wan was doing his best to exude calm and compassion. He wondered if she knew who Obi-Wan was. She would have to remember him from being on the Jedi Council, back when she had left the Order to get married.

As he should have.

“We should go inside,” Anakin said, glancing towards the street. The stone fence and the way the house was set back from the road offered some privacy, but curious neighbors could still peer over the wall or through the archway. Someone possibly already had, and he hoped no one was calling the Breelden authorities yet.

“What are you planning to do with her?” Obi-Wan asked. He shrugged out of his robe and held it to the back of her bleeding head.

“Question her,” said Anakin, clipping both lightsabers to his belt.

“Then what?” Obi-Wan pressed as he pulled Dredaxia to her feet.

“Depends on the answers.”

She glanced at him fearfully, but allowed Obi-Wan to guide her towards the house. Anakin could tell that some kind of lecture was brewing underneath Obi-Wan’s surface, but for the moment the Jedi made no protest, likely since he also understood that the front yard was not the place to have a debate.

Inside, the lower level of the house was empty except for the droids. “Mistress Padmé has taken the children upstairs,” said Threepio.

“Watch her,” Anakin told Obi-Wan needlessly, sweeping past Threepio towards the stairs.

“What are you going to do?”
“Get Mara and Faisellu.”

Obi-Wan opened his mouth as if to say something, but Anakin was already halfway up the stairs, ignoring him.

He went to the twins’ bedroom and waved the door open. Padmé was inside with all four children, who were scattered around the room.

Mara was still hovering close to Luke, which irked him in a way he didn’t stop to explore. Leia was sitting with Padmé, and Faisellu sat alone in the corner.

“Your ‘aunt’ is here,” he said. “Come with me.”

“No,” Mara protested, but he had run out of patience. Anakin walked over to her and picked her up, throwing her over his shoulder.


“It’s alright,” said Padmé, quickly getting up and putting a hand on him. “Everything will be fine.”

Anakin was already walking out of the room, ignoring Mara’s attempts to punch and kick him into dropping her. She was a tiny thing that weighed next to nothing, and her fists felt like feathers on his back.

“Stay here,” Padmé instructed the twins in a voice that brooked no argument. She started to follow Anakin, but he turned and jerked his head towards Faisellu, so she reached out to take the girl by the hand and pull her along out of the room. Luckily, Faisellu seemed to want to follow Mara more than she feared where they were going.

Downstairs Obi-Wan was seated with Dredaxia, still pressing his cloak to her head. She looked up but her eyes skittered away from Faisellu.

Anakin plopped Mara down onto the couch and turned to Padmé. “You better make sure the twins stay in their room,” he said, not trusting Luke or Leia to resist the urge to come downstairs.

Padmé shook her head, however, meeting his eye with a determined look. “Don’t worry about them,” she said. “I want to know what’s going on here.” She nodded to Dredaxia.

Anakin didn’t push the matter. He turned to Dredaxia, with a hand still on Mara’s shoulder in case she decided to bolt.

“What were your exact instructions from the Emperor?” he asked.

“I’ve never met the Emperor,” she said dully.

“Then whoever you received your instructions from on the Emperor’s behalf.”

Her eyes fluttered closed.

“She hit her head rather hard,” Obi-Wan said with concern. “Perhaps this should wait.”

“Threepio,” Anakin said, and the droid stepped forward. “Get some ice and bandages.”

“Why bother,” Dredaxia said as Threepio rushed to comply. “You’re going to kill me anyway.”

“Don’t tell me what I’m going to do. Instead tell me everything you know about your assignment
here. Let’s start with something easy. How long ago did it begin?”

For a moment he thought she would continue to resist, but she looked to Faisellu and then answered, “Five years ago.”

“What were you told?”

“That I was to set up a life here, and await further orders down the road. In the meantime, I was to get to know her,” she motioned to Padmé, “as much as possible.”

“And you knew who we were?”

“Yes. I was informed, though I would have recognized you anyway. You were all very famous, you know.”

She fixed Anakin with an accusatory stare and added, “He showed me what you did. At the Jedi Temple. He played the security holograms for me, so that I would know exactly who you really were.”

“The Emperor showed you that?”

“The Grand Inquisitor. I told you, I’ve never met the Emperor. I only ever dealt with the Inquisitors.”

“Is that why you agreed to work for them? Because of the holograms?” Padmé asked. “Did this Grand Inquisitor tell you who ordered the attack?”

“I am aware that the Emperor ordered the sack of the temple,” she retorted. “I was shown the holograms to erase any doubt I had that Anakin Skywalker, great hero of the Jedi Order, was capable of murdering children. It was not to convince me that the Emperor was a friend to the Jedi. Also, I am not ‘working for’ the Emperor. I’m no lover of the Empire.”

“Then I don’t understand.”

Dredaxia looked from Padmé to Faisellu, whose hand she still held.

“I should have killed her.” The words fell out of her mouth like stones.

“Excuse me?” Padmé said, shocked. Obi-Wan just raised an eyebrow.

Mara perked up, looking around with a curious frown. Faisellu barely reacted.

Threepio returned with the ice and bandages, which Obi-Wan took. He laid his bloodied robe to the side and set to work wrapping the gauze around her head. The droid had also brought a bottle of water, since he was always attuned to the needs of the organics. Dredaxia pushed it away, but once Threepio began to enthusiastically explain to her the necessity of keeping her hydration levels up, she acquiesced and took a sip. She brushed Obi-Wan away and reached up to hold the ice to her own head.

Anakin let her have a few moments free of questions, but before long he said, “We all want to protect our children. There’s no shame in doing anything you have to in order keep them alive.”

She looked skeptical at his understanding words, so he added, “We don’t have to be enemies. Everyone hates the Emperor here.”

“I don’t,” said Mara. “The Emperor is a good man. A wise man.”
She was ignored.

“You seem to think yourself a good person,” Dredaxia said to Anakin. “You expect me to believe that you care about what happens to me, but you don’t.”

“I don’t think I’m a good person,” Anakin denied.

“Just kill me,” she sighed. “Be done with it.”

“Why do you want to die so badly?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” She waved a hand towards Faisellu. “You know she’s my daughter, apparently. Surely you can see what they did to her.”

Padmé looked at Dredaxia in horror, and turned Faisellu away, shielding her defensively, as if she could deflect words with her body. Faisellu seemed unconcerned, however, and said, “You’re not my mother. My mother is dead.”

She pointed to Anakin. “He killed my mother.”

Anakin closed his eyes. He couldn’t afford to let that get to him. Not right now. How does she know? he wondered.

“No, child, I’m not dead,” said Dredaxia sadly. “And I am your mother.”

Faisellu just looked at her with narrowed eyes and said nothing.

“That’s the first thing you’ve said to her,” Mara spoke up again, but this time she wasn’t ignored. Everyone looked at her, and she clarified, “I noticed. Ever since we came here you avoided her, only ever spoke directly to me. I thought you just disliked children.”

“I don’t have a mother’s instinct,” Dredaxia said. “Not like you,” she added, glancing towards Padmé. “I don’t know what to do with children. And I waited for so long to get her back… but when she came she was… wrong…”

“She’s not ‘wrong’,” Anakin said with sudden harshness, and it made everyone jump a little. He knew what Dredaxia was getting at, what she was bothered by but couldn’t put into words, so he put it into words for her. “I know the kinds of things the Emperor does to the Force sensitive children the Inquisitors find. The kinds of things that make killing them seem like a mercy. The kinds of things that leave a mark, forever. But your daughter is alive and she’s not in the Emperor’s hands anymore.”

He fixed Dredaxia with a glare. “Are you just going to sit there and whine about what a terrible failure of a mother you are and insist that I kill you? Because I don’t want to, I really don’t.”

“Please,” she said, and he took a step backwards, bumping into the glass table and knocking the holoprojector onto the floor.

Obi-Wan looked concerned at his unexpected clumsiness and asked, “Are you alright, Anakin?”

“I’m fine.” He silently cursed himself for letting that one word get to him. “I’m perfectly fine,” he ground the words out between his teeth.

Padmé let go of Faisellu and went to him, putting her hand on his arm, her touch and her presence soothing, as it always had been.
Faisellu stood for a moment alone, adrift, before taking a step towards Mara. She slid onto the couch next to the other girl and reached out for her. Mara hesitated, but took her hand and held it. Faisellu gazed doubtfully back at Dredaxia.

“Yes, everyone look at me like I’m some kind of monster,” said Dredaxia flatly. “I deserve it. I let them take my baby, I let them take her and torture her… Now it’s like she’s dead. I know she’s alive, I can see that, but you understand, don’t you?”

She looked to Obi-Wan, who still sat next to her, looking at her kindly. “In the Force, you can feel it, like I do, can’t you? Death is all over her signature.”

Anakin wondered if that was because he had killed her in the other life. But if that were the reason, the same should apply to Padmé, to the twins, to Dredaxia herself. No, it was something the Emperor had done.

“The other Force sensitive children all died,” he said. “Didn’t they?” It was true in the other life, so likely true in this one as well.

“Not me,” said Mara.

“He spared you,” Anakin told her. “Whatever he might have had done to you is nothing compared to Faisellu and the others.”

“That’s not true. I’m just stronger.”

He sighed at her and said, “I’m not going to argue with you. The Emperor treated you with relative kindness; that was part of his experiment on you. He told me so.”

“When?”

“That’s not important.”

She scowled. He could not deny that her anger made him happy, so to drive the point home, Anakin added, “Faisellu is stronger than you could ever hope to be.”

“I am not,” protested Faisellu. “Mara is the best. She’s perfect in every way. She deserves to be the Emperor’s apprentice, not you, not anyone else. Mara is the strongest.”

“No one deserves to be the Emperor’s apprentice,” Anakin said drily. “I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy.”

“That’s because you’re a traitor,” Mara spat. “He gave you the highest honor and you betrayed him.”

“You have a lot to learn, Mara.” He realized that she had lost all the fear she had felt before when she looked at him, as if she had finally realized he did not want to kill her. It made her even bolder.

She would make the perfect charge for Ahsoka to look after. Soon.

“You were promised your daughter back,” he said, turning back to Dredaxia. “In return for what?”

“I told you already,” Dredaxia lifted her shoulders in a listless shrug. “I was to make a life here. Find a job, buy a house, and await further instruction. It came about a month ago. I was contacted, told I would be receiving the children, and given the story of being their aunt. My job was to give them a plausible home and background… to be their guardian but for the most part to just stay out of their way.” A thin smile spread across her face. “To stay out of Mara’s way.”
“So they didn’t tell you that Faisellu was supposed to be some kind of sacrifice to turn my children to
the dark side?”

Her eyes flashed with brief vigor, a spark of hatred, before she blinked and her eyes clouded into a
thousand-yard stare. “No,” she said. “I thought Mara was here for some purpose and that Fai…
Faisellu was my payment for cooperating. The Inquisitor told me I would get her back someday. I
thought he had kept his word.”

_Sidious never lets anyone get off that easily_, Anakin thought. He watched as Dredaxia released a sigh
and let her head droop against Obi-Wan’s shoulder. Her eyes fluttered closed again.

“Don’t fall asleep on us,” Anakin said. “We’re not done talking.”

She opened her eyes. “What else is there to talk about?”

“I’m trying to give you an out. An escape.”

“From what?”

“From death, despite the fact that you seem so eager for it. You can take your daughter and leave, as
long as you don’t go back to the Emperor.”

“I can never escape the Emperor. None of us can.”

“Yes, we can,” Padmé said. “We did it.”

“Did you?”

“He doesn’t have us yet,” said Anakin. “He failed. You see, he didn’t think I would recognize Mara,
he didn’t think I knew her, but he was wrong. He’s not all knowing or all powerful. You don’t have
to go back to him.”

“I wasn’t expecting to. I was expecting you to kill me.”

“I refuse to have your death on my conscience. I’m sorry, but you’re going to have to figure out how
to live, one way or the other.”

“Is this your line in the sand? You massacred the Jedi but you refuse to kill a pathetic
straggler?”

“I’m not a tool you can use to commit suicide.”

“Is that the problem? If I was begging for mercy, asking you to spare my life, you would be more
inclined to kill me?”

(Please.)

“You know, Nerellu, I don’t care what you think of me. I’ve tried to be kind to you. I’ve tried. I
won’t kill you, I won’t hurt your daughter. I just want you to leave. You can go back to the Emperor
if you want to. What are you going to tell him that he doesn’t already know? Go to him and tell him
that I have Mara Jade and he’s never getting her back, and that he’s never getting my children, no
matter what he does. On second thought, I have an even better idea. I’ll record a hologram for him
telling him exactly what I think of his latest brilliant scheme, and you can deliver it. Or you can do
the sane thing and try to escape from him as well.”

She blinked slowly.
“You’re letting me go?”

“I’m making you go. I’m pushing you out the door.”

“With Faisellu?”

He nodded. “With Faisellu.”

“I don’t want to go with her,” said Faisellu. “I want to go wherever Mara goes.”

“That’s not an option. Mara stays with us. Your place is with your mother.”

“Why can’t I go back to the Emperor if I want to?” Mara complained.

“Because you’re stupid enough to actually want to,” Anakin told her. He was rewarded with a fiery green glare, which he returned unflinchingly. “You’ll thank me one day.”

“No one should go anywhere tonight,” said Obi-Wan. “It’s late, and she has a head injury.”

“We’re all leaving first thing in the morning,” Anakin decided. He turned abruptly and walked out of the room, heading towards the stairs. “I’m going to go check on Luke and Leia.”

When he opened their door, he found the twins draped out across different pieces of furniture with awkward casualness. They were breathing too hard, as if they had just finished dashing back into the room and thrown themselves down. Luke pivoted in his chair, holding a datapad upside down in shaking hands, and said, “Yes, Father?”

“You were listening, weren’t you.”

Leia sat up on her bed, shaking her pretense off like a robe before battle, and said, “Of course we were listening. Did you expect anything less?”

He could tell that she was angry. She was practically vibrating.

He opened his mouth to reprimand her for her sass, but she cut him off by asking, “Is it true?”

“What true?”

“That you’re a murderer.”

For a moment he stopped breathing. He suddenly couldn’t remember how. In the silence of his nonresponse, Leia pressed, “She said that you massacred the Jedi. That can’t be true. You are a Jedi.”

“But you didn’t deny it,” Luke said quietly. “No one did. Not Mother. Not Uncle Ben. You all kept going like it was just a fact.”

“I…” the words died in his throat. There was no oxygen to fuel them. Not like this.

“Tell us it’s all lies,” said Leia.

Anakin didn’t say anything.

Luke stood up and the datapad dropped from his hand onto the floor. “No,” he said. “It’s not true. It can’t be.”
Anakin looked into his eyes and said, “I’m sorry, Luke. I didn’t want you to find out this way.”

Luke looked at him with utter betrayal, then pushed past him and ran down the stairs. Anakin let himself be shifted to the side. He would have to go after Luke, he knew, but first he looked at his daughter. She was the opposite of Luke, standing perfectly still, stiff and unmoving.

“Leia,” he said, “I’m—”

“No!” she shouted, coming out of her stupor. She turned her back to him and retreated to the opposite end of the bedroom.

Anakin reached out a hand but then stopped. He was torn. He didn’t want to just leave Leia without saying more, but what could he actually say? He couldn’t deny it, he couldn’t justify it or explain it to her. And Luke was running away.

He turned without a word and jogged quickly down the stairs, looking around to verify that Luke wasn’t just in the living room.

Padmé met him. “Luke—” she began, but Anakin shook his head and told her he knew, and that she needed to go to Leia.

He went out the front door and down the path to the street. He paused under the arch and looked back and forth. Luke was running with the determination of someone trying to escape a nightmare, but he was small and had not gotten very far. Anakin could see him down the road, head down and elbows swinging out to the sides as he ran, ran, ran.

“Luke!” he shouted, but his son didn’t slow down.

Anakin followed him, running past quiet houses with blossoming osa flowers, serene in the evening despite all that had happened. He felt as if their street should be on fire, every house ablaze, or that there should be thunder and lightning raining jagged down from the sky. But there was none of that.

When he caught him, Luke he had gotten all the way to the bottom of the hill and was breathing heavy from his sprint. “Let me go,” he cried as Anakin reached forward, grabbing at his arm to make him stop. Luke yanked his arm away violently enough that Anakin fell to his knees on the pavement with a bone-jarring thud, but he did not let go. His weight forced Luke to skid to a stop because he could not drag his father along behind him.

“Luke, please,” he said, pulling him into a shaky embrace.


“I know, I know, but you can’t. It’s not safe.” Anakin didn’t know if there were any more undercover Imperials waiting in the darkness to enact a contingency plan, but he couldn’t take the risk. Suddenly everyone he had known and lived beside for the past ten years could be working for the Emperor.

“I don’t know who you are,” said Luke.

“Just come back to the house. To your mother.”

“Did she know?” The question came out in a strangulated gasp.

“I don’t know any of you anymore.”

“I’m sorry, Luke, I’m sorry,” was all he could say, and he rocked back, kneeling in the street under the glow of the lumenglobes that lined the sidewalk. He held onto Luke with a death grip, unwilling and unable to let go. Luke just cried, slumping in defeat and sobbing angry tears against his father’s shoulder.


But Anakin didn’t have any answers to give.

No one slept, but the house was quiet. Luke lay flat on his back, staring up at the ceiling, listening to Leia’s breathing in the bed nearby.

He’d been told to sleep, that they had a busy day tomorrow. As if he could sleep. He replayed the overheard conversations in his head, thought of every lie that he had built his life and his identity upon.

He got out of bed after a while, after what seemed like hours of sleepless silence, and went over to sit on the edge of Leia’s bed. She was on her side, face to the wall.

There had been talk recently of moving them into separate bedrooms, of remodeling the basement level of the house to make more room. Luke didn’t quite understand the need for this, though Mother said stuff like “getting too old” and “you’ll want your privacy” and other curious things. All he knew was that he and Leia had been together forever, for their entire lives, even before birth. Sometimes she annoyed him, sometimes he felt exasperation or even jealousy. But he couldn’t imagine life without her close by, at all times.

And now he felt as if she were the only person in this house that he knew. The only one who had never lied to him.

“She,” he whispered.

“What,” she said.

“What is going to happen to us now?”

She turned over slowly.

“I don’t know.”

“I feel like everything is upside down,” he said. “It’s like a bad dream.”

She stared at him for a moment, then turned back over. “Let me sleep,” she said, her voice very quiet.

He looked at her for a moment, saddened. Who would he talk to if Leia would not speak to him? But he understood something of her weariness. He wished he could turn his eyes to the wall and wait for sleep to come.

But he couldn’t.

He got up and left the room.

He made his way quietly through the house, avoiding the adults. Father was gone, along with Artoo,
so that made it easier. He had left earlier, and Luke had overheard him saying he was going to prepare their transportation off the planet. Luke could guess from that that he had gone down to the rental storage garage where he kept a refurbished spice freighter under tarps. It was a Corellian G9 Rigger freighter that Father had bought off a junk dealer and dubbed the *Twilight II*. Luke had sometimes gone there with him to work on it or take it out for periodic runs around the planetary orbit to keep it in working order.

He had known, somewhere in the back of his mind, that this freighter’s sole purpose was to be a getaway vehicle if they ever had to run from the Empire again. But he hadn’t dwelt on that before, only enjoying the time spent with his father and the small taste of space flight.

Mother was moving restlessly around, packing things with Threepio at her side. Uncle Ben sat in silence in the living room, meditating, but his true purpose was to guard the house, and keep their “prisoners” from going anywhere.

They had been divided up and locked in different rooms.

The woman who was apparently not Faisellu’s aunt but her mother had been put upstairs in the small loft room that was usually set aside for Uncle Ben. Faisellu was with her.

Mara was in the basement, in a storage closet.

Luke crept past Mother on his way downstairs, and was able to skirt the living room entirely.

He knew all the keycodes for the house, even the ones he wasn’t supposed to. He entered the small room and saw her sitting cross-legged on the floor, almost a mirror of how Ben had been posed when Luke glanced in through the doorway on his way past. The room was dark except for a sliver of moonlight that streamed down from the narrow window well at the top of wall. She looked up, the light falling across her face.

“Have you come to help me escape?” she asked, but her voice was flat and devoid of any actual hope.

He ignored the question, letting the door lock behind him as he sunk to the floor opposite where she sat. He realized that he didn’t know what to say, that he didn’t really have anything to say. He just couldn’t sleep and he needed to talk to her, alone, without all the adults hovering around.

“Why are you here, Luke?” she asked, when her goading question went unanswered for too long.

“You lied to me.”

“I did.”

“You pretended to be my friend.”

She cocked her head to the side. “Yes,” she said slowly. “We were friends.”

“No. We’re not friends at all. You’re a spy, an Imperial… everything you said about wanting to be friends was a lie.”

She was silent, her face unreadable in the near dark. “Why does that matter?”

He frowned. “You lied,” he repeated.

“So we could become friends.”
“You work for the Emperor.”

“And he told me to become your friend.”

“That’s not how friendship works,” he protested.

“It’s not?”

He shook his head emphatically. “You become friends with someone because you like them and you want to hang out with them, not because it’s a job for your evil master.”

“So you’re angry at me.”

“No,” he sighed, searching his emotions, trying pinpoint exactly what it was he felt when he thought about Mara lying to him, about everyone lying to him. “I’m sad. I’m disappointed.”

“You shouldn’t have expected so much, then.”

“Is that really a lot? All I thought was that you were actually just lonely, maybe, just a kid who lost her parents and didn’t know anyone. And that you were like me and Leia, so we had something in common.”

“But I am and we do.”

“No.”

She shrugged carelessly. “We are strong in the Force. The Emperor knows we’re special, he honors us with his interest. He gives us the chance to prove ourselves. That’s enough to base a friendship on.” A smile played across her face, ghostly in the silver light. “Or a rivalry.”

He looked at her in disgust. How could she talk about the Emperor that way? He was pure evil. “I’m not honored,” he said.

“You should be.”

“He killed your parents.”

Her eyes flashed briefly. “So your father says. And he’s full of lies, isn’t he? Do you want me to tell you more about your father?”

“No.”

“I’d think you’d be angry with him, not me. He’s been lying to you a lot longer than I have.”

Luke pushed aside the overwhelming exhaustion and sadness he felt when he thought about Father, and said, “What does that have to do with you?”

“Nothing, I suppose. But at least my master never lies to me. I know who I am.”

“So do I,” he said, getting to his feet. He could hear someone coming.

She looked up at him. “We could still be friends,” she said.

He almost laughed in surprise, in disbelief. “I could never trust you again,” he said. “We can’t ever be friends. Not now.”
The thought made his heart feel heavy. They had never been completely at ease or the closest of friends, but for a brief time he had almost enjoyed her company. The fact that she was like him and Leia, that she could use the Force and had secrets in her life, had made him feel like he could possibly be himself around her in a way that he couldn’t with any of the other kids. He and Leia had always been slightly off and apart from the other children at school, even though he tried to be friendly and outgoing. They all found the twins a little weird and weren’t afraid to tell them so. Mara had been weird enough herself, he had thought, not to mind. But it had not been so simple after all.

“Then what did you come here for?” Mara asked, and if he could have trusted anything about her he might have thought she was hurt.

He shook his head. “I don’t know.”

The door opened, and the light that flooded in from the hallway was blinding in its harsh electric falsity after he had become accustomed to the soft moonglow.

“Luke, come out of there,” said Father. He didn’t sound angry or even surprised, but there was no room for argument.

Luke walked past him and saw Uncle Ben standing just outside the doorway. Ben put a hand on Luke’s shoulder and gave him a kind smile and a nod, then steered him away from the storage room. Luke looked back over his shoulder as Father went into the room, wondering briefly, automatically now, if Mara would be safe.

But then he shook that thought away and looked up at Ben. “Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked.

“It wasn’t my place,” said Ben. “It was something that your parents had to discuss with you and Leia when you were old enough.”

How old was old enough to find out that your father had actually massacred the Jedi, had worked for the evil Emperor, for reasons Luke could not understand because they still hadn’t told him?

“All this time you’ve been telling me about the Jedi way, about using the Force,” said Luke. “And my father was the one who killed them.”

Ben just sighed.

“You didn’t have anything to do with it, did you?” Luke asked shakily. He would never have thought it possible, before. But now…

“No, Luke. I did not. Though I do regret that I did not do more to prevent it.”

“Why did he do it?”

“It’s not my place, Luke. Not my place,” he repeated, as if trying to convince himself. “You will have to talk to your mother and father.”

Luke lowered his head. He thought of the way all his father could do was cry and apologize when he asked why. There didn’t seem to be any answers. How could there be, for something so terrible? Something so evil and wrong?

Mara watched Luke’s father warily as he sat down on a box. He had turned the light on in the room and she didn’t like it. She had been happier in the dark. It had felt safer.
“I should apologize to you,” he said after a moment, and she tried to hide her surprise. She still automatically tried to hide everything she felt around Lord Vader, thinking of her master’s warnings. But she had begun to think that the Emperor didn’t actually know Vader as well as he thought he did, since he had said his wayward apprentice would not hesitate to kill her, and all the man had done was hesitate.

She didn’t respond to his statement, only looked at him silently, waiting.

“It was unfair to call you stupid. I know that it can be hard to leave the Emperor. You think that you have to go back to him, because that’s all you’ve ever known and you think that’s all there is to life. But it doesn’t have to be that way.”

“I’m your prisoner. It’s not as if I have a choice.”

“I wasn’t talking about actually going back to him,” said Vader. “Because of course I’m not going to let you go. I mean that you don’t have to think of him as your master, anymore. You could decide to not want to go back to him.”

Mara turned these words over in her head, trying to figure out what he was playing at. It sounded more like he was talking about himself, than her.

“My loyalty is unshakable,” she said, drawing herself up proudly. “I am the Emperor’s hand.” Or, she admitted to herself, I would have been if I had succeeded here. This assignment had been her great test, and she feared that she had failed.

She had failed by allowing her cover to be blown, but she would not fail by turning her back on her master and forsaking him out of cowardice.

“You do understand that he doesn’t tolerate failure,” said Vader, as if he could read her thoughts. “If I were to let you leave and return to him, he would probably kill you. Or worse.”

“You’re trying to frighten me,” she said. “I may be a child but I’m not like your kids, I’m not naïve, and you can’t scare me.”

He was quiet, and she could sense that he was fighting against the irritation that swelled at her words. It gave her some small satisfaction that she could needle the great and legendary Darth Vader. Perhaps her master really did venerate him for no good reason, after all.

He lifted his hand and she flinched. She cursed herself for that. He lowered his hand.

“If you think that your master cares about you or deserves your loyalty, then you are naïve,” he said at length. “You think you are a trusted servant, maybe even important enough to be his hand. But what you don’t understand is that you are actually a slave. He stole you from your parents.”

“He raised me up to meet my destiny,” said Mara.

“That’s what he tells you.”

“No, the Force tells me that. I knew before he ever came for me that I would go with him.”

“And he rewarded your compliance by killing your parents.”

“You lie.”

“Mara.”
“What do you want? What are you going to do with me?”

He sighed. “I know someone who can take care of you,” he told her. “A friend. She is coming to get you.”

Mara scoffed silently at this, allowing her disdain to show plainly on her face. “I’ll escape,” she said. “I’ll kill this someone and find my way back to my master.”

“Have you ever killed a person, little one?” he asked, and the gentleness in his voice was enraging. How dare he condescend to her like this?

She put her chin up. “Almost as many as you.”

“I doubt that. I’ve killed a lot of people.”

She looked at the floor. She had not yet had the opportunity to kill anyone, but admitting that to Vader seemed shameful somehow.

“You don’t actually want to kill Faisellu,” he said, ignoring her silence. “Or offer her up to be killed or however you want to put it. I know a thing or two about wanting to kill someone, and you don’t. You want to please your master but I don’t think you really understand what he asks of you.”

She ground her teeth together and balled up her fists. “Stop acting like you know me.”

“You’re not a killer yet, so maybe there’s hope for you to not become the monster the Emperor would make you into,” he said calmly. Her lack of control seemed to please him.

“What do you care?”

“When you’re older you might understand,” he said, uttering the most infuriating phrase an adult of any species could say.

She shot him a death glare.

“You know,” he said, conversationally. “the thing about killing is that you don’t just kill someone else. You destroy a little part of your own self every time. And at first you might not notice, or you might even convince yourself that you’re getting stronger. But you’re not.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“I’ve killed a lot of people who are alive, now,” he said. “But the part of me that I killed, that’s still dead.” He said it with a sort of wonder, looking up towards the window instead of down at her. “That’s a terrible thing, Mara.”

She wondered what kind of strange Jedi nonsense he was spouting. It made her feel deeply uncomfortable.

“I don’t know why you’re telling me this.”

“Because I think you need to hear it.” He stood up and she remained very still. He wasn’t scary, she told herself, he was just a strange man who talked too much. “Anyway,” he said, taking a step towards the door, “I’m not very good at this whole ‘imparting wisdom’ thing so I don’t expect you to understand. Ahsoka will be here soon… and no, you’re not escaping from her. She’s more than a match for you.”

Mara frowned but said nothing. Whoever this Ahsoka was, Mara was determined not to make life
easy for her. She had to get back to her master before he thought that she had defected like Vader had. Or worse, before he decided that she was unworthy of forgiveness because she had failed and let herself be captured for too long.

Vader reached to open the door, said, “And Mara? Don’t ever talk to my son again,” then left.
Padmé took a deep breath and looked to Obi-Wan, who nodded almost imperceptibly.

“Anakin,” she said. “We need to have a talk.”

He turned to her, silhouetted by the blue of hyperspace out the viewport. They were en route to the Carvaggo system to meet Ahsoka, to hand over Mara, and the three children were divided up in separate bunks in the back of the *Twilight II*.

Dredaxia and Faisellu had been left behind on Osallao. Their fate rested in Dredaxia’s own hands, whether she chose to go back to the Emperor or escape with her daughter, or do something else entirely; something terrible and rash. Padmé had trouble shaking the idea that the unstable woman would choose to end her own life and her daughters’ rather than risk recapture by the Empire. But Anakin didn’t seem to think so. “She loves her daughter,” he’d said, as if he knew her personally, or had some special insight into a woman he’d only just met. “She’s just forgotten, but she’ll remember.”

Obi-Wan had wanted to take the pair with them, for safekeeping, but Anakin was adamant that they must go separate ways. He told Obi-Wan to decide who he wanted to accompany. Obi-Wan had made a show of looking thoughtful, but in the end he had followed the Skywalkers. There was really very little question who he would chose.

Padmé wondered at what made Anakin so sure that Dredaxia would make the right choices, but she agreed that they should go their own way. A conviction was growing in her that perhaps Anakin was more right than he knew. They were safest on their own, apart from the Skywalkers, just the two of them. It made them less of a target.

“We’re concerned about you,” she began, now that they were locked into hyperspace and she had Anakin’s full attention.

He glanced at Obi-Wan then back to her, wariness stealing over his features.

“You have been acting somewhat strange,” said Obi-Wan with more bluntness than Padmé would have liked.

“It’s been a strange day,” Anakin replied.

Padmé shook her head. “It’s more than that. It’s been a hard day for all of us. And we’ve barely had time to really stop and think, besides making plans for what to do next… But there are some things that I need you to explain. To help us understand.”

Anakin swiveled around in the pilot’s seat and narrowed his eyes defensively. “You’ve been
discussing me while I was away?”

“It’s not like that.”

Well, it was, she had to admit to herself. When he had left to go prepare the spaceship for departure they had compared notes, confirming that they had both noticed the same irregularities. But Anakin was incredibly sensitive on the topic of people talking about him behind his back, so it wasn’t the best way to lead into this discussion.

Anakin propped his elbows on the seat rests and folded his hands loosely over his chest, trying (and failing) to look nonchalant. “What is it, then?” he asked.

“You seem to know things that you cannot possibly know,” said Obi-Wan. “Some of the things you said to Mara and to Dredaxia. Knowledge and certainty of the Emperor’s motivations and actions regarding Mara, in particular. But she was not even born when we fled Mustafar. The same goes for Faisellu and the other children you seem to think the Emperor has been collecting and performing experiments on.”

Padmé watched Anakin closely as Obi-Wan spoke. He tilted his head back and his eyes went half-lidded, which was not a great sign. Perhaps it wasn’t the best idea to include Obi-Wan in this discussion.

“We know that you have been here on Osallao this whole time,” she said. “And yet you speak as if you’ve been by the Emperor’s side.”

“I was just saying things to rattle Mara,” Anakin told her. “To shake her confidence in the Emperor.”

“Were you?” Obi-Wan said skeptically. “What about Dredaxia? You seemed to recognize her.”

“So? She was a Jedi Knight. I was a Jedi Knight. Our paths crossed. You should have remembered her, too. She left the Order during the early days of the Clone Wars. She met a man when she was stationed on Christophsis and fell in love and decided to leave the Order and the War to start a family. She stood before you in the Council chambers and announced her resignation. That’s not something I was likely to forget, considering my own situation.”

Anakin rattled off the information without making eye contact, nervously reciting it like a lie. Everything he said made sense, including the fact that Dredaxia had stuck in his mind for defecting to get married. So she wondered why it felt so false.

“Unfortunately I don’t remember her,” said Obi-Wan. “Perhaps she made her grand exit when I was not available to sit in on the Council meeting. And I don’t remember seeing her on Christophsis.”

Anakin swiveled around to face the viewport again. “I guess your memory is going, old man.”

Padmé got up and placed herself between Anakin and the void of hyperspace. “We’re not trying to interrogate you. I just wish you would be honest. If you know something about the Empire that we don’t… if you have some kind of contact there… please, talk to me.”

“You think I have spies in the Empire? When would I have time for this? My only priority all these years has been my family. This is ridiculous.”

“We just want to understand.”

“I don’t know why you won’t accept what I told you.”
Obi-Wan shifted in his seat, fixed Anakin with a look that reminded Padmé of years and years ago, when Anakin was still a Padawan, and said, “There’s more. I have spoken to Ahsoka.”

“You’ve been busy. And?”

“She told me about the information you supplied to her. Very helpful, but very unusual. She couldn’t go into detail, of course, but she admitted that it was surprisingly extensive data about the inner workings of Palpatine’s Empire.”

Anakin was really starting to squirm now. He unlaced his fingers and gripped the sides of the chair instead. “I thought she would be more discreet.”

“She was,” Padmé tried to reassure him. “She was only answering Obi-Wan’s questions. We’re all your friends. Just please tell us, where did you get the information?” She reached out a soothing hand to touch his hair. His eyes remained fixed on Obi-Wan. He had gone very tense and still, as if preparing for a fight. “Whatever is going on, you don’t have to deal with it all yourself.”

“Why can’t you trust me?”

“I think you know the answer to that, Anakin,” said Obi-Wan, and Padmé shot him a warning look. He was not being helpful at all.

“I want you to trust me,” Padmé said, brushing her hand down his arm, trying to get him to focus on her instead of Obi-Wan. “No secret, no matter how well-intentioned, can be good for us. I need to know everything.”

He got up and retreated away from her touch. He stood with his back against the wall near the edge of the cockpit, and said, “Do you think this is really the best time for this? We’ll be rendezvousing with Ahsoka soon.”

“It’s the necessary time,” said Obi-Wan. “We have several more things to discuss, but not before you help us understand what is going on here.”

“Fine.” He crossed his arms over his chest, tapping the clasps along his right arm with irritation. “I know things because I come from the future.”

“Anakin, do be serious.”

“I am being serious. I come from an alternate future where I never left Mustafar with you two, where I stayed by the Emperor’s side for years and helped him rule the galaxy. That’s how I know things. Next topic?”

Padmé sighed and put her fingers to her temples. This had been a mistake. She should have spoken to him alone, without Obi-Wan there to be antagonizing. Somehow she had hoped that things had thawed between them enough for a reasonable discussion. It was a necessary hope for what she was about to propose, but now it seemed like everything was going to be a bitter argument.


Anakin just shrugged and returned his gaze defiantly.

“And what were we up to in this future where you were by the Emperor’s side?” pressed Obi-Wan.

“What about the twins? I’m terribly curious.”

He sounded terribly sarcastic. “Stop this,” said Padmé, to both of them. “Now you’re just fighting
“I’m not fighting, I’m answering your questions,” said Anakin. “I’m being completely honest and open, just like you asked.”

“Let him do this,” Obi-Wan told Padmé. “I am dying to hear what he comes up with.” Then, to Anakin, “Well? Tell us all about this alternate future. I’m listening.”

“I don’t know about you, Obi-Wan. You disappeared, went into hiding. But not before you chopped off all my limbs and left me to die on Mustafar,” Anakin said. He spoke the words with bitter relish, a dangerous gleam in his eyes. “You set me on fire.”

“Oh, delightful,” said Obi-Wan. “I’m glad I get to be such an outrageous villain in this story.”

“It’s not a story, it’s just what happened.”

“Right, of course. And what about Padmé?”

The vindictiveness went out of Anakin. He looked at Padmé, then dropped his gaze to the floor and said quietly, “She died.”

Obi-Wan seemed too worked up to notice his shift, and he retorted, “I suppose I murdered her in some horrible way, as well?”

“No,” Anakin said, “it was me.”

_He really believes this_, Padmé realized. Obi-Wan must have had the same revelation, because he had no biting words or sarcastic dismissals to offer.

“Is this what’s in your nightmares?” Padmé asked. It was the only explanation for such macabre imaginings. For years he had been having such terrible night terrors, dreams that left him shaking and unable to return to sleep. He would never tell her the exact nature of these dreams, except sometimes when he would gasp out that the Emperor had him again, the suit, the darkness. “It’s not real, Anakin. I don’t care how terrible or real these dreams might seem. None of it happened.”

He looked up, meeting her eyes for the first time since he had begun making declarations about time travel. “It did,” he said very sadly. “It all happened. I killed you, and Obi-Wan did his best to kill me, but I survived. Barely.” He sighed out a long breath and shut his eyes, resting his head against the cockpit wall. “I never thought I would say that to you.”

Obi-Wan was silent. He had begun to stroke his beard thoughtfully.

“Just dreams,” Padmé said. She crossed over to him, took his hands and pulled his arms around her. “Obi-Wan would never leave you to die, Anakin. And I don’t believe for a moment that you would ever kill me.”

Anakin looked down at her with a small, sad smile. He reached up to touch her face, holding her head tilted up towards him in both hands. She was conscious of how fragile she was, at that moment, how with just a twist and a jerk he could break her neck. But she trusted Anakin. She felt safe in his hands. She always had.

She knew that Anakin was capable of murder. And yet she still could not believe that he would harm her. Not her. Obi-Wan had once scolded her for her naïvety, but Anakin had proven her faith in him was not misplaced. He had put all that darkness aside, for her, and had been the best husband and father she could have asked for.
“I’m sorry, Padmé, but it’s true. I killed you. I strangled you.”

She gripped his shoulders and shook her head. “I’m not dead. You didn’t kill me. I’m right here.”

He just dropped his hands from her face and wrapped his arms around her again, pulling her close to his chest. She could feel his heartbeat against her cheek.

He really thought that he had killed her. But she knew with all her heart that it could not be true. It was some nightmare he had tricked himself into believing.

Obi-Wan cleared his throat.

“I will admit to not knowing everything about the galaxy, or the Force,” he said. “But time travel? Forgive my skepticism, but…”

“Choose to believe me or not, I don’t care. I’ve answered your questions.”

Padmé listened to the rumble of his voice in his chest as he spoke. She sighed and extracted herself from his embrace.

Obi-Wan was still seated in the co-pilot’s chair. He said, “I have stood by you for all these years, Anakin, even after witnessing your crimes against the Jedi with my own eyes. When will you begin to trust me?”

“I just trusted you with the truth and you ridiculed me.”

“Anakin, you tell me a preposterous tale about how I cut off all your limbs and set you on fire and you call that trusting me with the truth?”

“Yes, I do.” Anakin did not seem angry anymore. But he showed no signs of budging on his assertions.

“Why is it so strange for you to imagine?” he asked. “You came to Mustafar prepared to kill me. I still wonder why you didn’t, when I was unconscious.”

Obi-Wan spread out his hands and said incredulously, “Because you were unconscious.”

Padmé shook her head. “This is ridiculous. Obi-Wan loves you, Anakin. He loves you.”

“I know he does,” said Anakin calmly, to her surprise. Then he smiled and added, “He told me so when I was burning to death in front of him.”

“I refuse to sit here and listen to this,” Obi-Wan said, drawing himself up with great dignity. His voice was clipped and reserved. “Padmé, if you’ll excuse me, I think I will rest until we are out of hyperspace.”

“Obi-Wan,” said Padmé, but he ignored her, brushing by them on his way out of the cockpit.

Padmé shook herself free of Anakin, upset with him for saying such terrible things with such casual spite. She walked over to sit in the co-pilot seat and looked out the viewport. She wondered what she was going to do now, with this new problem. And she had not even gotten a chance to broach the most important topic... the one that would surely upset Anakin and be met with resistance.

After a moment Anakin came up and sat beside her. They both watched the undulating waves of hyperspace rippling by for several minutes, before Padmé finally broke the silence.
“I believe that you think what you are saying is true,” she said cautiously. “But it is a lot to take in. The idea of time travel aside… you’ve described something truly horrible.”

“I’ve kept this to myself for a decade,” he responded. “If I’d known you would both just dismiss me as crazy I’d have told you right away and gotten it off my chest years ago.”

“I’m not dismissing you as crazy. But I worry about you and how seriously you always take your nightmares. You were so certain that I would die in childbirth that you let Palpatine fill your head with lies and convince you to do terrible things. But it was just dreams.”

“I didn’t dream this up, Padmé. Yes, I still have nightmares about it. But it was real. There are things about the Force you don’t know, and things that Obi-Wan doesn’t know.”

“And only you do? The secret of time itself, that’s… that’s something. I don’t know.”

“It’s not as if I can just rewind my day at any time if I want to,” he said. “It’s not that easy or simple. But yes… I spent years with nothing to do but study the Dark Side of the Force, so there are things I know that no one else does. Except, maybe, for Sidious. Who knows what that bastard can do…”

“How many years are you talking about?” Padmé asked, though she told herself that she shouldn’t be encouraging him, that maybe she was feeding a delusion by asking for more details.

“Fifteen years,” he answered.

“Fifteen?” she echoed, incredulous. “And then you reset time to… to what point? I’m confused.”

“Do you remember when I collapsed on Mustafar?”

“Of course.” How could she ever forget that horrible day?

“Right around then,” he said. He wasn’t looking at her, and his voice was casual, but she could recognize the strain underneath. He didn’t like talking about this, which made her sure that he believed it.

“Perhaps,” she ventured, “when you passed out, you… imagined… this other future? You were out for a very long time, Anakin. I don’t think you realize how worried we were about you. I was worried that you would never wake up. It was hours.”

“You can’t talk me out of what I know is true,” Anakin said. “I wish that life were just a terrible fever dream, a hallucination. But it wasn’t.”

“I don’t believe that you killed me. I cannot.”

“Because you would hate me if it were true?”

She was silent. It wasn’t that at all, she thought. She could never hate Anakin. But she couldn’t believe this… she couldn’t. She would have to be afraid of him, then, afraid that there was truly no line he could not cross if pushed hard enough. If he could have killed her in any reality, then she would have to be wary of it happening again. And she didn’t want to carry that fear around.

She had once thought that Anakin could never hurt the innocent. Could never kill children. When she had realized that was false, she’d had to adjust her understanding of him. But she had to believe that he had some limits. She had clung to the conviction that he could never hurt her, and would never hurt their children.
He never has, she reminded herself staunchly.

“It’s just too much,” she said, her voice thick with weariness.

“I won’t push you to believe it if you don’t want to. It’s unfair, I know, to ask you to believe all of this. But I don’t want to lie to you anymore, either.”

“Tell me,” she said, lifting her chin resolutely. “Tell me about it.”

“It?”

“The moment when you killed me.” She forced the words out with difficulty. “You said that you strangled me. How? Why? When?”

He shook his head, looking a little sickened. “Why—”

“Because I want to know. It’s real to you, so it’s real enough to come between us. It’s been between us for all this time and I didn’t even know. I want to know what’s in your head, Anakin. What do you think when you look at me?”

“That I don’t deserve you.”

“Don’t do that. Just tell me.” She hated when he did that, when he tried to debase himself for her. It always felt like a diversion, and never more so than now.

He became very interested in the ship’s control panel, flipping through navigation status indicators and fuel gauges. “It was on Mustafar,” he said, mouth twisting out the word like it was repugnant to him. “When I saw Obi-Wan on your ship I lost my mind. I don’t… I don’t even remember what I was thinking, just that I was so angry. So angry.”

“Because you thought I brought him on purpose. To kill you.”

She remembered conversations about this, back on Polis Massa. He had thought that she was conspiring against him with Obi-Wan. But on Polis Massa the admission had come without the blinding anger he described now… just sadness. Resignation. He had even offered to let it happen. That had frightened her at the time; it had wounded her that Anakin could ever think such a thing of her, and it bothered her even more that he was speaking suicidal thoughts. She recalled slapping him.

Anakin was remembering a different version of events, however. “Yes…” he said, “and you denied it, but I was so sure that you were lying that I just couldn’t… listen.”

He stopped and slumped back into the chair, letting out a pained sigh as he put his gloved hand over his face. “I don’t want to talk about this, Padmé. You don’t want to hear this.”

“Tell me.”

“I wanted you to stop lying to me. I wanted you to stop trying to convince me that I was wrong and that I should stop what I was doing and run away with you… all the while Obi-Wan was there to kill me. You said that you loved me and I snapped.”

He was right, Padmé thought. This was not something she wanted to hear. Whether it had happened or not seemed hardly to matter… if his dreams were full of the thoughts and images of murdering her to silence her… what did that mean? Padmé felt sick.

“And then?” she said, relentlessly.
“I choked you.”

Padmé had the inescapable mental image of his hands around her throat, squeezing the life out of her, and she shuddered.

“So then I died, in this… dream…” She would not call it anything else. “And the twins?”

“Dead with you.”


Padmé clenched her fists, suddenly angry. “No,” she said. “This never happened. I refuse to accept it.” She got up from her seat and knelt beside him, reaching out to pull his hand away from his face. He had been crying. He tried to turn away, but she would have none of it. “Dreams and false visions, that’s all this is.”

“Why would I dream something so terrible?”

“You dreamt that I would die in childbirth because you were afraid for me. This is the same thing. It’s fear. It’s your fear making false memories,” she insisted. “You’re afraid of hurting me so you dream about hurting me. That is the only thing I can believe.”

“Don’t do this, Padmé.”

She stood up and turned away, shaking her head.

He reached up and held her arm, though he did not pull her back to face him. “I never wanted to tell you this, but now you know. You can’t deny it. I’m sorry. You know that what I’m telling you is possible.”

*I can deny it and I will,* thought Padmé, but before she could voice this, he asked, “So, is this the end?”

“The end of what?” she asked, purposefully obtuse.

“Us.”

“You’ve always doubted my love for you,” she said. “Always. Do you realize how much that hurts me? I don’t know how I can prove it to you anymore.”

His grip tightened on her arm, his hand shaking. “I’m not asking you to prove anything.”

“Really? Because I feel as if this is some kind of test. To see how far you can push me away before I actually go.”

“I don’t want you to go. That wasn’t my intent.”

“Then what is your intent?”

He dropped her arm, but stood up. He towered over her in the close proximity of the cockpit, gazing down at her intently. “To tell you the truth.”

“And what am I supposed to do with this truth?” She laid one hand on his chest, partly to hold him back, partly to steady herself. “This terrible thing… it never even happened to me. If it happened at all it happened to some other version of me, in some other life, and I don’t know what I’m supposed to do with this knowledge. Do you want me to forgive you? To say I understand?”
He placed his hands over her forearms but didn’t grip them, as if afraid that she would struggle away from him if he held too tightly. He searched her face for a moment, then said, “I don’t know. I’m not trying to force this part of my life onto you, Padmé. I’m not trying to make you forgive me for something that never happened to you. This isn’t a conversion that I’ve planned out. I didn’t want to tell you.” His leaned in closer, pressing against her hand. She curled her fingers into the fabric of his shirt, feeling the rapid heartbeat underneath. “I didn’t want you to have to do anything with this… it’s been my burden alone and I always thought it would stay that way. But you wanted honesty. You wanted trust. You wanted to see inside my head? This is it. This is me. You say I’ve never trusted your love for me, but you’ve never liked knowing the truth about me. Not when Obi-Wan told you, not when you saw it for yourself, and not now.”

Padmé shook her head, blinking tears from her eyes. “That’s not true.”

“It is.” He reached up to wipe at her cheek with one thumb. “Do you remember the Sand People? I told you what I did to them and then we went on as if nothing had happened. You forgot. I allowed you to forget. We pretended nothing was wrong.”

“I never forgot.”

“You had to. How else could you have loved me? Married me? This is how it’s always been with us. I’ve always known that you have to pretend I’m someone, something, else. Otherwise you could never go on with me the way you do.”

“Is that what you really think?” Her voice came out in a whisper. She could barely trust herself to speak.

He nodded. She found herself narrowly focused on his mouth as he pressed his lips into a line before saying, “I’m not the man you think I am.”

Padmé felt a rumble of anger growing inside of her. She reached up and grabbed his neck, pulling herself up to her fullest height and his face down to meet hers. “I know exactly you who you are,” she hissed, lips brushing against his without actually kissing him. He closed his eyes and shook his head, trying to pull away, but she tightened her grip. “You are a good person, you are my husband, the father of my children. But I am not a naïve girl, Anakin. I am not a trusting fool. I have always seen the demons you carry around inside of you. I love you, I have loved you even when it seemed that the darkness had swallowed you up, and I will always love you.”

She kissed him and he melted into her arms. She could feel his relief in the way he returned her kiss and pressed one hand to the small of her back, the other cradling her head, pulling her close against him.

She let him hold her like this for a moment.

But then she let go of him abruptly and stepped away, putting as much distance between them as the small cockpit allowed. The air felt cold around her where his body had been pressed against hers. The absence of his warmth was a harsh reminder to her that she had to be strong, could not lose herself in his embrace and let all their problems be washed away with kisses and tears. Not this time.

He leaned against the control panel, head bowed and shoulders hunched. “I’m not a good person,” he said quietly.

“You are, and I will keep reminding you,” she told him. “I won’t ever let you forget it. I know that you have done things, bad things. But that isn’t you. You are not the darkness inside of you, Anakin. You have to fight that darkness.” She paused, took a deep steadying breath, and said, “Not for me, or
even the children, but for yourself.”

“I am fighting it,” he said. “I will always be fighting it.”

“Good.”

He turned around to face her. “But you have to believe me. About everything. The time travel. That I killed you, even if it was a different life.”

A hard feeling of refusal fought its way up to the surface, but Padmé pushed it down and only nodded. She could not believe that he had killed her, somehow, even if he were fully convinced that it was true. But she decided to put that aside for the moment, as best she could.

“If you spent fifteen years lost in darkness, my heart hurts for you,” she said. “And I wish that you had told me sooner, instead of carrying it around like a weight that no one else could know about. I wish you trusted me with these things.” She lifted her chin, gathering strength, telling herself that she could handle this, that she had to. “I promise that I will believe you. Whatever you need to tell me about what happened in this other life that you remember. Because it may not be real to me, but if it is real to you, then it’s part of who you are.”

He nodded, but eyed her warily, and said, “There’s something more, isn’t there?”

She swallowed, her mouth suddenly feeling dry and filled with sand, even with the taste of his kiss still on her lips. “This is a terrible time,” she said, “but there isn’t going to be another opportunity. We’ll be entering the Carvaggo system soon.”

“What is it? This is what you and Obi-Wan wanted to talk about, isn’t it? What you really wanted to discuss.”

She nodded. Obi-Wan wasn’t there anymore, but perhaps that was for the best.

“I’ve decided that I’m going to go with Ahsoka,” Padmé said slowly, watching the flicker of his eyes as she spoke the words. “She can take me to meet with the rebel cells spread out across the galaxy. And then I’m going to speak with the leaders… Bail and the rest… about what we are going to do in order to bring Palpatine’s rule to an end.”

“When did you decide this?”

“Last night, while you were out. I talked it over with Obi-Wan, but it was my idea.”

“What about me? And the children?”

“The children have to be hidden,” Padmé said. “The Emperor found us once, and I don’t want that to happen again. As a family we are too large of a target, especially now that we know he knows about the twins.”

“What are you suggesting?”

Padmé realized that she was gripping her hands together in front of her, holding them so hard that her nails dug into her skin. “You and Obi-Wan need to go deeper into hiding, to keep the twins safe. You need to split up. Obi-Wan has agreed to take Luke with him. You will take Leia. You must stay on the move, never living in one place for too long.”

“No,” he said, his eyes hard.
“Yes, Anakin. It’s the only way. We cannot just find a new planet and settle down again and hope that this time he doesn’t find us.”

“You’re right, but I can’t let Obi-Wan take Luke, I can’t let us all break apart like this.”

“You have to trust Obi-Wan.”

“I do trust Obi-Wan,” he said. “I trust him to do the right thing, the hard thing, and I know that he will. But I won’t lose my family, I won’t split up the twins like that, and I cannot believe you are talking about abandoning your children entirely to go fight with the rebellion!”

“I am not abandoning them,” said Padmé, feeling her cheeks flush. She had been prepared for this reaction, however, and did not hesitate to counter it. “Our family will never be safe as long as the Emperor is in power. I have hidden long enough. I have to do what I can to help the people who are trying to fight him. Only when he is removed from his throne will we be able to call ourselves a family, use our real names, lead our lives without fear.”

“‘Removed from his throne?’” Anakin echoed. “You talk as if you plan to arrest him and put him on trial.”

“Yes,” she said. “He must stand trial for his crimes. For seizing control of the republic, for retooling it into an Empire with himself as the sole head. For ordering the destruction of the Jedi, and for all he has done since then.”

“And what about me? When do I go on trial?”

She faltered, but then lifted her head again. “The rebellion needs me,” she said. “I cannot hide what you did for Palpatine from them, especially not if he is to be put on trial, with all his crimes laid bare. But you will be a witness, and in return I will demand that they pardon you for your role in the beginning. They will have agree to this if they want my help.”

He sighed and ran his hands through his hair and down his face. “Even if I could believe that it would be that easy for them to ignore what I did… you can’t just put the Emperor on trial. That will never happen.”

“Why not?”

“Because he’s a Sith Lord. He’s the Sith Lord. You could never imprison him.”

Padmé scoffed, letting him see the full extent of her disregard for the mighty Sith. “He may be a Sith, but that doesn’t make him a god. He’s just a man. His strength comes from the Empire he has built around himself. His soldiers, his spies, and the politicians who support him. Bring all that down and he can be put in shackles just like any other man. The Jedi were not invincible and the Sith are just Jedi who love the darkness.”

Anakin shook his head. “You’re thinking of Palpatine,” he said. “You need to understand Darth Sidious is not just a clever politician who grabbed power by talking. You’re still thinking of him as the Chancellor, the man you knew. I know him to be much more than that. I’ve seen what he can do with my own eyes. Padmé, he’s not just a man. He’s… he’s…”

“A Sith Lord, I know.”

“Do you? If you believe me about my other life, then you have to understand that I was by his side for fifteen years. Fifteen years, Padmé! And I hated him for every single year of that existence. I wanted to die, but I couldn’t. I wanted to leave him but I couldn’t get away.”
“But then you did get away,” she said, fighting to remain calm.

“I used the Force to rip apart time itself and I knew that I would probably fail, that I could very well die in the process. I took a huge risk, and yes it worked, but it took every ounce of power I had and I can never do it again. Are you going to do something like that? Are you going to use the Force when you arrest him and have him put on trial?”

“I was planning on using the rebellion’s military.”

“He’ll kill them all.”

“What would you have me do, Anakin? Just give up? Is that what you plan on doing?”

“If you want to end the Emperor’s reign, the only way to do it is to kill him outright,” said Anakin. “And I don’t know if that can be done. Once I thought that I could overthrow him all by myself…but I was a lot younger then and I was stupid. I underestimated him. I underestimated his power and overestimated my own. Don’t you underestimate him, too.”

“He’s a man,” said Padmé staunchly. “His empire is made up of men and women. Even if he has great power in the Force, he relies on other people to keep the Empire afloat. If we manage to strip him of everything that surrounds him, he will just be a lone Force user, and we can deal with him.”

“No, you can’t. If you are determined to see him brought down, then you know what has to be done. It has to be me. I have to try to kill him. I’m the only one who will stand a chance against him.”

“No! No. Obi-Wan said that you would say that, but I won’t let you run headlong into the Emperor’s trap and sacrifice yourself. Maybe you could kill him, but maybe he would kill you, or worse. I won’t let you take that risk.”

“And I won’t let you join a lost cause when you are needed with us! With your children, and me.”

*I will not cry*, she thought. *I will not let fear rule me.* “You cannot stop me, Anakin. My mind is already made up.”

He stared at her incredulously. “I thought that you said you loved me? And now you’re going to leave me?”

“I don’t want to leave you! I don’t want to leave the children! But I can do so much for this galaxy; I can help in the fight. I can make sure that our family has a future that doesn’t involve being taken by the Emperor or watching you be arrested and put on trial. Knowing all that I can do for us and for the galaxy, how can I continue to run and hide?”

“But you want me to run and hide.”

“Someone needs to keep the children safe and hidden,” she repeated, wondering why he refused to understand. “You and Obi-Wan are Jedi. I need you both to use everything you know, all the power you have in the Force, to make sure that Luke and Leia are safe.”

“Until the Emperor is dethroned and you’ve, what, reinstated the slow and useless bickering of democracy in his place?”

“Don’t sound so disgusted. Yes, I want to reinstate democracy. We’ll make a new Republic, one that doesn’t repeat the same mistakes that led the old one into ruin. If we don’t do that, then overthrowing the Empire will be for nothing.”
He was about to say something, but then the hyperspace drive indicators started to flash. He turned around and said flatly, “We’re approaching Carvago. You should go get Obi-Wan.”

“Anakin—”

“Does Ahsoka know that you’re planning on joining her?”

“No. I didn’t want to discuss it with her over her frequency, even if it is supposed to be secure.”

He just shook his head, then sat down and started to concentrate on piloting the ship, getting ready to pull out of hyperspace. She did not feel as if their conversation was over, but she looked at the stiffness of his back and the way he made a show of flipping through controls that didn’t even need attention, as if he were doing something extremely important, that he had shut her out. She sighed.

Perhaps it was best to give him some time. If he really thought about it, if he put aside his emotional reaction, she was sure that he would see she was right.

She slipped into the back to let Obi-Wan know they were about to arrive. She found him meditating in the empty cargo hold.

“How did it go?” he asked without opening his eyes.

“I don’t know.” She thought over their conversation and was overwhelmed all over again. “You will have to talk with him after I’ve gone, Obi-Wan.”

“Do you believe him?”

“I do,” she said. “I have to. I promised him that I would.”

He opened his eyes and surveyed her thoughtfully for a moment. “This changes things.”

“Does it?”

“He’s more unstable than we thought,” he said, nodding. “I’m not sure you should trust him to take Leia on his own.”

“I trust him,” she insisted. “He told me the truth… or what he believes to be the truth. That’s all I can ask.”

“But…”

“Have some faith in him, Obi-Wan. He is trying. He could have killed Dredaxia, or those girls, at any time, and he didn’t… that shows me more than anything that he wants to be a good person. But he’ll never believe in himself if you don’t.” She shook her head and turned away. “We all have to trust each other now. We don’t have the luxury of sitting around staring at each other waiting for someone to break. And if we cannot remain strong while we are apart, the Emperor has already won.”

Anakin saw Ahsoka first. She was seated with her back to him, a hood pulled over her montrals, but he knew it was her.

The small spaceport café was dimly lit, with the clanking of dishes and the whir of food processing machines creating a low counterpoint to the smooth jatz music playing overhead. The air was thick
with the smell of brewing caf and cooking food. A screen played the HoloNews on mute in a corner. She seemed to sense him, and turned.

He saw that she was with someone, another hooded figure seated in a chair opposite her, holding a steaming mug in one slender green hand.

Barriss.

He hadn’t known that she would be here.

He looked around the café suspiciously, noting everyone who was there, from the harried service droids to the handful of customers quietly sipping caf, or conversing with each other over meals. He was on the lookout for anyone who appeared to be an Imperial spy. There were not many humans, though, and unless things had changed drastically, the Empire was not keen on alien species in their ranks. He took note of the human or near human species that he did see.

Padmé followed him over to the table, holding onto Mara, who was thankfully quiet and compliant for the moment. He had a feeling she was biding her time, and he worried that she would try to make a scene. He wished they could have rendezvoused in a more private location.

“Snips,” he said, sliding into the seat next to Ahsoka. He looked at Barriss coolly.

“Who is the youngling?” Ahsoka asked.

This was going to be interesting. When he contacted Ahsoka he had not laid out what his emergency was. He couldn’t afford to do so over long range communications. He didn’t trust any rebel frequency, no matter how well encrypted. He had simply told her that they needed to meet as soon as possible, and they had carefully agreed on the coordinates for the meeting.

Now they were together, and Barriss was there, which made him uneasy. He hadn’t forgotten that she had been released from prison to hunt Jedi, even if Ahsoka claimed that she had chosen to disregard the Empire’s wishes instead.

“Her name is Mara,” he said, watching Barriss closely for any reaction or sign of recognition. Even if she was working for the Empire still, that didn’t mean she would be aware of Mara, but he knew that it would be a dead giveaway if she was. The Mirialan sipped her caf and returned his gaze steadily.

“You only had two children the last time I saw you,” said Ahsoka.

“I’m starting a collection.”

“Oh?” A smile played at her lips, her eyes showing amusement under her hood.

“He kidnapped me,” Mara spoke up.

“Is that so?”

“In a manner of speaking,” said Anakin. “If you can calling rescuing a child from old Sheevs after he had her parents killed ‘kidnapping,’ then yes.”

Mara’s eyes flashed angrily, but she said nothing. Not many people in the galaxy were familiar with Palpatine’s given name, so using it served almost as well as a code name. Whether Mara was angrier at the casual disrespect or his continued assertion that the Emperor had killed her parents, he didn’t
“You’ve been busy,” Ahsoka observed.

“She sort of fell into my hands,” Anakin said. “I need someone to take care of her for me.”

Barriss leaned forward. “Is that why you called us?”

“I called Snips, not you,” he replied.

Ahsoka put a hand on his arm. “It’s alright, Skyguy,” she said. “She’s with me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Very.”

He tapped his foot under the table, trying to channel his irritation into something less visible. “Fine. And yes, I called you because the girl needs someone to look after her. Someone who can handle a special child.” He glanced around the café as he said it, letting the implication of Mara’s Force abilities sink in at the table.

“That’s quite the responsibility,” said Barriss.

“There’s more,” he added, looking pointedly at Mara, giving her a warning glare to remind her to remain silent. “She’s been brainwashed pretty badly. She thinks she belongs by Sheev’s side, has delusions of grandeur. You’ll have to protect her from herself just as much as from others.”

Mara was started to practically thrum with anger, Padmé’s steadying hand the only thing keeping her from ascending upwards like a hoverbot, powered by her own indignation.

But Ahsoka was intrigued. “This is a lot,” she said quietly.

“Why not take care of her yourself?” asked Barriss, giving Mara a distasteful look. He didn’t know whether Barriss liked children or not, but he was guessing not.

“I don’t want her around my children. She’s a bad influence.”

“A bad influence,” Ahsoka said with a widening smirk. She leaned towards Mara. “You must really be something if Skyguy here thinks you’re a bad influence.”

“I am,” said Mara.

Anakin snorted, then nodded to Ahsoka. “What do you say?”

Ahsoka settled back in her chair and exchanged glances with Barriss. “It wouldn’t be the first time I snatched a youngling out of old crumplypant’s hands.”

Mara uttered a shocked gasp.

“How long would we do this for?” asked Barriss.

“I’m not asking you to do anything,” Anakin said.

Ahsoka shook her head. “You are, though. We’re together… you ask something of me, you ask it of Barriss.” She reached across the table and took one of Barriss’s hands in her own. That made a tiny smile play across Barriss’s otherwise stoic face.
“You would keep her for as long as you have to,” said Padmé. “For as long as she needs a mother.”

“A mother,” Ahsoka said, losing her voice halfway through the word, mouthing out the last syllable. “I’ve never been someone’s mother before.”

“I don’t need a mother,” said Mara, frowning deeply.

“Everyone needs a mother,” Anakin said, shooting Padmé a pointed look. She just turned away, pretending to sweep her gaze across the café.

Ahsoka looked to Barriss, who shook her head slightly, but Ahsoka just smiled and said, “I think you already know what my answer is going to be, don’t you?”

“I hope that it’s ‘yes’.”

“Who am I to turn away a bad influence in need?”

Barriss sighed and took a long sip of her caf, but said nothing.

“I would like to come with you, as well,” said Padmé. “Not indefinitely. I’m hoping there are places,” she paused importantly on the word, indicating more than she could risk saying out loud, “that you can take me to. People I need to meet.”

Ahsoka raised her eyebrows and looked at Anakin sharply.

He just shook his head and gazed down at his hand, holding it under the table, clenching and unclenching reflexively. He didn’t want them to see his distress, and he didn’t want Padmé to think he might lose control. He didn’t want her to go but he didn’t know how to stop her.

Everything was happening too fast. She had sprung this on him too suddenly, and at a time when he was exhausted and emotionally spent. It wasn’t fair.

“Alright,” said Ahsoka. “It’s going to be a cozy flight, though. I don’t fly a big ship.”

“I’m sorry,” Padmé told her. “I would have discussed this with you beforehand, but there hasn’t been much time.”

Ahsoka nodded. Then she said, “Barriss? Do you think you can handle this ‘special child’? Take her to the ship?”

Anakin felt unease in his stomach at the idea of Barriss leaving with Mara, but he just watched as she stood, wiping at the corners of her mouth with a napkin before she let it fall to the table. She turned to Mara and outstretched a hand.

Mara hesitated with a calculating look in her eyes.

“Come along,” said Barriss, waving her fingers. Mara stole a look at Anakin, then reached out. He wondered if she thought that she could escape from Barriss once they were away from him. She was in for a surprise, there. He wasn’t worried about Mara getting the better of the former Jedi, only that Barriss might not be as reformed and free of the Empire as Ahsoka liked to think.

But, he realized, if he expected to trust Ahsoka with Mara, he was going to have to trust that Ahsoka knew what she was doing with Barriss. He didn’t really have a choice.

When the two of them had left the café, heading towards wherever their ship was docked, Ahsoka turned back to Anakin and Padmé, asking, “What’s going on?”
“I can explain later,” Padmé replied quietly.

Ahsoka’s eyes darted between them. “Something’s wrong. I don’t like it.”

“He knew where we lived,” Anakin said, not bothering with any sort of name. “He sent Mara to our home to recruit the twins to the dark side. Another long, slow plan of his. His favorite game. But we’re gone from there, now. For good.”

“Where are you going?” she asked, as if he could answer her there in public, even if it didn’t seem that anyone was paying them any mind.

“I don’t know,” he answered truthfully. “And I couldn’t tell you if I did.”

“Is everyone alright?”

Anakin looked at Padmé.Alright? He certainly didn’t think so. He remembered her taking Luke and Leia’s hands in hers and telling them that she was leaving and they had to promise to be good for their father and uncle while she was gone. The twins had been extremely distressed. He had been distressed. He still thought she was doing the wrong thing, but he couldn’t stop her, and it was maddening.

“We’re fine,” he said, and he could tell that Ahsoka saw right through him.

She frowned. “Is this about the questions Obi-Wan was asking me?”

“No.”

She looked at him long and hard, and Anakin decided he could not take another interrogation, not today. He hadn’t slept in two standard days. He’d had his entire life turned upside down, wrung out, and flung in his face. He couldn’t take much more of this. He stood up.

“That’s it, then?”

“Thank you, Snips, for doing this. I know how much I’m asking of you.” He nodded to her, put a hand on her shoulder, then turned away abruptly.

He was already out of the café, head down, heart pounding as he stalked away, when he felt a hand on his arm. “Stop,” said Padmé.

He stopped, and she pulled him around to look at her. She was slightly out of breath from chasing after him.

“If you’re going to leave, leave,” he said harshly, but she ignored him, reaching up to lay her hands against his face. Her eyes were wide and full of unshed tears.

“I don’t know when I’ll see you again,” she said. “I have to say goodbye.”

He wanted to be angry. How could she insist on going, on doing this even though he asked her not to, told her it was foolish and wrong, and still expect him to comfort her in her uncertainty? “I don’t want to say goodbye,” he said, pulling away.

She wrapped her arms around him, refusing to let him go, and wasn’t that ironic? He stood as still and unresponsive as possible as she kissed him, wondering if she would stay as long as she felt their parting moments were unsatisfactory.

“I love you,” she said. “I trust you. I have faith in you. You are a good person. Remember that.”
“Don’t go.”

“I have to. I have to do this.”

“No, you don’t.”

She just shook her head, dropping her hands to her sides. She took one step backwards, then two. “I love you,” she repeated.

She had the strangest way of showing her love. He remained silent, just staring at her. This still felt like abandonment, no matter what she said. It felt like punishment for the things he had told her, the terrible truths. Maybe he deserved to be abandoned. But it still hurt.

He’d always thought that if she left she would take the twins with her. That she would look at him with hardness and hatred in her eyes and tell him that he wasn’t fit to be a father, and that she never wanted to see him again. He didn’t know what to do with this unexpected turn of events. He didn’t know what to do with her insistence that she loved him and trusted him. If this was what trust meant, he didn’t care for it. At all.

“I don’t know what you want me to say,” he told her. “If you have to go, then go.”

She bit her lip and turned away, wiping at her face. He watched her leave. Ahsoka was standing at the café door, far enough away to offer them some privacy but close enough to see what was going on. She turned her head and spoke to Padmé as she passed, and then approached Anakin.

“I’ll contact you soon,” she said, and gave him a hug.

He was tired of hugs, of being hugged and told to be good and told to stay strong and promised that everything was for the best. Of being patted on the head and pushed around. He thought that he should tell her not to bother contacting him, that he was supposed to be going deep into hiding to protect Leia, but he didn’t. Selfishly, he wanted to see Ahsoka again.

“Take care of her,” he said. “She’s going to get herself killed.”

“She’ll be safe with me,” Ahsoka assured him. “You take care of yourself.”

“I will.”

He turned away again, determined not to just stand there and watch Ahsoka walk away. Not this time.

He wanted to look back, but he didn’t. He kept his gaze fixed stubbornly ahead while he walked down the street, keeping his senses open for any sign of danger, but unwilling to turn and check to see if Padmé had come back out to watch him leave. He hoped that she had. He hoped that she was watching him and hoping for him to look back.

But he wouldn’t.

He would not do it.

When he arrived back at the shipyard he half expected to see that Obi-Wan had taken off with the twins, leaving him stranded. But the Twilight II was still there and Obi-Wan was inside with both children.

He didn’t have to let Padmé’s plan play out all the way, he thought. Obi-Wan couldn’t leave with
Luke if he didn’t let him.

Another part of him whispered to him that this was only inevitable. He had been lucky to have his children at all. It was always destined to end like this, with Obi-Wan taking what he had waited for all these years.

“Is Mother really gone?” Leia asked, looking at him with dark circles under her eyes. She was too young to look so tired.

“Yes,” he said.

“Why did she leave? I don’t understand.”

Anakin put a hand on her shoulder. “Your mother and I decided that this would be for the best,” he said slowly, unable even now to disparage Padmé to the children. “We agreed that she needed to go away for a while. She has very important things to do.”

Leia shook his hand away. “I don’t believe you,” she said. “You made her go away. She left because she can’t stand you! You made her leave because you’re a bad person.”

Each word landed like a punch in the gut.

She turned and fled into an empty bunk, the door whooshing shut behind her.

“I don’t think that,” said Luke after a moment. “Mother would never leave us with you if she hated you.”

He forced a smile for Luke, but knew it wasn’t a very convincing one. “You should go to your sister,” he said, conscious of the fact that he would be separating them soon. He didn’t want to think how they were going to react to that. He still wasn’t sure he could do it, even though he knew that Padmé was right; if they were split up it would be harder for the Empire to find them. Or at least, find all of them.

Part of him knew this, anyway. The other part was still upset with her for leaving, for deciding that the only way to survive was rip their family apart. Did she really think this would all be over soon? That once she swept in to take over the rebellion, the Empire would come toppling down in a matter of months and they could all be together again, just like that?

When Luke was gone, Anakin sat down right there on the floor in the corridor and shut his eyes. *Maybe I’ll just sleep,* he thought. Not having the time to sleep for two days meant no nightmares, but he’d welcome a good old fashioned nightmare over reality, right about now.

Obi-Wan’s voice broke through his consciousness. “Did Ahsoka look well?” he asked, inanely.

Anakin cracked open one eye. It was the first thing Obi-Wan had said to him, directly, since landing on Carvaggo. Since he’d stormed out of the cockpit, insulted at the accusations of violence in another life.

“She’s with Barriss,” he said, disapprovingly. “But she looked well.” He thought of the way she took Barriss’s hand. It was just forgiveness all round. “Happy, even,” he added. He wished he’d had the time to tell Barriss what he would do to her if she hurt Ahsoka again.

He wondered if Obi-Wan was going to ignore the huge time travel shaped bantha in the room. Pretending they had never had the discussion and never speaking of it again would be just like Obi-Wan.
“What shall we do now?” Obi-Wan asked.

_Sleep,_ thought Anakin. Out loud he said, “Go to a new star system. There we’ll find you and Luke a ship.”

“You have agreed to Padmé’s plan, then?”

“She didn’t really leave me any choice,” Anakin said.

“I must admit, I am not so sure about leaving you on your own.”

“I won’t be on my own. I’ll be with Leia.” He shut his eyes again.

“You know what I mean.”

“You’ve been watching me for ten years, old man. Don’t you ever get tired of it? Don’t you ever get tired of thinking that you might have to kill me?”

“I don’t spend my days thinking about killing you,” said Obi-Wan, his voice clipped. “You are the one who seems fixated on the possibility. Don’t you ever get tired of hating me?”

“I don’t hate you,” Anakin said with a tired sigh. He rested his head against the wall of the ship’s corridor. He tried to recall the distant memories of intense pain, of the fire of Obi-Wan’s blade cutting through his arm and his legs, of the greater fire that consumed him after that. Memories of his suit, his respirator, the perpetual darkness inside his helmet. These were all things that had fed his hate for Obi-Wan through the dark years.

He thought about the words Obi-Wan had shouted at him, the words he had replayed over and over in his mind for years when he had no one to talk to but the memories of his old master and of Padmé, of Ahsoka. Of his mother. All ghosts to him.

Were they all to be ghosts and memories again? Soon he would have no one to talk to but Leia. And she was more than he deserved, but he felt he was losing her already.

“I don’t blame you,” he said into the silence. Obi-Wan was still there for now, though he had not responded to the earlier statement. Anakin didn’t open his eyes. He didn’t know what Obi-Wan’s face would tell him, but he could feel him there in the Force, and it felt something like calm.

“I did for a long, long time. I hated you and blamed you for everything that happened.”

“What changed?” asked Obi-Wan, barely above a whisper.

“I realized that you didn’t want to kill me,” Anakin said. “You don’t believe in time travel, that’s fine. But I lived through Mustafar twice. One time you almost killed me, the second time you didn’t. And only one thing changed.”

“What?”

“Me. I didn’t hurt Padmé and I didn’t try to fight you, the second time. Makes things obvious, doesn’t it? Really made me look at my life, think about my choices.” Anakin finally opened his eyes. Obi-Wan had sunk down to sit on the floor opposite him. “I’m not saying I don’t have trouble trusting you… or that I don’t still think about what happened, all the time. I do.” He allowed himself a regretful smile. “You should have seen yourself, the first time around. You were so disappointed in me. I don’t think I’d ever seen you cry before.”
“I could never want to hurt you, in any reality,” said Obi-Wan.

“If it makes you feel any better, I was trying my hardest to kill you the whole time.”

“It doesn’t.”

Anakin shrugged. “You said you were my brother,” he said, closing his eyes, reciting the words that had stuck in his mind for so long, burned into his memory. “You told me that you loved me. And then you left me.”

Obi-Wan was quiet. The silence settled over them, but Anakin didn’t mind. Silence was good.

“If you want me to stay, I won’t leave,” Obi-Wan finally said, by way of a response. Anakin wondered if he was incapable of saying the other words unless he literally thought Anakin was about to die.

“I always thought of you more like a father, you know,” Anakin said, ignoring the offer. Obi-Wan had to go and they both knew it. “But you didn’t really want to be my father,” Anakin went on, since it didn’t seem that Obi-Wan was going to stop him or even respond. “I suppose I understand. The Jedi was all about brotherhood, but who was willing to be anyone’s parent? That was just too much. We were all orphans together and no one was supposed to get too attached.”

He’d told Padmé this before, but never Obi-Wan. It had felt too sentimental a thing to say to his master’s face. He’d always known that Obi-Wan didn’t want to be thought of that way, not by the strange boy Qui-Gon had thrust upon him, along with grandiose claims of having the Force itself for a father and being the Chosen One and all that tired old Jedi prophecy nonsense. If the Force had fathered him it must have been some joke of the dark side, some ultimate trick the Sith had played upon the Jedi. He was certainly no son of the Light. He couldn’t be. Not with what he had done. Sidious had claimed he was the product of experiments run by his old master, Plagueis, but Anakin doubted that, too… mainly because it came from Sidious’ mouth and everything that dropped from that old monster was lies.

He still sometimes thought he had a father somewhere out there who was a slave, who would never know that he even had a son who’d flown away from the miserable dustball that was Tatooine to become a Jedi, and then a Sith, and then a father himself. His mother had never spoken to him about a father and he’d never asked. It wasn’t unusual for slaves to lose track of each other; for mothers to raise their children alone. The idea that he’d not had a father at all had only come up when Qui-Gon came around asking questions. And while he didn’t think his mother would have ever lied to him, he couldn’t say the same thing for Qui-Gon. He was a stranger looking for special children and what was more special than the midichlorians conspiring to make life all on their own?

“I tried to do my best by you, Anakin,” Obi-Wan said at last.

“I know.”

“I would die for you.”

“Well, I don’t want that. Die for Luke, if you have to. But not me.”

“I’ll still stay if you ask. I know it’s not what Padmé wanted, but…”

“No,” he said. “Better to do what Padmé wants.”

He thought briefly that he should actually be asking Obi-Wan to take Leia as well. That way the twins would still have each other. But that’s not how Padmé had planned it, and he knew why. If the
Emperor was to capture one, at least the other would still have a chance. And, selfishly, he did not want to send both children away with Obi-Wan. He wanted to keep Leia. He wanted his daughter by his side.

“Where do we go next, then?”

“I don’t know.” Anakin pushed himself up to his feet. “I’m tired,” he said. “I’ll let you decide. I trust you, remember?”

He grabbed a medkit from the utility closet and helped himself to a double dose of sedatives, the strong kind that killed even dreams, and planned on having a good long sleep. He placed himself at Obi-Wan’s mercy.
Anakin descended the landing ramp of the *Twilight II*, emerging into a humid atmosphere. He squinted around at the dense greenery shrouded by mist which took up most of the surrounding view. His feet squelched in the mud once he was off the ship, and he looked down at the soft, silty ground distastefully. There seemed to be no sign of civilization anywhere, just water and mud and lush vegetation all around. The thick, swampy air stank of rotting plants and the musk of the animals hiding in the undergrowth.

He saw Obi-Wan seated on a log not far off, watching over Luke and Leia, who were taking turns skipping rocks over the surface of a pond that took up most of the small clearing where the ship was docked. Luke was balanced on a small boulder along the shore, but Leia had her pants hiked up above her knees and had waded partially into the pond.

He walked over to them, his feet sinking into the boggy ground with each step, water pooling in the footprints he left behind.

Artoo was standing next to Obi-Wan. The droid was the first to notice that Anakin was coming, and beeped loudly in greeting.

“What happened to you?” Anakin asked, noticing that Artoo was covered in mud, slime, and broken off pieces of vegetation.

Luke jumped down from the boulder and ran to him. “Father! You’re awake!”

Anakin nodded, putting a hand on Luke’s shoulder when he came to stand beside him. When he looked down into Luke’s face he thought that perhaps everything could be alright between them, after all. He didn’t think Luke would ever understand what he had done, or why, but there was something like acceptance behind his eyes.

“Artoo went for a swim,” said Luke, as if that were a perfectly normal thing for an astromech droid to do.

“I see.”

He shot Obi-Wan a look meant to question why he was letting the children play in the swamp on an unfamiliar planet.

“Sleep well?” asked Obi-Wan.

“Too well, apparently. I can’t wait to hear why you’ve brought us to this slimy mudhole.”

He’d woken up to find that Threepio was the only one in the ship with him, and when he asked where they were the protocol droid had hemmed and hawed before finally admitting that he didn’t know because it was “classified.”
“Hungry?” Obi-Wan asked, neatly sidestepping the question. He and the children appeared to have been picnicking on the rocks near the water, though it was a somewhat depressing looking picnic which only consisted of sharing a box of ration bars and bottled water from the ship’s conservator.

Anakin acquiesced, since he couldn’t deny that he was indeed starving. He sat down next to Obi-Wan and helped himself to a shaak steak flavored food pack, which was one of the less unpalatable options. Luke climbed back up onto a nearby rock.

Leia looked at them over her shoulder and then turned away again, tossing the stone she held into the water with a vicious side swing. It skipped one, two, three times before plopping into oblivion, and she sighed before dipping her arms into the water to search for another rock.

“So, Obi-Wan, tell me why you brought us here. This doesn’t look like the best place to find a new ship.”

“I thought that might wait for the moment,” said Obi-Wan. “This place is secluded, safe. Off the Empire’s radar.”

“Where are we, exactly?”

“The Dagobah system,” said Obi-Wan. “This planet has no sentient civilization or modern infrastructure. It’s the perfect place to rest while we think things over.”

“I hope we have enough fuel to get to an inhabited planet,” said Anakin. “Unless you’re planning on spending the rest of our lives here.”

“We will. Don’t worry.”

“Father, look,” said Leia, and he turned to see that she had waded up to the edge of the pond and was holding out a giant reptilian creature towards him. She grasped it tenuously by the edges of its slick, moss covered shell, and it crained its neck out to snap at him with a sharp looking horned mouth at the end of a very ugly face.

“For kriff’s sake, Leia!” he said, startled. “Put that down.”

“Can’t I keep it?”

“Of course not,” he told her, leaning automatically away from the thrashing, angry creature. “Put it back.”

“It looks hungry,” said Luke, looking curiously on from atop his boulder. “I think it wants your ration bar.”

Anakin looked into the beady soulless gaze of the beast and thought that it looked more interested in eating his face than the ration bar.

“Leia,” he said, “come out of the water.” Who knew what else was lurking beneath the opaque water? There could be far worse things stirred to life by the skipping stones and the splashing feet of small children.

Leia sloshed her way out of the pond, still carrying her prize, and Luke gave in to temptation and went over to join her. He reached out to touch the moss that grew over the shell but quickly jerked his hand back when the creature whipped its neck around, snapping at him.

“Leave it alone. You’re making it angry,” said Anakin.
“I don’t think it’s angry,” Luke disagreed. “Just a little scared.”

Obi-Wan was watching all of this silently, but the amused look on his face spoke volumes. Anakin glanced at him and shook his head. What a responsible caretaker he was going to make for Luke. Obi-Wan had always said that he was too reckless, but Anakin sometimes had to wonder how he’d made it past the age of eleven with Obi-Wan as his father.

This was, after all, the same man who had once been more interested in studying the curiosity of brain controlling worms, rather than scorching them from existence, as any reasonable person would.

Leia set the monster down in the grass and proclaimed, “I think it’s some kind of turtle. It has an unusually long neck but that could be a special adaptation to this biosphere.”

“I think it’s some kind of I told you to put it back,” Anakin said while Obi-Wan smiled appreciatively.

Leia straightened and looked at him, her eyes sparking and some fresh sass already working its way to her lips.

Anakin stared her in the eye and with a flick of his hand, levitated the snapping turtle into the air and carried it to the far end of the pond, where he deposited it with a splash. It made an uncanny shrieking noise before going silent under the murky water.

“Come here, both of you.”

Luke came over and sat next to him. Leia blew some wayward strands of hair out of her face with a huff but followed her brother and plopped herself down on Anakin’s other side.

“I know you’re angry at me,” Anakin said. He put an arm around each of them. “But I’m still your father. You will listen to me.”

Luke gazed up at him steadily. He wasn’t sure what the look meant. It wasn’t defiant or angry, not the way Leia’s piercing looks were, when she would look at him at all. But it was thoughtful. Luke wasn’t about to say “yes father” in the rote, obedient way he had once done. And Anakin knew why.

Leia looked down and mumbled, “It was just a turtle.”

Anakin placed a hand on her head, on the braid that Padmé had woven into her hair. “You are going to be travelling to a lot of new places,” he said. “There will be lots of things you’ve never seen before, and some things that look familiar and safe but just a little bit different. It’s alright to be curious. But the galaxy is full of danger. There are creatures that would make a meal out of you in a heartbeat… especially on planets like this one.”

“The truth, your father speaks. Listen to him, you should. Many monsters, in the darkness there are.”

Luke jumped up, startled. “What was that?”

Artoo whistled excitedly.

Anakin turned slowly towards the source of the voice. It couldn’t be… he should have been able to sense the old Jedi Grandmaster’s presence here…

He had to look around for a moment to locate the speaker, but then he looked up into a nearby tree and saw Yoda, half hidden by leaves and camouflaged against the browns and greens of nature. He
sat nonchalantly in the crook where branch met trunk, holding his gnarled gimer stick and looking down at them with a tiny, knowing smirk.

Anakin looked back at Obi-Wan and said nothing. He let his dead eyes and a slow blink say everything.

Obi-Wan looked back uncertainly. “I thought,” he said slowly, with an apologetic smile, “that you might like to talk to him about things.”

Anakin breathed out through his nose and shook his head.

“Please. Give it a chance.”

“Who are you?” Leia asked, gazing up at Yoda with a small frown.

“Me? No one, I am,” said Yoda. He hopped down from the tree and walked towards them in a slow, meandering way that made Anakin raised an eyebrow.

“That,” said Obi-Wan, “is Master Yoda. One of the most powerful Jedi to ever live.”

Luke laughed appreciatively, clearly thinking that Obi-Wan was joking, but he quieted down when no one else showed any amusement. He looked around with reddening cheeks and then settled on staring at the ground.

“Pay Obi-Wan no mind, should you,” Yoda said. “Fond of hyperbole, he is.” He came to a stop a few feet from Anakin and rested on his gimer stick. “Hello, young Skywalker.”

“Master Yoda,” Anakin said. “Is this your home?”

Yoda nodded.

“It suits you.”

“Your children, these are?”

“Yes.”

Yoda hobbled closer, looked Luke up and down with pursed lips, then tilted his ears towards Leia and went, “Hmmmmmm. Hello, young ones.”


“You’re a stranger. My father says to be wary of strangers because they want to eat us,” said Leia airily, sliding her eyes up towards Anakin. “So I probably shouldn’t talk to you.”

Obi-Wan choked, or laughed, or coughed. Anakin wasn’t sure which.

“Alright,” said Anakin, “back to the ship. All of you.”

Both twins looked disappointed. Yoda was, he supposed, an intriguing sight for a child. Anakin had almost forgotten how small and odd looking the curious little Jedi Master was. Growing up in the Jedi Order, he had gotten used to seeing the powerful and ancient Force user that Yoda was. In his memories Yoda seemed to loom large. And yet here he was, small and lumpy and giving Anakin’s children the benign gaze of a half-witted hermit.

“Go on,” he prompted when they hesitated. “I have to talk to Yoda.” Artoo bleeped and Anakin
added, “Yes, you too.”

The droid made what sounded like a squawk and settled back into the mud. Yoda chuckled and tapped Artoo with his stick lightly. Anakin sighed.

Obi-Wan pulled himself up. “Come along, children,” he said, herding them towards the ship. They allowed him to direct them, but looked back over their shoulders at Yoda, who lifted one clawed hand in a small wave.

“I’m only doing this for you, Obi-Wan,” Anakin called after them. “To make you happy.”

“I’m ecstatic.”

Anakin shook his head as he watched them walk up the boarding ramp. Then he turned back to Yoda.

“Fine looking younglings have you,” said Yoda.

Anakin hesitated, but decided to be civil. “Thank you.”

“Take after their mother, they do.”

Anakin walked over to the tree Yoda had been sitting in earlier and leaned against the trunk, looking down at the Jedi will half-lidded eyes. “I thought you would be part of the rebellion,” he said. “What are you accomplishing here?”


“Learn what?”

Yoda ran a hand over the sparse white hairs on his head. He started to walk away from Anakin, into the forest. “Come,” he said. “Show you something I will.”

“What has Obi-Wan told you?” he asked. He knew that Obi-Wan had managed to learn a way to speak with Yoda through the Force, even across the galaxy, allowing him to possibly brief Yoda on what they had been discussing before they even arrived in the Dagobah system.

“Worried about you, he is,” said Yoda.

“When is he not?” Anakin asked, dragging his feet to avoid overtaking Yoda. He brushed some branches out of his face and bent to pass beneath the thick foliage.

“To believe you about your alternate timeline, he does not want,” Yoda told him.

So they had discussed that. “What about you?”

“Lived very long, I have,” said Yoda, crawling over a log. Anakin wondered why he didn’t jump or levitate himself with the Force. Yoda was certainly capable of more than the slow, cane assisted walk he was affecting at the moment. “Seen many things, I have. Traveled to places unimaginable. With
ghosts, I have spoken. Doubt the possibilities, I do not.”

“You believes it’s possible, but do you believe it?” Anakin asked skeptically. It wasn’t like any Jedi to just accept what he had to say.

Yoda looked at him over his shoulder. “When last I saw you, young Skywalker, sensed much that was hidden about you, I did. Shrouded by secrets. Lies. Full of fear and mistrust. Clouded by the dark side, you were.”

“And now?”

Yoda stopped. He frowned. “Still much fear I see. Always so much fear in you. Your constant companion, this fear, from when you were a youngling. But fear not for yourself anymore. Now for your children. For Padmé.”

“Is that an improvement?” Anakin asked, wondering if Yoda had forgotten that fear for Padmé had been exactly what had lead him into Palpatine’s arms the first time.

“What it is, it is,” said Yoda, bowing his head. Anakin almost wanted to laugh at that. Yoda, accepting his flaws? Surely not.

“But no lies do I sense,” Yoda went on. “No secrets. Unburdened yourself of these, you have. Believe you, I must.”

“Did you tell Obi-Wan this?”

“Tell Obi-Wan many things, I do. Listen to them? Not always, he does.” Yoda turned and began to walk again.

“Where are you taking me?” Anakin asked, remembering that he hadn’t gotten an answer yet.

“Patience.”

Anakin sighed.

“Trust in my wisdom, you do not,” Yoda observed. “Think nothing I have to say, need you to hear.”

“On the contrary,” Anakin said. “Everyone knows you’re the wisest of the Jedi.”

“Wise enough your sarcasm to notice.”

“I don’t usually follow anyone deep into a creepy old forest,” said Anakin. “That should be a show of good faith.”

“Confident you are that I cannot harm you.”

“True, but I don’t expect you to try to harm me, either. You already let me go once, back when I was more of a threat. Mere days after I slaughtered the Jedi. I don’t really see the point in leaving me to my own devices for ten years then deciding I need to be fed to the Dagobah equivalent of a sarlacc, after all,” Anakin reasoned.

Yoda chuckled. Despite Anakin logically feeling he had nothing to fear from him, he found the chuckle mildly ominous. Yoda was different from how Anakin remembered him. Part of it was that he hadn’t been able to sense the Jedi Master’s presence earlier. Part of it was that he had found Yoda in a place like this at all; living in exile on an uninhabited planet with no sentient creatures
surrounding him. What did he do all day? It seemed so off for the being who had once been the head of the Jedi Order. Who had, in fact, been the head of the Jedi Order for hundreds of years.

“Powerful in the Force you have become,” said Yoda. “To manipulate time, great skill, indeed.”

There had once been a time when hearing such words from Yoda would have filled Anakin with happiness and pride. When he was a Padawan and even as a Jedi Knight. Now they seemed meaningless, a rote observation.

“The Dark Side of the Force opens pathways to things many would consider unnatural,” he said, conscious that he was quoting Palpatine. Sidious had boasted of this more than once, relishing his deviance from Jedi ways. Anakin said it without any passion or conviction.

“The Dark Side you say? No,” Yoda scoffed. “Hatred, fear, sorrow, this is what the Dark Side is made of. What brought you back from the dark, is this? Darkness does not free from darkness. Darkness consumes, enslaves, buries.”

“I know what I did,” said Anakin, thinking of the ancient Sith holocron he had uncovered. “Besides, regret brought me back, and that’s not the Jedi Way. You’re all about letting go and moving on, not thinking about the past or worrying about the future.” He paused thoughtfully, and couldn’t help but add; “In theory, anyway. The Jedi Order I actually remember was all about clinging desperately to its old rules.”

“Brought down by darkness, our Order was,” agreed Yoda. “Led into Sidious’ web of lies. Entrenched in politics and war. Lost our way, we did. Led us into ruin, I did.”

Anakin was surprised to hear Yoda admit guilt so frankly. “You didn’t burn the Jedi Temple,” he said, feeling generous. “I did. I know that.”

Yoda stopped and leaned heavily on his stick. “Prevented it, I should have. Prevented the Clone Wars, Palpatine’s rise, all of it, I should have done.”

“Is that regret I hear?”

“Feel regret, even a Jedi may. Rule us, we do not let it.”

Anakin took a look around at the dark forest with its drooping trees and scurrying creatures watching from the undergrowth. It looked to him like Yoda was doing nothing besides let regret rule him.

“I hope you’re not thinking that I’m going to share with you the secrets of time travel,” Anakin said. “Because I’m not.”

“No. Tempting, it is. But no.” Yoda looked up at him, ears twitching. He poked Anakin in the shin with the gimer stick and said, “My point, you are missing. Brought you back, hope did. Love. Remorse. Of the dark side these things are not.”

Anakin shook his head.

“Yes,” Yoda insisted, continuing to jab him. “Brought you back the Light did. The Dark did not.”

Anakin felt that he understood Yoda’s stubbornness. He could not entertain the notion that the Dark Side was stronger than the Light. If he accepted that Anakin had done something as profound as time travel, he would have to tell himself that it was an act of the Light Side. Anakin expected nothing less from him. Still, he couldn’t help but argue.
“You always told me that I had to let go,” he said. “That a Jedi doesn’t seek to control the Force. I refused to let go and I sought to control the Force. That is the power of the Dark Side.”

Yoda laughed mirthlessly. “If owe your existence here to the Dark Side, you do, why do you not use it?”

“Who says I don’t?”

Yoda narrowed his eyes and pursed his lips, then shook his head. If the old Jedi Master had been given to eye-rolling, Anakin was sure he would have done so. Instead he climbed atop a boulder and sat down, crossing his arms and closing his eyes.

“What are you doing?”

“Waiting.”

Anakin nodded towards an old tree not far off, indicating the cave opening half-hidden under its gnarled branches. “Is that what you wanted to show me? That cave is strong in the Dark Side. Yes, I can sense it.”

Yoda opened his eyes. “Show you your fears, it will.”

“I don’t need to go into a cave to see my fears,” said Anakin. He was a little disappointed. Was this all that Yoda had to show him? He had walked in the Dark for years, shrouded in it, breathing it in and out, circulating it through his veins.

“Afraid of what you will find within?” Yoda asked.

“I’m not afraid of the Dark Side,” Anakin insisted. “There’s nothing in there that I haven’t already seen countless times in my dreams. Or in reality for that matter. I lived through my greatest fears already, remember? Maybe you should show it to Obi-Wan.”

Yoda ran a hand over his head and nodded. He looks so old, Anakin thought. Old and wizened and beaten down.

“Why didn’t you ever try to face the Emperor again?” he asked suddenly. “You failed the first time but you lived. Why hide here? Why not try again?”

Yoda cocked his head to the side, his ears moving thoughtfully. “Not my destiny, it is, to die by Sidious’ hand.”

“All the more reason to fight him.”

“Fighting,” Yoda said quietly. “Done with it, I am. With war.”

“You mean you’ve given up.” Anakin frowned. He had his family to look after and to live for. What reason did Yoda have for throwing in the towel and hiding from the Empire? He looked down at the Jedi Master and thought that he looked truly small.

Yoda inspected his claws in silence for a moment, then said, “Learned to let go, I have.”

Anakin looked toward the cave and sighed. He wondered if Yoda thought that the cave would tempt him, that its power in the Dark Side would call to him. There was nothing seductive about it, though. It sat like a fat black spider at the base of the tree, waiting for flies, sending sticky tendrils out into the gloom.
“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “Palpatine is my responsibility, anyway.”

“Your daughter, I thought, your responsibility was.”

“For now.” Anakin returned his gaze to Yoda’s face. “But one day I will have to face him. I know this. It has to be me.”

“Ready to face him, you are not.”

“Because of my fear?” Anakin asked dismissively. Yoda was nothing if not predictable.

“Part of you he owns, still,” said Yoda. “Fear being a slave to his darkness again, you do.”

“I’m no one’s slave,” Anakin said. “Not the Jedi’s, not Palpatine’s, and not even—”

He broke off, realizing at the last moment that he had been about to say “not Padmé’s.”

“I will face him when I have to,” he said. “Whether I’m ready for it or not.”

He turned away from Yoda, away from the cave, and began to make his way back to the Twilight II. He could tell without looking back that Yoda was not following him.

“Well?” asked Obi-Wan when he climbed the gangplank, Artoo wheeling up beside him.

“Well?” Anakin echoed, shrugging.

Obi-Wan looked out at the swamp, peering around for a sign of Yoda.

Anakin shook his head. Yoda was probably still sitting on that rock, staring down the cave, thinking about his own regrets. “Where are the twins?” he asked.

Obi-Wan nodded towards the common room, a small area fitted with a couch and a dejarik table. Through the open doorway he could see the twins hunched over the table as they monitored the warring holographic creatures. Their heads, one blond and one brunette, almost touched as they watched the pieces intently.

“When are you going to tell them?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Soon,” said Anakin. “First, we should leave this place.”

“I take it your time with Master Yoda was not fruitful,” Obi-Wan observed with a sigh.

“Has it ever been?”

“I had hoped…”

“He did agree with me that you’re in denial, though,” Anakin said, allowing himself some satisfaction.

“I know,” Obi-Wan replied. “He thinks I’m being closed minded about the potential of the Force.”

“Because you are. We disagreed on a few minor points, like the Dark Side and the Light Side,” Anakin said, closing the hatch. “But you can’t have everything.”

“You’re being flippant.”

“I’m sorry, Master, I just find it odd that you brought us all the way out here so that he could tell me
I’m being crazy, when he’s the one living all alone in a swamp. And it’s amusing to me that it backfired since it turns out that he believes me.” Anakin frowned, realizing he had slipped and called Obi-Wan by his old honorific. It was amazing how Obi-Wan could still make him feel like a chastised Padawan even after several decades and an alternate life. He decided to just pretend that it hadn’t happened and move on.

“Yoda is very wise,” Obi-Wan said with a sigh. “I have listened to his council and accepted it. I had hoped that you would also.”

“He didn’t have any council to give me,” Anakin insisted. “Except to tell me that I have too much fear, and he’s been saying that since I was nine. That doesn’t tell me what I need to do, does it?”

“Anakin…”

“I talked to him, Obi-Wan. Plus, I’m going along with Padmé’s plan. What else do you expect from me?”

Obi-Wan hesitated for a moment, then reached out to put a hand on his shoulder. “This wasn’t about what you’re doing, Anakin. But I am concerned for you and I thought that speaking with Yoda before we go our separate ways would be beneficial. For both of us. You have a difficult time ahead of you and there will be no one to help you.”

“I’ll be fine. You worry too much, old man.”

“I suppose that I do. But someone has to.”

Anakin forced a smile, trying to make it look convincing. He would be lying to himself if he said that he wasn’t upset about the whole situation. He was very upset about losing Padmé. He could barely focus on the reality of soon losing Luke. Even Obi-Wan was going to leave a hole; he could not deny it to himself. He had just finally gotten used to having Obi-Wan around again after so many years of being utterly alone as Darth Vader. But he could not cry to Obi-Wan about this. The decision was made already. The twins needed to be kept safe. He needed to be strong for Leia and not wallow in the feelings of despair and abandonment that crowded at his mind when he looked for Padmé and she wasn’t there. Holding onto Obi-Wan for support at this point would just be selfish weakness motivated by fear.

And isn’t that what Yoda thought had always defined him? And was he wrong? I can’t be afraid again, Anakin thought. Not now. Not ever.
I'm not giving up
I'm just giving in [x]

Leia was 11

It was the first birthday she had ever spent without Luke. Without her mother. She didn’t celebrate it.

Father was there but she was not speaking to him. She had not spoken to him since that awful day when he betrayed what little trust she had left in him and sent Luke away with Uncle Ben.

He said she couldn’t keep this up forever, but he was wrong. He underestimated her. She would prove it.

On the day of her birthday they were in hyperspace, so it hardly felt like a day at all, but according to the 
Twilight II’s computer it was. Father tried to give her a present, but she wouldn’t take it. She wouldn’t look at him.

Threepio hovered solicitously at her shoulder, trying to speak to her on her father’s behalf, but she reached up and switched the droid off. There were days when she would allow him to intermediate, but not this day.

She stared into the shimmering abyss of hyperspace and she cried silent, angry tears.

Leia was 12

Her father took her to the Vohai system. She would have asked him why they were there, but she had spent a year proving to him that she could, indeed, keep this up forever.

It was not that she had never spoken a single word to him in all that time, but she had managed to be nearly entirely mute. She spoke to Threepio when she had to. Threepio spoke to her father for her.

On Vohai she felt a presence she had not felt in a very long time. She turned around and there, in the dusty spaceport hangar, she saw him. Her brother. “Luke!” she shouted, and he smiled a big dopey grin and in that moment everything was alright.

But Mother wasn’t there. It was just Luke and Uncle Ben.

She swallowed her disappointment. She crushed it into a kernel that she kept weighted in her heart.

She listened to Luke tell her about everywhere they had gone, the planets he had seen, about the
beings he had met.

He had been with Mother only a few months ago. Mother was with the Rebellion, she was in a secret location, she was conspiring against the Empire. The Senator from Naboo had returned and given them new hope for their cause.

Leia swallowed her envy. It settled into the pit of her stomach.

She told Luke about the gang of evil force users that Father had killed. There had been five of them. She would never know their names. Their names didn’t matter. They had called each other brother, sister, had laughed and thought that their strange spinning lightsabers would somehow defeat Anakin Skywalker. He had set their bodies adrift in the depths of space.

She had watched them float away, one hand splayed against the viewport, her breath fogging on the transparisteel. It was a sight she would never forget. She tried to describe it to Luke but she didn’t think he understood.

Their time together was too short. Father stole Luke away from her, and Uncle Ben took her to the side “to have a talk.” She braced herself for it. She could guess what he was going to say.

“Your father tells me that you are refusing to continue your training.”

“I don’t want to learn anything from him,” she said.

“What if I trained you instead?”

She allowed hope to tickle at her heart. “I could go with you and Luke?”

He shook his head. “Luke would go with your father. You would come with me.”

She lowered her eyes to hide the disappointment in them. Is that what Father had been talking with Ben about? Swapping them, so he could have the good child?

“I don’t want to learn about the Force,” she said quietly. “I don’t want a lightsaber anymore.”

Every time she saw her father’s saber, lit up in blue, she thought about how the blood never stuck to it. Flesh, metal, blood; it all burned away like nothing had ever happened, like nothing had ever been touched. And yet, when she held it, when he tried to convince her to practice her forms with the innocuous training droid, she thought she could feel the fear of the children who had died before she was born. Trapped there, memories like ghosts. She remembered the laughter turned to screams of the sisters and brothers.

It was all the same. They were all the same.

“You were doing so well, Leia,” Ben said. She lifted her eyes to see him stroking his beard, his eyes a little sad, but knowing.

“I’m sorry, Uncle Ben.”

“You don’t need to apologize. But I do worry about you. Your father worries…” He trailed off at the steel that came into her eyes at the mention of her father’s concern. “Your mother would want you to be able to protect yourself.”

“Then tell my father to give me a blaster. Or tell my mother that I want to be with her.”

“Your mother knows—”
“Then why won’t she come see me?” Leia asked, fighting back tears.

“You will see her, Leia. It is just unwise for all of us to meet in one place,” he explained patiently. “You will see her soon, I promise.” He put a hand on her shoulder, but she shook it off roughly.

“I don’t want any more promises,” she said. “Father promised we’d all be together again soon and that was a long time ago.”

“Leia…” he sighed, “please just talk to your father. He’s trying to keep you safe.”

“I don’t want to be safe. I want to be with Mother and Luke. Tell him to go kill the Emperor so we can all be together. Then I’ll speak to him.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“It is. He’s just afraid to face him.” She thought of the bodies floating away into space, of the way her father said, *I didn’t want you to have to see that,* but she had seen it anyway, and she wasn’t sorry that she had. He could kill anyone. He could kill the Emperor if he really wanted to.

Uncle Ben said, very cautiously, “He just wants to keep you safe.”

“Then he should let me go with you and Luke, or go be with Mother, so he can be alone,” she said.

“You don’t want him to face the Emperor alone,” said Uncle Ben.

“Then you go with him.”

“Then who will look after you and your brother?”

“Our Mother,” she said, exasperated. “We will be just fine.”

“Your father would never allow that. All three of you alone like that. One of us must be with you,” he explained.

“Then why is Mother all by herself?”

“She’s not. She’s with the rebellion. She’s with Ahsoka.”

With Ahsoka. That meant that she was with Mara, as well. The idea that Mara saw her mother when she did not make Leia feel hot and cold all at once.

“I would be safe with Mother and Ahsoka,” she said. Ahsoka had been a Jedi, just like Father and Ben.

Ben was silent. Then he said, reluctantly, “Your father doesn’t want you to be around Mara.”

She already knew this. But hearing it again, having him spell it out, that she was here while her mother was with the interloper who had torn their family apart…

“I hate him,” she said.

“No you don’t. You don’t hate him.”

“Everything is his fault.”

“Leia—”
But she was already walking away. She wished she could run and hide, become lost in the bustling spaceport, hitch a ride off this planet before her father could make her go with him again. Then she would find Mother, wherever she was.

She wanted Luke to come with her. She wondered if she could convince him to do it.

But it was not to be. Luke told her that everything would be alright and he asked her to please be kind to Father. “He misses us too, you know,” he said. “He’s very lonely, I can tell. You’re all that he has.”

Leia didn’t want her last time seeing her brother for who-knew-how-long to end in a fight, so she didn’t argue. She didn’t make any promises, either.

She almost thought that she should take Uncle Ben up on his offer. Maybe she should go with him, while Luke went with Father. Why are they even leaving it up to me?

But she didn’t want to be with Uncle Ben. The thought of being taken away from Mother, Luke, and Father suddenly terrified her and she could not do it. Anyway, Father would be happier with Luke and why should he get to shunt her off on Ben and be happier without her? She had never been as close to Uncle Ben as Luke was; he’d always been more focused on her brother and clearly he did not actually want to take her instead. He was only making the offer because Father didn’t want her anymore.

She hugged Luke goodbye and felt no shame in her tears. She had never known true loneliness until they had taken Luke away from her. She didn’t want to let him go a second time.

They were on the move again. Her loneliness made her almost want to speak to Father, to have him hold her like when she was very small, when he could carry around both her and Luke, one in each arm. But then she remembered that he was the one who was responsible for all of this, he was the one who had decided that she and Luke must be separated, that it was too dangerous for them to be together. She decided that she would rather be lonely than forgive him.

Leia was 13

She sat very still, her eyes wide open, but barely seeing the space around her as she focused her energy on amplifying the muffled sound of voices from the other room. The sound of waves crashing against rocks outside pummeled at the edges of her consciousness, but she filtered it out, along with the shrill caw of seabirds circling the shore. She listened to her parents talking about her.

“I can’t do this anymore, Padmé.” Her father’s voice was very tired. He was always tired these days. He barely slept. “She still hardly speaks to me. I thought being with you would make her happy, but…”

Leia frowned. How could he be so obtuse? Being with Mother did make her happy, but they were not whole without Luke. She was not whole without Luke. Things were not right unless they were all together in one place.

“She’s at a trying age. She’s needs some stability.” Mother paused, then sighed. “Perhaps if you joined us... joined with the Rebellion, we could be together again.”

“What about keeping Leia hidden?”
“I don’t know,” Mother said, sounding frustrated. “I don’t want her in the middle of a war, but…”

“Come with us instead, then. It’s been how many years now? Your plan didn’t work, Padmé. Maybe it’s time you left them, and came back to us.”

“I’m still doing good,” Mother insisted. “It’s taking much longer than I initially anticipated, yes, but we’re making progress. We are. I can’t give up now. I can’t leave just to be with you. But you could join us, now. The offer of clemency Mon Mothma extended to you still stands.”

“I don’t want clemency.”

“Ani…”

“They want me to be the Hero With No Fear again… poster boy for the Rebellion just like I was for the Republic… but I’m not that person anymore. They can try to spin my time with the Emperor however they want, but it won’t work.”

Leia pressed her lips into a thin line. She agreed with her father on that point, at least. Nothing he could do now would wash away the past.

“You have to stop doing this,” said Mother. “I have forgiven you. Obi-Wan has forgiven you. When will you forgive yourself?”

“Maybe when Leia forgives me I’ll consider it.”

“That is far too much responsibility to put on your daughter,” Mother said, unamused.

“I didn’t mean it.” He paused. “You know that Mon and the rest just want me to join because I’m your husband and it’s bad for them if one of their leaders is married to an unknown factor. They want to give me a rank so that they can keep me in line. That’s all.”

“I am very aware of the politics,” Mother told him. “Accepting a place with the Rebellion might make you uncomfortable, but that doesn’t mean it’s not the right thing to do.”

Leia allowed a smile to play across her lips. Leia had heard Mother’s many speeches rallying the galaxy to the cause, broadcast over secret frequencies that the Empire was constantly trying to squash. She sounded like she was about to start orating to Father.

“I’m already on the same side,” he said, wearily. “I hate the Emperor. They hate the Empire. I’m already helping them. If they want to take credit for what I’ve done, let them. But I’m not taking orders from anyone.”

“You’re too stubborn. You and Leia both.”

“I’m not the one who refuses to speak.”

“She’s angry. She’s like you.”

“I know she is. That’s what worries me.”

Leia felt the heavy, salted air of the oceanic planet settling over her, and she blinked, brushing at her cheeks. She got up and went to her window, pulling it shut. Her parents’ voices faded into unintelligible murmurs. They were still trying to decide what to do with her. She knew that whatever solution they came up with, it would not make her happy.
Leia was 14

She sat at a different window, looking out across a sun dappled courtyard as Astreia and Winter Organa, Princesses of Alderaan, walked brusquely past. Autumn leaves fell from the trees lining the walkway, swirling languidly around the hurrying girls. The two of them made a striking pair. Astreia had jet black curls and brown skin, while Winter had hair so blonde that it seemed silver against her pale complexion. They were both adopted, but Astreia was the first, the elder, and was the heir to the Organa family dynasty.

Winter glanced up, caught Leia’s eye, and smiled. Leia lifted one hand in a brief wave.

She sighed as she watched them go, then retreated from her window to fling herself listlessly down onto her bed. This room was not a prison, but it often felt like it was.

Astreia had purpose and drive that Leia admired from a distance, wishing she could be with her when she walked through the halls of the Imperial Senate, head held high. Winter was always at her sister’s side.

But Leia wasn’t allowed to go near the senate. She wasn’t allowed to leave Aldera, much less Alderaan. Sometimes it felt like she wasn’t even allowed to leave her room in the Organa family castle.

The problem wasn’t Alderaan. She liked this planet, and she loved looking at the mountains. They reminded her of distant memories of Osallao, of the mountains ringing Breelden, of the home she would probably never be able to revisit. They reminded her of Luke.

The problem wasn’t the Organas. They were all unfailingly kind to her. Princess Astreia, Winter, Bail, and Queen Breha. Officially, she was one of them; she bore the name Filia Organa and people were told that she was another one of their daughters. Adopted, obviously, because she had come to them at the age of 13, but no one besides the immediate family knew her true origins.

They never treated her like an unwelcome guest or a burden, despite the fact that she knew she was both.

The problem was that she felt as if she were wasting away here in this castle. Everyone else was doing something. Acting against the Empire, subverting it from the inside out with bravery and cunning. She should be there in the Senate beside Astreia, the way Winter was.

Or, if not helping the Rebellion through the Organas, she should be by her mother’s side. She should be with her brother, wherever he was. She still heard bits and pieces from Bail, from Astreia, letting her know that Mother was with the Rebellion, helping them. Padmé Amidala was a name synonymous with hope.

She should be with her father, who had become the scourge of the Empire now that he was free of her, free of the daughter who had always held him back.

It was death to publicly mention the name Anakin Skywalker, the Jedi who had returned with the seemingly singular purpose of chewing through the Empire’s forces wherever he went. But people still whispered the name among themselves. Some said he was a General within the Rebellion, others said he was a rogue fighter.

Leia’s hands tightened into fists, balling up the coverlet as she thought of her father.
He had left her here, as nothing more than a burden for the Organas to look after. To hide. To keep safe.

It was because of him that she wasn’t allowed to do anything to fight. He was the dragon who kept her locked up in this tower. And worst of all, he had flown away and left the keys in someone else’s hands.

She would never forgive him. Never.

Leia was 15

Life was not all bad. Some of it was very good.

She had her first kiss in the hanging gardens, surrounded by sweet smelling spring flowers. Winter’s lips tasted of tart Alderaanian wine, and they giggled together, shyly, hiding their faces behind nervously fluttering hands.

There were sweet moments like this. She did not feel lonely then.

But Winter and Astreia would be gone again, on their diplomatic missions, gone performing duties both senatorial and rebellious. Leia wondered if Winter thought of her, out there, but she was probably too busy doing so many important things.

Bail and Breha worried over their daughters, though they tried to hide it. Leia felt ill equipped to comfort them, to be the good daughter in their place… she wasn’t sure she knew how to be a good daughter to anyone, anymore. But she sat with them; she held Breha’s hand and talked with Bail and they both hugged her and told her how happy they were to have her. How glad they were of her company. And she was happy with them, sometimes, when she could bury the cold core of sadness that threatened to turn everything in life to gray.

Mother came to visit her, sometimes. It was dangerous, but she would come anyway, and sit and brush Leia’s hair and tell her soon, soon, soon now everything will be better. Stay safe, my beautiful daughter, that’s all I want from you.

She would dream of Luke, sometimes. She dreamt of him on far off planets, with Uncle Ben, meditating or learning the ways of the Force. She dreamed that she was him, holding a green lightsaber he had fashioned with his own hands from a crystal he had gathered from a cave below an ancient Jedi Temple. She felt stronger, better, happier as she dreamt.

She was sure that these dreams were real.

She dreamed of him with Mara, with Ahsoka and Ben smiling over them as they sparred. Mara’s blade was a brilliant magenta. Predictably garish, like the girl herself. Or at least, the girl Leia remembered from many years ago. She could sense that Luke was traitorously happy in Mara’s presence, now. She woke from that dream with hot stinging jealousy needling through her veins.

She had refused the training. She knew this. But that did not mean that Mara could take her place. She knew that Ahsoka and Ben had allowed this to happen behind Father’s back, but somehow she was still angry at him. He couldn’t prevent Luke and Mara from being together, but he had still managed to keep her apart from her brother for years.
It was all wrong. Terribly, terribly wrong.

The war was in full swing, now. The Empire still pretended that it wasn’t, on the official news channels, because the fighting was still centered around backwater planets. The Rebellion, and not even her father, could seem to shake the hold the Emperor had on the inner core systems. But Leia knew about the victories and the defeats that happened far away from the peaceful Alderaanian system because they were more deeply connected to the Rebellion than anyone suspected.

She would have escaped, if it wasn’t for Bail and Breha and not wanting them to be held responsible for letting her go. She was not even sure what she would do if she did leave Alderaan. Could she follow her dreams to where Luke was? She was afraid to hold a lightsaber, still, afraid of what she might do if she followed in her father’s footsteps and became a rogue fighter. She still kept up with her blaster practice, but the long ago lessons in the mountain meadows of Osallao had faded from memory. She was not sure that she could survive out in the galaxy on her own, anymore.

**Leia was 16**

She sensed her father’s presence on Alderaan before anyone told her that he was there.

She burst from her room and marched down the stairs, across long corridors, her feet propelled by equal parts fury and excitement. Her senses could not tell her his exact location, but she headed to Bail Organa’s study, knowing that she could find answers there.

Queen Breha intercepted her in the vestibule. “My dear child,” she said, laying cool hands on Leia’s cheeks, “you look like a wild thing.”

Leia took several calming breaths, then said, “My father is here.”

Breha nodded. “And I have just got done telling him what a sweet young woman you have grown to be.”

Leia laughed with an incredulous snort, but then quieted at Breha’s concerned look. The Queen didn’t deserve her ire or her bad manners.

“What is he? Can I see him?”

“Yes, but be careful, Leia.” Breha held a finger to her lips. “No one can know that he’s here.”

Leia knew the drill. It was the same when Mother visited. They were among the Empire’s Most Wanted.

She approached the study, and heard voices within. “…the ability to blow up a planet is insignificant compared to the power of the Force,” her father was saying.

“And yet it’s a very real threat to any planet caught in its sights,” replied Bail. “Are you sure this is the best course of action for you to take?”

“Yes. No technological terror is more dangerous than Palpatine himself. If you destroy his toy, he’ll just build another.”

She pushed open the double doors that led into the study with both hands, lingering in the doorway
for a moment. Her Father was standing with Bail by a window, one of the security shaded one-way viewports that offered the study a view of the mountains without allowing for the possibility of spies looking in. They cut off their conversation and both looked over at her. Leia let the doors fall shut and sauntered in, chin out, trying to look as careless possible.

Bail left the room, laying a hand on her shoulder and giving her a brief nod as he passed by.

She looked at her father. It had been nearly three years since she had seen him last.

His hair was lighter. He had stopped dying it the dark black that he had when she was young and they lived on Osallao, in what must have been some half-assed attempt at a disguise. There was a little bit of gray in the sandy brown, even though he was not yet forty. It was longer, too, and he had a scattering of facial hair that was not quite a beard, but the scruff of someone who just couldn’t remember to shave regularly. It made him look like a stranger.

“Well,” he said after a few moments of tense silence, “are you going to talk to me, now?”

“What are you doing here?”

He shifted. “I wanted to see you.”

She kept her voice even and low, because it wouldn’t do for people to hear her shouting. “Just like that? It’s been years and you finally just feel like paying me a visit?”

“I’ve been busy.”

“So I’ve heard.”

He pushed away from the window and approached her cautiously. “I have something for you,” he said, reaching out.

She recoiled. “I don’t want anything from you.”

“It’s not from me. It’s from Luke.”


“I see Luke.” He took another step towards her. “From time to time.”

She told herself sternly that hearing that would not make her cry. She reached out tentatively and let him place something in her hand. If she was suspicious that it was from Luke before, holding it erased her doubts. It was a stone that was slightly frosted, a pale opalescent white. She felt as if she remembered it from a dream.

“What is it?” she asked.

“He said it made him think of you. That’s all.”

She closed her fist around the stone. It was cool to the touch. It made her feel calmer.

“Is that all?” she echoed.

He put his hands on her shoulders, hesitantly, in what seemed like an attempt at a hug. “Leia,” he said.

“Father.”
“I can’t stay long. I have to go soon.”

“Where are you going?”

He shook his head.

“Take me with you,” she blurted, and she hated the pleading in her voice. But he had been right. She couldn’t do this forever.

He just kept shaking his head. “I can’t.”

“Why not? Are you punishing me?”

“What? No.”

“You left me here all alone.”

“Don’t they treat you well?”

“Of course they treat me well. That’s not the point! You dropped me off like I was dead weight and you come back after three years just to tell me you’re leaving again?” Her voice rose, and she forced it down again.

“You didn’t want to be with me, Leia. You made that very clear. I thought you would be happier here.”

She just shook her head, disbelieving, and twisted away from him, shaking his hands free.

“We thought... your mother and I... thought you needed some stability. And neither of us could give that to you. Not while fighting the Empire.”

“You don’t understand a thing,” she said.

“Leia I didn’t come here to argue with you.”

She turned her back on him and looked down at her hands, letting the stone tumble down her fingertips and float from palm to palm.

He stood in silence for some time, waiting for her to speak. When she didn’t, he turned with a sigh and headed for the door.

“Wait,” she cried out, snatching the stone from the air and turning quickly to fling herself towards him. She threw her arms around him and buried her face in his side, saying muffled promises into the warm brown cloth of his cloak. “I’ll talk to you. I’ll never shut up. Just don’t leave me behind. Don’t leave me. Take me with you. Let me see Luke.”

He didn’t respond for a moment, just wrapped her up in a hug that was familiar yet new. It had been a very long time since she had felt her father’s arms around her or smelled the sharp, slightly charred odor of motor oil that seemed to always follow him home from the shop. He still smelled like that now, despite having left Agolerga’s Droid Manufacture and Speeder Repair behind a long time ago. She didn’t think he would be alive if he’d not had time to tinker on a droid or work on his spaceship amid all the rebellion heroics.

“I won’t be seeing Luke for a while,” he said at last, with a hitch in his voice. She looked up, realizing that she had made him cry. “I can’t take you where I’m going.”
“Why not?”

“I just can’t.” He took a deep breath. “The next time I see you, we’ll all be together. I promise.”

He had to peel her arms away and push her back as he tried to leave. He patted her face affectionately, like she was still seven years old, not nearly seventeen, and he was sending her off to school.


But he went.

It was not until a few days later that Leia awoke in the middle of the night with a sharp pain in her heart. She thought she was dying. She slipped from her bed and lay on the floor, her face pressed into the rough fibers of the braided rug. She stared wide-eyed into the darkness and clawed at the fabric of her nightgown. Something terrible was happening.

Threepio came to her, shuffling, unable to bend down fully. “Mistress Filia!” he said, using the assumed name she had gone by since coming to Aldera. “What is the matter? Should I get help?”

The horrible pain subsided.

“I’m fine,” she said, pushing herself up, her fingers tingling with the memory of electric shocks. “I just had a bad dream.”

In the morning it was all over the HoloNews. For the first time the Imperial channels did not hesitate to broadcast the name Anakin Skywalker to the far reaches of the galaxy. Skywalker, renegade Jedi and notorious war criminal, was dead. He was heroically cut down by Imperial Guards, they said, while attempting to assassinate the Emperor, just as other Jedi had done so long ago when Palpatine was still the Supreme Chancellor.

“As long as any one of them lives they will not cease to pursue me with murderous intent,” Palpatine said in a speech from the Imperial Palace steps. The rest of it faded from her hearing into a blur of words. She could not understand it no matter how many times she rewound the footage, replayed it, listened.

But she was not surprised and she did not cry.

Bail and Breha tried to make her turn it off, to stop watching it, but when they switched off the holoprojector she just reached out into the Force and turned it back on again. It was easier to use the Force than to move her limbs.

The Empire was safe, he said, from the Jedi menace. But he encouraged all citizens to be vigilant, for there were more of those fanatics still lurking in the wild spaces of the galaxy. If you suspect someone you know of being a Jedi, you must turn them in. If you suspect rebel sympathizers or rebel activity in your star system, you must contact your local Imperial authorities.

Astreia and Winter were there, she thought dully. On Coruscant. At the Imperial Center. She wondered if their parents were worried about them, as she was only distantly aware that Bail and Breha were seated on either side of her, their arms around her.

“You daughters are unsafe,” she said, watching the hologram shudder as a reporter stopped a rodian male on the street and asked him if the idea of Jedi still roaming the stars made him worry for the safety and security of his family.
She felt a wetness on her hair. Breha was crying tears for her because she could not, whispering, “Tú eres segura, eres amada, eres segura,” and Leia wondered who she was speaking to.

She didn’t know when they finally got her to stop watching the HoloNews. She would never be able to remember much about the moments or the days after that. All she would remember is that she did not sleep, or eat, or cry.

*Leia was 17*

“You cut your hair,” she said, looking at her mother’s head, so foreign with its tufts of close-cropped brown that barely curled around the ears.

“I shaved it all off,” said Mother.

“Why?”

“It’s tradition.”

Leia looked away. She had received enough of an education about galactic cultures to know which Naboo tradition required a woman to shave her head.

It was such an old, archaic tradition. She would not have thought before that her mother would follow such an outdated piquancy. She pictured her alone on a secret rebel base, slowly running the vibroshears across the dome of her skull, while her curls fell in clumps to the floor.

Had she cried? Leia wondered. Was that tradition, too?

She looked at her mother’s hair and wondered why she had not come to visit her sooner. It had been months since Father’s death. And not a word from Mother or Luke in all that time.

“Are you here to tell me that it won’t be long, now?” she asked.

“No.” Her mother reached up, unconsciously, to touch the nape of her neck where her hair ended. “We’ve had many setbacks.”

Leia laughed. It was a dry, harsh sound.

“I came to ask if you wanted to leave here, to come with me.”

“No,” said Leia.

There had been a time when she had wanted nothing more. But this strange woman did not seem like her mother, now. This was Padmé Amidala, the Rebellion leader, with cheekbones that looked gaunt and hollow circles around her eyes. She was fighting a war that could never be won, trying to kill the unkillable monster.

“I think I would rather stay here.”

Padmé nodded. “Just stay safe,” she said, running her hand down the length of Leia’s waterfall hair. “Just stay hidden, my beautiful daughter. Someday, this will all be over, and we can be together. You, and me, and Luke.”
The words rang false. The picture was incomplete.

Leia was 18

She looked out her window one day to see that a moon had appeared in the skies above Alderaan. Which was strange, because Alderaan did not have a moon.

And more than that, she sensed a presence that puzzled her. It was something like him, like that person she never thought about, but faint and sickly and wrong. Corrupted.

She was summoned to the throne room, which was another strange thing. Queen Breha did not often sit at court these days. But she put on a formal white dress and did her hair up in loose buns and went, dutifully, to stand before the Alderaanian nobility, politicians, and hangers-on. She tucked the white stone into an inner pocket. It was the only thing that gave her strength.

When she got to the throne room things were made more clear.

Grand Moff Tarkin, a skeletal man in an Imperial suit, smiled thinly at her with predatory malice and told her that her presence was required on the space station orbiting the planet. “Your father,” he said, “would very much like to see you.”

“My father is here,” Leia said, nodding to Bail. It was the story she had told all the years she had lived on Alderaan with the royal family and now it was true enough. Bail was the only father she had left, and the other one, well, he was barely just a memory of too many goodbyes.

“Don’t play coy,” said Tarkin. “I know who you are, Leia Skywalker.”

Leia look to Bail again, trying to hide the alarm in her eyes.

“How preposterous,” said Queen Breha from her throne, her eyes flashing with royal indignation. “What sort of cheap gossip are you basing your operations on these days, Tarkin?”

“That is Grand Moff Tarkin to you,” he shot back, rolling his r’s. “And you, your highness, are under arrest for harboring the daughter of known criminals.”

“Under arrest?” Breha’s icy glare could have frozen him where he stood, if his blood was not as cold as a trandoshan’s already. “How dare you presume such a thing. If you lay a hand on me, or my daughter—”

“Oh we won’t be laying any hands on you,” Tarkin hissed. “Though we have already taken your other daughters into custody on Coruscant, your prison will be this planet. You are not permitted to leave Alderaan. In fact, no one is permitted to leave Alderaan, for the time being.”

“Why?” asked Bail. “What game are you playing?”

“In due time, Prince Organa, in due time. For now, all you need be assured of is that any noncompliance from you will result in the swift execution of your daughters on Coruscant. All I need do is give the word.” Tarkin turned to Leia, disregarding Bail’s protests. “I have little patience. I’m on a schedule. As I said, you father would like to see you. Will you come with me willingly, or…” He jerked a finger to the battalion of stormtroopers which flanked him.
“I’ll come with you,” Leia said.

“Excellent. Now, a precaution.” Tarkin ordered a stormtrooper forward. He held bluish glowing restraints in his hands.

“Stuncuffs?” asked Bail. “Is that really necessary?”

“For a Jedi? It is the least of the precautions I could take,” said Tarkin. “It will ensure that she cannot use her arcane arts to attack my men.”

“I’m not a Jedi,” Leia told him.

He scoffed. She put out her hands and accepted the cuffs. All she could think of was the faraway presence, faint, yet familiar.

Tarkin and his stormtroopers led her to a shuttle which was to take them to the gigantic space station hovering in orbit.

When the shuttle docked she was led to yet another throne room. There she saw him. The black cloaked figure draped on the chair swiveled away from the viewport and the shadow beneath the hood surveyed her for a moment. She could feel rather than see the slow smiled which spread across his face. She didn’t need the HoloNews images to tell her who this was.

“You’re not my father,” she said dryly, trying to maintain a careless air. “I’m a little disappointed.”

He chuckled and it sounded like snakes slithering over one another. “No, I am not,” he agreed. “Think of me as a grandfather… if you will.”

“No, thank you.”

The Emperor rose. He slowly made his way down the steps from the throne, red cloaked Imperial guards following in his wake.

“Walk with me, young Skywalker,” he said. “I have something to show you.”

Leia, her hands still bound by the glowing cord, which sapped at her strength and her focus and would send shocks through her if she tried to use the force, said tartly, “I was promised my father. I came along willingly, now where is he?”

“I don’t recall promising you anything,” Tarkin said. “I merely shared my opinion that your father would, no doubt, be happy to see you. If, theoretically, he was given the chance.”

Leia sneered at him, but the Emperor just waved him silent. “Come along Tarkin, but keep quiet.”

Tarkin sniffed, but said, “Yes, your excellency.”

The Emperor led them down several corridors and elevators, winding their way through the labyrinthine insides of the giant space station. Eventually they came to a room that was heavily guarded and fortified. The Emperor waved his way in.

In the room was a bacta tank, set up in the middle of the room on a raised platform like a trophy case. Leia drew a sharp intake of breath. Inside the tank was her father. He was stripped down to just his undergarments and his cybernetic arm had been removed, so that she could see the stump of his severed arm for the first time in her life.

Several tubes and wires were laced into his body and a breathing mask was over his face. She
followed the red snake of some tubes and noticed that his blood was slowly dripping into a reservoir on the outside of the tank.

“Father,” she said, tripping forward, ignoring the warning jolt of pain from her cuffs. She looked at the Emperor in horror. “What are you doing to him?”

“Keeping him neutralized,” said the Emperor. “Your father, the fool, thought he could take me on all by himself. Just as arrogant as Yoda once was. He failed, and I captured him. But I’m sure you have already pieced that together.”

“Is he alright?” she asked, hating the small sound of her voice.

“He’s alive,” said the Emperor.

“Just barely,” Tarkin spoke up with evident pleasure in his voice. “You see, it appears to be a bacta tank, but it is not quite the same. The solution you see has some of the nutrient properties of bacta in order to keep the subject alive, but it is also designed to dampen his ability to draw upon the force. And it causes him near unimaginable pain.”

Leia stared at the ghoulish man in horror, unable to fully comprehend the satisfaction he derived from such a statement.

“Yes,” said the Emperor. “It’s so sad to see him like this, is it not? He was once so promising.” He sounded anything but sad.

“Yes, I recall,” Tarkin said. “Oh, and did we mention that the tank is set up to allow for periodic electrical shocks to be transferred through the substance? It is an added layer of precaution. He has now been subjected to so many repeated applications of electroshock that I hazard there is not much left to his brain. Even if he were to be released from the tank, he may likely remain in a vegetative state.”

If Leia were not wearing her own electrocuting braces, she would have killed Tarkin on the spot. She knew exactly how she would have done it. The images flashed through her mind. Tarkin falling to his knees, clawing at his throat, eyes bulging as spittle flew from his mouth.

Instead she simply stared at him long and hard.

“Yes, Wilhuff, thank you. I thought I had asked you to remain silent,” said the Emperor.

“My apologies, your highness. I simply get so excited when witnessing your technological marvel, here. It is the most perfect Force suppressant imaginable. And as Skywalker is arguably one of the most powerful Force users we have had the displeasure of knowing, he makes for the perfect subject to test its capabilities.”

“It’s capabilities have been thoroughly tested before Skywalker,” said Palpatine, seeming to forget that Leia was even there. “I spent years preparing a suitable cage for my former ally. It had better be up to snuff.”

“Of course,” Tarkin said, nodding.

“Now,” the Emperor said, turning his wizened, robe obscured face to Leia. “You see that your father is alive. Does this surprise you?”

Not as much as it might have, if she had not sensed his presence when the space station entered Alderaan’s orbit. But she nodded. She collected herself. She thought about her mother’s stiff back
and her shorn head held high as she released another forbidden speech to the underground HoloNet. She thought of Queen Breha’s icy stare.

“Why,” she asked, “have you not just killed him?”

“Kill Lord Vader?” the Emperor laughed. “What would I do to amuse myself, then? Oh but in all seriousness, child, he is far more useful to me alive. If out of commission.”

“How.”

“Let the HoloNews broadcast his demise to the galaxy at large,” said the Emperor. “It's good for morale. Bad if you’re a rebel. However, I doubt I could convince you, Leia, to join me without your father to use as leverage.”

She tried to hide her shock at his straightforward words. “Join you? I would never join you. And certainly not while you’re torturing my father.”

“Oh, but I think you will, when you have heard me out,” said Palpatine. He went to the tank and put a gnarled hand on it, as if carelessly caressing the man trapped within. “You see,” he said, turning back to Leia, “I have in my hands the lives of people you care about. Your father quite obviously. But also the people of Alderaan. Your caretakers, the Organas. The girls, Princess Astreia and Winter. Your sisters? Friends? What are they to you?”

Leia thought of Winter, lips like wine, hair like the moonlight, and Astreia, who had all of Breha’s poise and savvy but also loved mountain flute music and dancing barefoot in the grass. She swallowed and schooled her face into a blank mask.

“What are you saying?”

“I have a proposition for you,” said the Emperor. “I would like for you to stand by my side, be named my heir apparent and right hand, to take on the mantle of my apprentice. If you do this, I will not kill your father, execute your friends, or obliterate Alderaan from the galaxy.”

Leia was silent for a long moment. “How would you even do that?” she asked finally. “Obliterate Alderaan, I mean. The entire planet? I don’t understand.”

“Don’t get Tarkin started on it,” the Emperor said, waving a hand at the Grand Moff. “He’ll talk your ear off all day about the capabilities of our newly completed Death Star. And he’d be eager to show you. But I think you would like to avoid a demonstration.”

Leia swallowed hard. Her eyes trailed to her father in his cage of misery. “You must know I’ll never be on your side,” she said. “Even if I pretended to be.”

The Emperor chuckled. “I think you could be persuaded. There is already so much anger in you. Hatred. It feeds on you, and you rely on it to survive. Yes, I can feel it. I can feel all the ways you have fantasized about killing Tarkin and I since you boarded this ship. It is very good. You are very promising. You lack formal training, but that can be rectified.”

“Just because I hate you, you think I’ll join you?” Leia marveled.

“I think you will join me because you have no choice. I have all the control.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“For now, it is enough that you pledge yourself to me, agree to learn from me, but most importantly,
you will appear by my side. It will be broadcast all over the galaxy that the Daughter of Amidala and Skywalker has renounced her mother and father’s traitorous ways and shed the name which those despicable rebels gave her. You will declare that you are no longer Leia Skywalker, but…” and here he hesitated, cocked his head to the side, and smiled, “…Darth Vestre. Yes.”

“You’re insane.”

“If you do not wish to make this bargain, I will begin by sending so much electricity into your father’s tank that you will watch him burn alive,” said the Emperor calmly. “He may not have the capacity to even feel himself die, anymore, but I’m sure that you will.”

Leia swallowed thickly and felt something tugging at her eyes.

“After that, if you are still unwilling, we shall pay a visit to the control room and witness the destruction of Alderaan. Tarkin hopes that you are stubborn, I can tell, but I must say I hope that you are more reasonable. An entire planet? Gone? What a waste; what a sad, if necessary, waste.”

Her eyes felt hot and dry.

“If you are still resistant, after that, I will bring up a hologram feed of the Princesses Organa being executed,” said the Emperor. “And if that is not enough? Well, then, I suppose I will have to fill this tank with a new Skywalker after the old one is sloughed out and run down the drain. Then I will turn my attention to hunting down your brother and that miserable fool Kenobi.”

“No,” said Leia. “I’ll do it. I’ll do it.” She hung her head in shame, but then she lifted her eyes, flashing with anger. “I’ll go through the motions, I’ll say and do whatever you want me to, but you have to know that I’ll never be a Sith. Not in my heart.”

He just laughed. “Well,” he said, “we’ll see about that.”

She returned his mocking gaze coldly. But there, in front of her father’s body suspended like a nightmare in the tank, she knelt before the Emperor and spoke the words he wanted to hear. He dubbed her Darth Vestre and said that she would be Leia no more.

Leia put a hand to her side, feeling the stone resting in its pocket underneath her clothes. She lifted her eyes to the Emperor. “My master,” she said. “I have a promise to make you.”

“Oh?”

“I will be the destruction that brings everything you have ever cherished down in flames around you.”

“My dear child, you are a treasure,” he responded with unabated glee. “You are perfect in every way. And you are so like your father. I think I will enjoy our partnership very much indeed.”

Leia stood. The Emperor waved a hand and her restraints fell away. She looked at him curiously, and she wondered if she should not try to kill him now. But her father had ended up in a tank trying to defeat him. She didn’t know how she could best him if Father could not.

“Now,” Darth Sidious said, “you may kill Tarkin.”

“What?” the Moff coughed out, startled.

But Leia didn’t wait for the Emperor to change his mind. Tarkin fell choking and blubbery at her feet.
“Good,” said Sidious. “Well done, Lady Vestre. You have not entirely been neglecting your training.”

“It’s not training,” Leia said dispassionately, while Tarkin convulsed in his death throes. No one had ever trained her to use the Force in such a way and she had certainly never worked at honing the skill. If it could be called that. “It’s instinct.” She looked at Sidious with dead eyes. “May I have one other favor?”

“What is it, my child?”

Later, Leia stood at a viewport, her hand resting on the transparisteel, her breath fogging against it as she watched Tarkin’s body float away into the emptiness of space.
The Blade of the Heart

The crystal is the heart of the blade.  
The heart is the crystal of the Jedi.  
The Jedi is the crystal of the Force.  
The Force is the blade of the heart.  
All are intertwined.  
The crystal, the blade, the Jedi.  
You are one.  

[—Jedi Lightsaber Code—]

When Luke’s father told him that he was sending him away with Ben, Luke did not, at first, believe him.

The signs had been all there, along with an uneasy feeling all the way from Dagobah. But still, Luke had thought that Ben was going away and Father was keeping them both close by his side.

Luke had always been aware of the vague mistrust that existed between Father and Uncle Ben. It was the sort of thing that the adults tried to hide, but badly. It was one of those puzzles that Luke and Leia had put their heads together about and discussed in secret, along with all the other unspoken facets of their parents’ and Ben’s history. They had never reached an agreement on what was at the root of the unease.

Now Luke thought that he knew. It had to do with the things Father had done. The terrible things he had done to the Jedi Order to which he had once belonged. It was odd, though, since Luke had always thought Ben had given Father something to be mistrustful about, and not the other way around. But they had been wrong about their Father. He knew that now.

Luke was still having trouble reconciling the man he had known all his life, with the idea of a man who could do the things his father had done. The same man who was a murderer and a betrayer had raised him, had taught him how to fix machines and fly podracers and landspeeders, had laughed with him and spun him and his sister around like a spaceship when they was small and walked them to school, had loved Mother and Leia and Artoo and was good, a Good Man…

It made his head reel and his heart hurt every time he thought about it. He felt as if he were falling a great distance and there was no bottom to be found.

And now solid ground was even more unreachable because Father was sending him away with Uncle Ben. For “safety.”

Luke might have cried or argued, but he didn’t get a chance to react, because Leia exploded in anger. Some things about his life were reliable, still. Everything she had been stewing on erupted like a kettle boiling over. She screamed at Father and pummeled his chest with small fists and told him that she wasn’t going with him; either he had to keep Luke with them or she would go with Luke and Ben but she would never, ever allow him to take her away from Luke. And Luke…

Luke suddenly felt very old. He was the older twin, by a whole eleven minutes, but that had not meant much to him before. But now amidst his own turmoil over the news he felt a feeling wash over him, a certainty that he had to be not a twin but an older brother, now.
One of them had to try to keep the family together, in spirit if not in body, and it looked like it had to be him. There was no one else to do it. Just him.

Leia’s anger burned out quickly but was replaced by a cold and distant silence. When she realized that Father would not be swayed by any of her antics she became truly upset. Luke had not seen this before, but he could sense his sister’s state of mind well enough to understand what was going on. Father had always doted on her and she had always found it just a little bit easier to get her way or receive forgiveness, but something was broken between them now and she was terrified even as her anger burned a hole through her chest. It made Luke sad. Whatever had changed, Father was still Father; if Leia could only see that perhaps she might have argued for them to stay together a different way, the way she had argued for things before, with sweetness instead of rage.

But she didn’t see it and she couldn’t do it. Luke wished, for all of them, that she could.

She was not the one losing Father. He was. And she was only making things worse, ensuring that Father would not listen to her, would dig his heels in and stick to the plan.

Luke felt them all slipping away from each other even as they stood together on the Twilight II, while Ben waited outside with his newly acquired ship, to take Luke away.

“Luke,” Father said, turning away from Leia with a sigh. “Say goodbye to your sister. Then get your things and follow me.”

Luke didn’t have many things to grab. Just a knapsack with a few extra changes of clothes, that Mother had packed, along with a datapad, and a holocube. Everything else that he had ever owned was left behind on Osallao.

He went over to Leia, who had stomped off to hurl herself down at the dejarik table. “Leia?”

She lifted her head. “Don’t let him send you away,” she said quietly.

“I can’t really stop him.”

“Just don’t do what he says. Don’t go with Uncle Ben.”

He shook his head. Father was still Father; he couldn’t disobey him like that.

“Please.”

“We’ll all be together again,” he told her, echoing what Mother had said when she left. He had to believe it was true. “Take care of Father, alright?”

She stared at him. Her mouth twitched then flattened into a thin line. Her eyes went hard.

“I’ll see you later,” he said.

She slumped over the table and hid her face in her arms, shaking her head in a rocking motion from elbow to elbow. He hesitated, hoping that she would give him something more than that, but then he turned and walked slowly out of the common room, down the corridor, and out the hatch.

Father and Artoo were waiting for him at the bottom of the gangplank.

“Do I have to go away?” he asked.

Father looked very sad, but he said, “Yes. Your mother wants you to be safe. We both want you to be safe.”
“And I won’t be safe with you?”

“The Emperor will be looking for both you and your sister. We need to make it harder for him to find you.”

“But if he does,” Luke said, “you don’t want him to get us both at the same time.”

Father looked surprised that Luke understood, and a little guilty, too. “We don’t want him to find either of you,” he said. “You’re both going to be safe until this is over.”

“Why are you sending me with Uncle Ben?”

Father looked at him curiously, not seeming to understand. “I just told you.”

“I mean why can’t I stay with you? I promise I won’t be like Leia.”

Father put a hand on Luke’s shoulder. “I wish I could take you with me,” he said nearly in a whisper, as if fearing that Leia would overhear from inside the ship. “But don’t you think Leia is a little much for Obi-Wan to handle?” He tried to smile, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

Luke nodded. It was true. He wondered what it would be like if he stormed about and threw a fit like Leia, if that would convince Father to keep him close. But he didn’t have it in him. All he felt when he looked inside was sadness, unease, and worry for the future.

“Uncle Ben isn’t… I like him, but he isn’t… he isn’t family,” Luke said.

Father gave his shoulder a squeeze. “But he is family,” he said. “He’s the only kind of family I have, besides your mother and your sister and you. Ahsoka is family, too. I don’t have any blood relatives besides you and your sister, but that’s not the only thing that makes someone family, does it?”

Luke shook his head in agreement because that’s the response Father wanted. He would have to think it over. He had always been fond of Ben, his eccentric old uncle who lived in the mountains, but he’d always known that he wasn’t really their uncle. Luke had never thought he would become his only caretaker, a substitute for both Mother and Father.

Father smiled, and it almost seemed a real smile this time. “Obi-Wan raised me from when I was nine, you know. So you could even call him Grandfather if you wanted to. He’d like that.”

Luke looked at him skeptically. It was a little late to change how he addressed Uncle Ben now. But perhaps, he thought to himself, it was time to outgrow the childish habit of pretending that Ben was his uncle. He was just old Ben.

He felt a distant rumble in the Force, as if it was all about to go terribly wrong. More wrong than it already had. But he didn’t know what to do about it and he didn’t know how to quiet the rumble. It was there and he felt helpless. Father was Father, and Leia was Leia, and there wasn’t anything he could do to change either of them.

He had not been able to say anything to make Mother stay.

He was the older twin. But he was still very young, and no one listened to him.

Ben appeared a little way off, and waved as he approached them. “All set?” he asked when he was near.

“Almost,” said Father. Then he crouched down by Luke and drew him in for a hug. “Be good,” he
said. “Listen to Obi-Wan, do as he says. Don’t give him any trouble.”

“I won’t,” said Luke, fighting back tears. This goodbye was becoming too real. Too close to being final. Father held him so tightly for a moment that he almost couldn’t breathe.

“I’m sending Artoo with you,” Father said, releasing Luke. “Take good care of him. Make sure you oil him regularly and keep him clean. And don’t let him run himself down till he’s out of power. You have to watch him sometimes; you know how reckless he can be. He’s your responsibility now.”

Artoo beeped in protest, probably claiming that he was the picture of caution or that he could take care of himself. Luke smiled. Knowing that he would have Artoo made some of the unease dissipate. “I won’t let anything happen to him,” he said, knowing how fond his father was of his droid. “I’ll take care of him. I promise.”

“Good,” Father said, nodding, “good.” His voice shook as he said, “See that you do.”

“Promise me that you won’t let the Emperor get Leia,” said Luke.

“I won’t, I promise.”

Father stood up and turned to Ben. Luke placed his hand on Artoo’s dome, feeling the cool metal against his palm.

“I don’t need to tell you to keep him safe,” said Father, his voice gruff. “But take care of him. He’s used to lots of affection, you know. Hugs and encouragement. I know you’re not very good at that but you’re going to have to get better.”

Luke felt himself flush with embarrassment even as he fought against the urge to cry. Father was making him sound like some kind of mama’s boy, while also reminding him that Mother was gone and he soon would be as well… and not doing a very good job of hiding how upset he was about it. Father being upset was making it very difficult for Luke not to burst into tears and he really wanted to be strong right now.

Ben nodded. “Goodbye old friend,” he said, and there was an awkward moment of silence and stillness, before he reached out as if to give Father a hug.

Father leaned away from him, startled. “What are you doing?”

Ben dropped his arms to his sides. “I thought you wanted a hug.”


“Well I thought… I mean it was implied that you wanted a hug,” Ben said. “I’m not a mind reader, Anakin.”

“Apparently not.”

“Family means hugging one another,” Luke spoke up, wondering at how strange they were being. Not like adults at all. “That’s part of being a family, and you said Ben was your only family.”

“That’s alright, Luke,” said Ben, his voice gentle. “No need to make your father uncomfortable.”

“I’m not uncomfortable,” said Father. He moved suddenly, giving Ben a darting hug like a surprise attack, thumping him on the back twice in quick succession before pushing him away to hold out at arm’s length. “Anyway, I have to go look after Leia now. Take care old man.”
Ben had no words, possibly because those back pats had sounded like they were pounding the air out of his lungs. He just nodded, and Father nodded too, while backing away.

Then he turned around abruptly and stalked towards to his ship.

“Come,” said Ben, putting a hand out for Luke as they watched Father’s retreating back.

Luke took his hand, but he felt as if he were the one offering the comfort, not the other way around. He felt an acute pressure, as if everyone and everything depended on him remaining strong.

He was nearly eleven years old. He would always remember that day as the last day of his childhood. It was time to start growing up.

Five years went by. It was far longer than Luke had thought he would have to be separated from his family. Every year that went by seemed to pull them further and further apart instead of bringing any promise that they would be together again soon.

And yet that was always what Mother and Father said. Soon.

Luke pretended to believe it.

He saw each of them a few times a year, mostly at separate times. There had been a moment long ago when Father had arranged a meeting with Ben, with Leia in tow, but the next time Luke saw Father, she was not there. She had been sent to live in secret somewhere “safe” but they would not tell Luke where she was. For his safety and hers, Father had said. The less you know, the better.

“I understand, Father,” Luke had said, the unease blossoming in his stomach like a rotten flower, spreading through him until he felt like he might become sick with dread.

Whenever he saw Mother she always cupped his face and cried and said that he was growing so big and so very handsome and it would have embarrassed him if he was not so happy to see her every time.

Father was with Mother more often now that Leia was hidden somewhere else, and Luke didn’t know what to think about that. He insisted, every time Luke saw him, that he wasn’t going to join the Rebellion. And yet everyone seemed to assume he was with the Rebellion, anyway, because he spent so much time hanging around the Rebellion base plotting with the Rebel leaders. Helping out the Rebellion.

Luke tried to know as much of what his parents’ were doing as he possibly could. Everywhere Luke went with Ben, he paid close attention to the rumors and the talk that was whispered furtively among beings in cantinas and on sidewalks. He watched every bit of underground propaganda released by the Rebellion that he could get his hands on. Much of the time it was his mother’s face and voice that appeared, floating above pocket holoprojectors cupped secretly in alien palms. Mother was, for many, the image of the Rebellion.

He busied himself with his training. Ben had promised to teach him everything he knew of the Jedi’s ways. How to fight but also whatever wisdom he had learned and could pass along. Advice on how to deal with life’s problems. How to quiet the rumble.

Throwing himself into his training was the best way Luke knew to avoid the worry, to stifle the unease, to keep the rotten flower of worry that grew in his stomach from sending out tendrils through his bloodstream to lodge in his lungs and wrap around his throat, choking him to death.
Ben let him use his lightsaber to train with, though they would still fight with sticks when sparring.

“One day you will build your own lightsaber,” Ben would tell him. “When you are ready.”

Lightsabers were scarce in the new galaxy Emperor Palpatine had created. Luke wondered where all the lightsabers had gone, all those weapons that had once belonged to the ten thousand Jedi that protected the galaxy until… Until his own father had joined forces with the evil Sith Lord that secretly ruled the Republic and turned it into an Empire devoid of Jedi.

What kind of Jedi could he become, Luke wondered, with a father who had destroyed the old Order? What kind of New Republic would the Rebellion make, when their celebrated underground hero had helped raise the Empire they were fighting?

He asked Ben these things. Ben told him to learn from his father’s mistakes rather than fear them.

Luke wasn’t always sure what that meant.

They never lived on one planet for very long at a time. A few months at most. Ben made credits by transporting contraband and natural resources from one planetary system to another. Their small freighter, named the Daring Duchess, was filled with herbs, spices, fruits, and other produce from around the galaxy along with a motley assortment of trade goods that Ben had bartered for in seedy backwater spaceports.

They were smugglers. There was really no way to sugar coat it.

Father had made a small protest when he found out what they were doing to get by, saying that the last thing they needed was to show up on the Empire’s radar for petty crime, or for any reason at all.

But Ben was very, very good at what he did. Luke had watched him mind trick his way past security checkpoints and tariff stations in awe, and had learned how to do it himself. “Those crates are empty, that smell is nothing, the ship does not weigh as much as you think it does.”

There came a day when they left one temporary home behind and Luke asked where they were headed next, but Ben was strangely coy with his answer. “Oh you’ll see,” he said. “I have a special destination in mind.”


“Patience,” Ben chuckled. “I have a surprise in store and I think you’ll like it.”

“Are we going to see Leia?” Luke blurted.

Ben’s smile died. “No,” he said.

“Oh.”

They were in hyperspace for a full week before they reached their destination. Ben put the Duchess down on an expansive outcropping of rock that jutted from a cliff face near a waterfall. The vista from the viewport was breathtaking; rolling hills of rippling grassland spread out until the horizon where the system’s star burned bright in the sky. In the opposite direction the cliffs ran for miles, tall and craggy and imposing, yet dotted with trees and openings to caves and pathways to secret glades.

He thought of home, of the Shalla Canyon country. Of the grasslands that led down to the sea. But this was not Osallao. They would never go back to Osallao.
“What is this place?” Luke asked as they climbed down from the ship.

“La’as Vinto,” said Ben. “There is a civilization here, but far on the other side of the planet. We should be fairly safe here.”

“Look, someone else is already here,” Luke said, pointing to a spot far across the plateau. Another ship was docked there.

“Yes,” said Ben. “We’re meeting an old friend here.”

An old friend? Luke turned the words over in his head as they walked towards the other ship, Artoo wheeling at his heels.

The side hatch opened and a landing ramp slowly extended down to the ground. A tall togruta woman with tiger striped blue and white lekku descended, followed by an elegant looking hooded Mirialan with diamonds spread around her cheekbones. Luke recognized the togruta from years ago. This was Father’s friend, Ahsoka.

From the shadows behind the Mirialan woman emerged a third figure. A girl about his own age with loosely flowing hair, red like a flame as it danced around her head, wild in the wind that rushed across the plateau. He knew that hair, and the face which it half obscured. She reached up a hand to smooth the wayward strands down, frowning a little as she squinted into the wind.

She caught sight of him and then looked away without any reaction, as if she did not recognize him. She kept on walking, just a little to the left of the Mirialan woman, though Luke had come to a dead stop.

Mara Jade. She had changed. Well, she had, and she hadn’t.

She was taller, of course, with a face less round and not as freckled, as if the baby fat had thinned and the freckles faded with time. She was five years older, which shouldn’t have been a surprise, but somehow when he did think of her he had still pictured the feisty and rude child she had been the last time he had known her. She was almost pretty now, which he knew was a ridiculous thing to focus on under the circumstances, but the thought presented itself unbidden nonetheless.

Still, even if she had looked completely different than she once had, he still would have recognized her immediately. It was her Force signature, that bright shining center that radiated a particular earnestness which she had always tried to hide underneath everything else. The careless hair toss, the flippant words, the brazen actions.

He had puzzled over her when he was younger, but when her true identity and purpose had been revealed, he’d thought that he had discovered what that earnestness was centered on. The need to please her master. The Emperor.

For she was the Emperor’s agent. The girl who had lied to him, who had abused his kindness and his trust and the very notion of friendship in order to bring evil down upon his family.

Her Force signature had not changed. He recognized it. It was still as earnest as ever. She still carried that need around inside of her, and he could see it just as clearly as he had when he was ten.

She didn’t look particularly like a servant of evil, but then again she never had. She carried a leather satchel slung across her back, and she was dressed in a practical black shirt and pants with a gray and green jacket over the top. Green the same color as her eyes, which were fixed ahead, carelessly, her face turned away from him.

Artoo beeped at him and bumped up against his calves. He realized with embarrassment that he had stopped in his tracks while Ben had kept walking to meet the group.

He followed Ben, coming to another stop when they neared the pair of alien woman and their human charge.

Ahsoka greeted Ben with a hug. He patted her back lightly and smiled with fondness, and they exchanged a few words which Luke only half registered. Mara was watching them with a mild, neutral expression. She had not once looked at him beyond the passing glance she had afforded him when sweeping her gaze over the plateau upon disembarking from the ship. It made him want to be angry. How could she have the nerve to ignore his presence when she was the one responsible for the last five years in the first place?

“What is she doing here?” he asked Ben.

Ben turned back to him, but before he could answer the question, Ahsoka made a very strange noise, something between a squeal and a gasp. And then she was upon him, giving him a crushing hug and exclaiming that she had barely recognized him. “You’re all grown up,” she said, “and you’ve gotten so tall!”

Luke knew that to be an obvious, if generous, lie. He was well aware of the fact that he was quite short for his age. He was patiently anticipating the day when he would be as tall as Father, but it hadn’t come yet. He was hoping that it would happen once he turned sixteen. That seemed like a good time for it. Magical things would happen next year, he could feel it. The Empire would fall, the family would get back together, and he would finally hit that growth spurt.

As it was, he was nowhere near his father’s height yet, and Ahsoka towered over him the same as Father. But he said, “Thanks,” anyway when she let go of him, and he tried not to be acutely aware that Mara had finally turned to look at him with laughter in her eyes.

“We should get down to business,” said the Mirialan in a lilting voice, “before nightfall comes.”

“Yes, quite right, Barriss,” agreed Ben.

“What business?” Luke asked. He had decided that he would not look at Mara anymore, and he stared pointedly at Ben.

“Look over there,” said Ben, sweeping his arm out. “What do you see?”

Luke saw the waterfall. It cascaded from the distant clifftops all the way down to the grassy hills below, creating a river than wound towards the horizon. It cut into the plateau where they were gathered, creating a tunnel through the rock, appearing again a few miles down in a glittering spray.

“The rocks on either side of the waterfall look like pillars,” Mara observed, though Luke was pretty sure that Ben had not been addressing her.

She was right, however. There were rocks stacked up creating a gateway framing the falls. They were worn down enough to almost look natural, but on closer inspection the boulders clearly could not have fallen into such straight stacks.

“Is there a cave behind the waterfall?” Luke asked, trying to think of a reason why the rocks would be stacked that way.
“Close,” said Ahsoka. “It’s an old, abandoned Jedi Temple, built into the cliff. The front gate is behind the waterfall.”

“Abandoned when the Jedi fell?” Luke asked, feeling a sudden tightness in his chest.

“No,” said Ben. “It’s been deserted for thousands of years. There are many old sites like this all across the galaxy. As the Jedi Order grew and slowly became more centered on the core worlds, the old Jedi left these sites behind.”

“Can we go inside?”

“Yes, that is why we have brought you here. Luke, it is time for you to build your own lightsaber. But you are missing the most important part; the kyber crystal that is the heart of the blade. Many of the Jedi Temples were built around places where these crystals can be found. That is why many Temples are built on top of caves.”

Luke felt excitement rise in him. He was finally going to have his own lightsaber! He had been waiting years and years for this.

But then he glanced quickly at Mara and his excitement dampened, replaced by that old familiar unease. “Is she coming too?”

“Yes,” Ahsoka answered. She put her hands on Mara’s shoulders and smiled down at her in a way that was both fond and proud. “We’ve decided that Mara is allowed to have a lightsaber now.”

Luke thought her wording was peculiar. Ben had said that he was ready to build his own lightsaber, but Ahsoka spoke of allowances. So she was still performing the duty Father had given her, to guard Mara, and yet she had decided that Mara was trustworthy enough to wield a weapon. And not just any weapon, but the blade of a Jedi. He knew that a lot could change in five years’ time, but the unease lingered all the same. He wondered what Father would have to say about this.

“How come you didn’t tell me before?”

“Father wouldn’t be happy about this,” Luke said. “He told me he didn’t want me speaking with Mara anymore.” He was not overly concerned about whether Father wanted him to be around Mara or not, but he thought he should remind Ben anyway. “And what if she’s still up to something? Or trying to get back to the Emperor?”

“Your father trusts Ahsoka’s judgement, as I do,” said Ben. “He will understand.”

Luke raised an eyebrow.

“This is something a small group of young Jedi would usually undertake together, and I didn’t want you to have to go it alone,” Ben went on. “Also, since the Empire is in possession of all the Jedi’s records, they know the locations of all the temples. I wanted some back-up to guard the area with me...”
in case we have any unwanted visitors.”

“You’re not going into the Temple with me?” Luke asked, surprised.

“No, of course not. I’m sorry, I should have prepared you for this, but I wanted it to be a surprise.” Ben shook his head. “A Jedi Youngling or Padawan must go without their Guardian or Master to find a kyber crystal. It is the Jedi way. You may be accompanied by your peers, but even so, once inside your paths will likely take you in different directions. Once inside, the journey you go on will be yours, and yours alone.”

Luke frowned at the cryptic speech. Not that he wasn’t used to cryptic — that was often Ben’s specialty. But he wasn’t sure what the point of going into the Temple with Mara was if they were just supposed to split up. He chose not to focus on that, though, remembering what Ben had said about guarding the entrance from an Imperial attack.

“Father couldn’t be here?” he asked, trying to keep his tone neutral, to not let the needful whine enter it and make him seem overly concerned.

Ben just put a hand wordlessly on his shoulder and shook his head. Luke stifled a sigh. He knew it wasn’t Ben’s fault and he didn’t want to seem ungrateful towards the Jedi. He was the one who was there, who was always there, and it wasn’t his fault that Father was not.

Luke had grown to hate the faraway look of disappointment and sadness that stole over Ben’s face when he asked after his parents. And yet, he still had to ask.

Luke looked over to where Mara stood with Barriss and Ahsoka. They were on either side of her, bent down a little as they spoke to her, each with a hand on her shoulder. Mara’s head was cocked toward Ahsoka, listening, her expression attentive and her smile… eager? It confused him. She looked like a girl with her two mothers hovering over her, not like a prisoner or a trouble child at all.

He wished his own mother and father were there to see him off. If this was an important Jedi rite of passage, as Ben said, then at least Father should have been there. But no. He quieted the whispers of discontent, closing his eyes and taking a moment to very deliberately try to settle his feelings.

There was no point and no sense in feeling jealous of Mara. She had Ahsoka and Barriss, but he had Ben. And Mother and Father and Leia were out there in the universe, still alive, while Mara’s real family was dead and gone.

When he opened his eyes, Mara was walking towards him. He tried not to feel nervous, but failed. There was the cocky smirk he remembered so well, the green eyes dancing with some sort of amusement at his expense. No, she hadn’t changed at all. He would have to be wary, even if all the adults trusted her.

Artoo wanted to follow after him, but Ben called the droid back. Artoo ignored Ben, as he always did, but Luke shook his head and told him, “I have to go in by myself.”

Artoo made any angry raspberry noise and directed his photoreceptor pointedly at Mara, but Luke just shrugged. He didn’t need Ben to tell him that astromech droids didn’t accompany the Jedi Padawans of the old Order on their quests. Artoo would have to stay behind.

Mara fell in step beside him, and he noticed that she smelled like velanie flowers. It was her hair. Whatever she used to wash it left the lingering floral scent and it wafted out as she moved. It made him uncomfortable to be that close to her, side by side, close enough to smell and, if some strange madness were to overtake him, to touch.
They approached the waterfall together. Luke glanced back towards Ben, who nodded encouragingly. He saw that Mara also looked back, furtively, towards her guardians. Ahsoka smiled and Barriss stared ahead with what seemed like cool indifference, but then one side of her mouth turned up and she inclined her head.

Luke felt the cool spray of the water as they neared the fall. Now that he was closer, he could see old aurebesh letters carved into the stones, but it was such an ancient dialect that he couldn’t read it. The water spilt over a ledge, creating a gap near the cliff face where they could walk underneath it without being swept away down to the far off plains below. A pathway followed this gap, and though it was unkempt and overgrown, it was obvious that it had been built deliberately, the stones laid out on the ground by sentient beings.

They followed the path silently, not speaking to one another. Luke realized that he hadn’t said a word to Mara or she to him out on the plateau; they had only addressed the adults. Now it felt awkward. He didn’t know what to say. “Hello” seemed too simple and innocent, but he didn’t want to make her angry right away by launching into accusations and suspicions.

Behind the waterfall was a short length of tunnel that led to a tall doorway carved into the rock. They came to a stop in front of it, side by side, and looked up in awe. The doors themselves were of the same rock of the cliff, carved with symbols and letters that Luke didn’t know the meaning of. He wondered if Mara did; he remembered that she had used to have all the answers in school. But he wasn’t about to ask.

“There aren’t any handles,” said Mara, breaking the silence. He was glad that she was the first to speak.

“We have to use the Force to open it,” Luke surmised. “I’ll pull one door and you pull the other.”

He decided that foregoing greetings or any sort of attempt to address the past was a good plan. If they stuck to practical things they couldn’t go wrong.

Mara nodded and reached out a hand. Together they pulled, and the doors slowly crept open with much scraping and groaning and sifting of dirt and debris. No one had been inside this temple in a very long time. Of course not. There were no more Jedi Padawans to come for kyber crystal quests. His father had killed all the younglings.

At that thought he faltered and his door stuck. Mara looked at him curiously, but said nothing. There was a gap large enough for them to walk through, so Luke just left it.

Inside it was very dark, with no windows or cracks to let any natural light in beyond what was sneaking through the opened doorway. Luke switched on the glowrod that Ben had given him and shined it around at the walls.

Mara pulled out a glowrod of her own and remarked, “Brings back memories doesn’t it?”

“Memories of what?” he asked, though he knew exactly what she was talking about.

“You, me, a cave… this time I’ve come prepared though,” she said, casting her light around. “But our sisters are missing. Your father took them away from us.”

“My sister,” said Luke, ignoring the accusation leveled at Father. “Faisellu wasn’t really your sister.”

“And Obi-Wan isn’t really your uncle.”

Mara shrugged and kept on walking. The sound of cave dwelling animals skittering away from their lights greeted them as they headed further into the old temple. Luke looked up and saw that the ceiling was covered in bats with their wings folded over their faces in repose. He suppressed a shudder.

“Have you heard from Faisellu?” he asked, unable to contain his curiosity.

“No. She and her mother disappeared.”

“Probably for the best,” Luke observed. “So long as the Emperor hasn’t found them.”

“I suppose.”

He glanced at her sidelong, wondering what the lack of reaction to his mention of the Emperor meant.

“I don’t think the Emperor would even bother to look for them,” she volunteered, unprompted. He just looked at her in surprise. She added, “He never cared about them.”

“What about you? Is he looking for you?”

She didn’t answer. She was silent for a very long time. They picked their way quietly through the corridors of the dark temple, not knowing exactly where they headed, but always going downwards. Long flights of curving stairs led them deeper into the cliff, and as they went Luke could see that the pathways became less polished, less constructed, as the temple began to blend into the natural caverns.

“I don’t think so,” she said at last, and he had almost forgotten what his question had been.

“Ahsoka and Barriss seem to trust you,” he ventured. “Letting you have a lightsaber and sending you down here unsupervised. So when did that change?”

“When did what change?” she asked obtusely.

Luke shook his head. His father had told him, five years ago, that Mara was being sent to Ahsoka to be kept safe from both the Emperor and her own self. The last time he had spoken to Mara she had still been insisting that the Emperor was a wise man and that her place was by his side.

“I’m old enough now to have my own lightsaber,” she said. “I’m almost fourteen. That’s past old enough. I’m surprised you don’t have one yet.”

He ignored the jab. “That’s not what I was talking about. You know what I meant.”

“You meant, why would they let an evil Imperial spy like me have a lightsaber?” There was an edge to her voice and it bounced sharply off the walls.

“I didn’t say evil.”

“You didn’t have to.”

They fell silent again, the only sound the dripping of water far off and the rustle of wings above, the light padding of ghostly animal feet in the shadows beyond their glowrods.

Finally, Mara said, “That was all so long ago. I barely even remember it.”

“I remember it very clearly.” His whole life had come tumbling down around him; how could those
memories ever fade? He doubted it was as insignificant to her as she claimed, either.

“You blame me for everything, don’t you?”

“No,” he said, though perhaps he did. If she hadn’t come to Osallao they would still be there, they would still be a family, and he might not have found out the things about his father that he really didn’t want to know.

“You do,” she said. “I can tell. But it’s not like I had a choice, did I? I’d like to know what you would have done if you were in my place.”

“Then you regret it?”

“Regret what?” She raised her voice slightly, and there was bitterness behind her words. “Being a child? Wanting to trust in the person who raised me and who treated me like I mattered? Being obedient? Which part of that should I regret?”

“Why are you getting angry at me? It’s not like I’ve ever done anything to you.”

“No,” she said, her voice growing quiet again, “you haven’t. Do you want to do things to me?”

“What?” he blurted in shock, not sure he’d heard her right.

She shrugged, her light bouncing up and down. “I ruined your life. Do you want to hurt me? Get your revenge?”

“Oh,” he said. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Am I being ridiculous? I can tell you’re angry at me. You’ve been angry ever since I walked out of my ship.”

He squared his shoulders. “I’m not angry. I don’t want to hurt you, and I’m not looking for revenge. That’s not the Jedi way.”

“And you’re a Jedi?” There was something just short of derision in her tone. Skepticism, definitely.

“Ben is teaching me to be one.”

“I see.”

Her disrespect irked him. “What are you doing here, then?” he asked. He swept his light around at the rocky walls. “Inside a Jedi Temple, looking for the heart of a Jedi weapon?”

She laughed. “Lightsabers aren’t just for Jedi.”

“What are you then? A Sith?”

She uttered a sharp, indignant bark of laughter. “No. I’m not. I’m nothing. I don’t believe in any of that; none of that higher purpose or ideological stuff. I just want a lightsaber.”

“Do Ahsoka and Barriss know you feel that way?”

She shrugged. “But they’re the same, you know. They’re not Jedi. Not anymore.”

“Ahsoka believes in something,” Luke said, even though he didn’t know his father’s togruta friend much at all. “She believes in the Rebellion.”
“And that’s makes her a Jedi somehow?”

“No. But…” He floundered, searching for a way to illustrate his point. He thought of Ben, of how he just knew that he personified everything about what the Jedi Order had stood for, once upon a time, but he couldn’t put it into words, so he just settled on proclaiming; “Once a Jedi, always a Jedi.”

“Did Obi-Wan tell you that?”

“No,” he admitted. “But I just know.”

“Oh, well, you’re the expert, then.” There was no scorn in her voice this time. Just amusement.

“They’re sending you on a Jedi quest,” Luke insisted. “They still think like Jedi. They treat you like a Padawan, the same as Ben treats me.”

“You don’t know how they treat me,” Mara said, shaking her head. “You have no idea what my life has been like these past few years.”

“Looked to me like you all got along pretty well,” he said, stubbornly. He knew that he hadn’t imagined the fondness in Ahsoka’s eyes, or the quiet pride in Barriss’s smile.

“I didn’t say we don’t. But it’s not like you and Kenobi.”

“Oh? So now you know all about my life.”

She laughed. Not the response he’d expected. “I guess you’re right,” she conceded, which was more unexpected still. “But you talk about him like he’s your wise Jedi mentor. It’s not like that for me. I’m not their Padawan. I’m their charge.”

“Not sure I see the difference.”

“Oh, you do. You said it yourself, earlier. They are allowing me to have a lightsaber, now.”

“So what changed?” he asked, spiraling back to his original question, the one she had avoided at first.

She sighed. “I don’t know, Luke. I don’t have all the answers.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means I don’t know!”

“Alright, I’m sorry,” he backed down. He looked away, shining his light up and down the wall next to him, as if inspecting it for stray kyber crystals.

Mara sighed in exasperation. “When your Father left me with them, I spent the first couple of months trying to get away any chance I could,” she told him, relenting. “I guess I just got tired of fighting. Then I got used to being with them. I don’t really remember what changed.”

He surveyed her skeptically. He could barely see her face in the dim light from the scatter of their glowrods.

She seemed to sense his disbelief, because she added, “I know it’s not the explanation you want, but that’s it. That’s all I have. And here we are.”

“What would you do if you had the chance to go back? To the Emperor, I mean.”
She didn’t answer. Instead, she stopped walking, and he eventually stopped as well, looking back at her.

“What is it?”

She turned, shining her light down a narrow tunnel that branched off from the main corridor they had been walking down.

“Did you hear that?”

“What?”

“I thought I heard someone say my name.”

“I didn’t hear anything.”

“I think I need to go that way.”

He shined his light after hers, then swept it around, pointing it into the yawning darkness ahead. “Are you sure? I sense that the path keeps going on that way.”

“Maybe it does. For you.”

So this is where we part ways, he thought. He had not anticipated how intimidating that would be until now. It was just going to be him and the blind creatures that lived in the caves, now.

“Or maybe you’re wrong.” Mara added. “Maybe we both need to go that way and your senses just aren’t that attuned.”

“I doubt that,” he said, but he walked back to where Mara stood and gazed down the tunnel, searching for any hint of a sense that this was where he was meant to go. Ben had said to trust in the Force and in his feelings, and he was getting nothing from that direction.

Mara suddenly jerked her head up and said, “There! I heard it again. Someone said my name as clear as day.”


“Maybe it’s my kyber crystal, calling to me.”

“Ben never mentioned them talking.”

“It’s the Force. Aren’t you skeptical all of a sudden,” she said with a sniff. “Afraid of going on by yourself?”

“No. But I’m not the one hearing my name.”

“Worried about me?” she said teasingly. “I’m flattered. But I can handle myself.”

She started down the tunnel, and he stood hesitantly in the corridor, watching her go. But then she stopped once more, looked back over her shoulder, and shone her light at him. “Well? Are you coming?”

That puzzled him. “Do you want me to?” he asked.

Somehow, even with her face obscured behind the glare of the light, he knew that she was smirking...
as she said, “Whatever will I do without a brave Jedi with me?”

He rolled his eyes. He should just walk away, he knew. Instead he heard himself prompting, “Is that a yes?”

“Maybe. But don’t let me distract you from your path,” she said. “If you really don’t think there’s anything down this way…”

He paused in thought for a moment, looking back and forth between the two passages. To follow Mara or keeping on heading down the main corridor? Ben always told him to follow his instincts, but also to examine what those instincts were and why he felt them. It made it difficult to trust his feelings because thinking about his feelings always made him trust them less. Just one of the many teachings of Ben’s that he struggled with. As he was turning this over in his mind, he saw Mara jump a little again and turn her head, listening intently, though he had heard nothing, not even a whisper.

He made his decision.

The passageway was too narrow for them to walk side by side as they had been. He followed behind her a little ways, shining his light towards the wall as they went, looking at them for any carvings or hints about where this tunnel led. It did not appear to be a natural cave tunnel, instead the walls were covered in uniform circular grooves, as if the rock had been slowly ground away in smooth spirals.

The only sound he heard was that of his and Mara’s breathing, their footsteps scraping against the uneven surface of the tunnel. There was air movement, though, coming from somewhere farther in, indicating that the tunnel must open up into someplace that at least vented to the outdoors. The air wasn’t exactly fresh, though. There was a smell to it… not the usual dank underground smell or even the musty smell of old bat droppings… but something muskier.

Luke was just thinking about what this could mean, when he sensed movement in the darkness above their heads, and with that movement, menace. He had a sudden flash of an emotion, not human but animal, hot breath and hunger and the instinct to kill.

Without thinking he dropped his glowrod, jumped forward, and pushed Mara roughly the ground. She shouted in surprise and indignation, her glowrod flying from her hand, but he didn’t have time to focus on that. Something was coming for them from above, and he pushed out with the force, sending it flying against the wall. A noise that was both guttural and shrieking came from the creature as it smacked against rock with a loud thud, but it twisted around with impressive agility and skidded its way down to the floor, claws screeching as they turned the rock wall into a shower of pebbles.

In the reflection of the light from the glowrods lying on the floor, he saw twin green eyes winking maliciously as the creature stalked forward, undaunted. He held up his hand and pushed again. The creature dug its claw into the bottom of the tunnel and growled. Luke gritted his teeth together, caught in a battle of wills with a monster. What he wouldn’t give to already have his promised lightsaber at that moment....

Mara rolled to her feet, swearing inelegantly under her breath, and said, “There’s more of them.”

“I know,” he said, sensing the approaching pack. There were more tunnels about their heads and they were crawling with this beast’s friends. There was no way Luke could hold them all off at once, especially as they were coming from different directions. “I don’t suppose you have a blaster in that satchel?” he asked, trying to keep his voice unconcerned even as he thought about what those claws were going to do to them.
“No,” she muttered.

Perfect. The monster was slowly inching forward, shaking its head angrily as he pushed back with the force. Mara reached out to help him, and they walked toward the beast, both understanding without discussion that they had to keep moving unless they wanted the rest of the pack to jump down on them soon. They pushed forward, and their combined force made the animal skid backwards. But very slowly, its claws digging grooves into the rock.

Luke realized that that wasn’t going to work. Not quickly enough. The animal’s claws seemed perfectly adapted to dig into the soft rock like an anchor. Adrenaline pounded through his veins as he anticipated the imminent attack from above, and he knew he was going to have to come up with a new plan, and fast.

He reached out to the beast’s mind with the Force. It was difficult to access, at first, so very different from that of a sentient being. It was utterly alien, with thoughts based on movement, scent, and instinct, not words. He closed his eyes and tried to translate his own human thoughts and emotions into something that the beast could understand, something that matched the essence of the words he wanted to convey. Friends, calm, friendly… we’re friends… he sent out, picturing warmth, happiness, play… rather than fear, suspicion, or hunger.

“What are you doing?” Mara hissed, shaking his concentration.

“Shhh,” was all he would say, fighting to maintain the slight hold he had gained on the animal. He added the shush to his mental repertoire, and slowly turned his hand from a pushing motion to a palm held upwards in placation.

“That’s not going to work,” Mara growled, seeming not to notice that it was already working. He pushed her negative feelings away, trying to clear his mind and stay focused.

The creature, meanwhile, was relaxing slightly. Luke could feel a new sense from it, a faint curiosity, as if it was contemplating his thoughts, echoing the feelings questioningly. Friend? Friend… He could feel the thought spread out, trickling through the rest of the pack where they crouched in the tunnel system above. A great tension went out of the entire cave.

With the hand that wasn’t raised towards the creature in supplication, Luke reached out blindly until he brushed against Mara… not with the Force, but physically, his fingers catching on the now dusty cloth of her gray and green jacket. “Stop pushing it,” he said, gently.

She seemed about to protest for a moment, but then she noticed the change coming over the creature. She dropped her hands to her sides and released her Force hold on the it. There was now nothing holding it back.

But it didn’t pounce. Instead, it licked its lips, perked its ears, and slowly walked towards them. Luke’s heart started to thump faster, and he could feel Mara tense where his hand still rested on her shoulder.

He could see it a little better now, as it crossed over the glowrods on the floor. It had a long, sinuous body and sleek dark fur. It padded closer on four paws, with silver claws that looked sharp enough to cut through durasteel. But its ears were tilted forward in a friendly, curious way, like an alley cat in a spaceport begging for food.

It came up to Mara and thrust its snout against her satchel. She stepped back, freezing in horror, but Luke could tell that she was restraining herself, fighting the urge to use the Force to fling the creature as far away from her as she could.
“Um,” he said, “I don’t suppose you have some food in there.”

“I… I do. But what about the rest of the pack? Aren’t they still coming for us? I don’t… I don’t sense them, but…”

“Pride,” he corrected, reaching out to run his hand along the back of the creature. He swore the start of a purr began to rumble in its chest.

“What?”

“Pride. These are rock panthiras, I think, so pride, not pack.”

She turned to look at him incredulously. “Well look who’s suddenly Mr. Animal Biology 101.”

He laughed, realizing how inane he must have sounded. He hadn’t meant to be pedantic, the thought had just popped its way to the surface, and he could almost hear it in not his own voice but… his sister’s.

“What about the pride, then?” Mara said, not seeming to see what was so amusing.

“They’re telepathically linked,” he told her, scratching behind the ears of the creature, which was definitely purring now. “When I calmed this one down it communicated to the rest that there was no danger, or, uh, food.”

Mara was silent for a moment. Then, “You befriended a whole cave of monsters.” It came out as a flat statement rather than a question, but he answered “yes” anyway. That was what finally made her laugh. She started to giggle in a strung out sort of way, the way one might do if one had just been convinced they were about to die only to be currently watching a giant cave dwelling feline being patted on the head.

The creature in question sat back on its haunches and licked at its paws, cleaning the rocky debris out from between its toes. Luke smiled. He had done it. He had trusted in the Force and—

…Luke…

He snapped his head around, looking towards the source of the sound.

Mara stopped laughing. “What is it?” she asked.

“I… it’s nothing,” he said, nerves rattled. “I thought I heard something.”

The rock panthira got up suddenly and bounded away, disappearing down the tunnel back the way they had originally come. Mara watched it go, then bent to retrieve both their glowrods.

“Then I guess we’re going in the right direction,” she said, handing his back to him. He nodded.

…Luke…

He shuddered. There it was again. He knew that voice… but it couldn’t be…

Whatever it was, it was coming from up ahead. “Come on,” he said, determined not to be afraid. He had just turned a beast that wanted to rip him apart into a tame cat. He wasn’t about to let his name scare him.

They continued on, and the tunnel emptied out into what looked like a natural cave; a vast open chamber with a plethora of rocky growths, stalactites and stalagmites reaching out to each other,
crowding the area and making it difficult for Luke and Mara to pick their way through. Now they were truly getting somewhere, Luke thought. The kyber crystals would be in the caves, not the temple built on top of the caves.

“I don’t think this leads anywhere,” Mara said, not seeming to share his optimism.

He kept his mind and ears open, but didn’t hear his name again, and it didn’t seem like Mara was hearing anything either.

“Trust—” he began to say, but halted abruptly when he saw the flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye.

He shouldn’t have been able to see anything in the dark there, outside the reach of their glowrods, but he was sure he saw something. Someone. A girl in a white dress seemed to dart behind one of the giant stalagmites. He squinted into the darkness, hoping to see something again, but even when he didn’t, he motioned in that direction. “This way.”

“Why?” Mara asked, even as she followed.

“A hunch.”

“I don’t know, Luke, I don’t like this, it feels—”

“Trust me, alright? I know what I’m doing.”

“It feels off,” she muttered, finishing her thought.

He turned back to her. “You were right about coming this way,” he said. “Why are you uncertain now?”

“I don’t know. It’s not that I don’t think this was the right way. It’s just this room. In particular. I don’t know. I have a bad feeling about it.”

He was about to respond when he heard a chuckle that seemed to come from far away, the sound of a girl’s laughter, and it certainly wasn’t Mara doing the laughing. He wheeled around and shone his light in the direction. He saw a flutter of white retreating into the darkness.

He stepped forward, following the glimpses of the girl. He thought he knew who she was but he stopped himself from saying or thinking her name. Mara called out a protest from behind him, but he ignored her, focused only on what was ahead.

There was another tunnel, this one much smaller than the one they came in through, and he had to duck down in order to enter the passage. He reached out with the glowrod, trying to see how far the opening stretched and if there were any obstructions, but he couldn’t make much out. He inched forward, wondering—

...Luke...are you happy...?

His foot slipped suddenly and he realized with a dull oh no that he was about to go down. And then he did, as nothingness reached up to take him and he crashed into the rock, sliding uncontrollably downward as gravity and slick, slippery ground carried him forward.

The tunnel was not, so much, a tunnel as it was a slide. He wished, too late, that he’d been less focused on the apparition and more focused on the floor.
Luke reached out with everything he had, hands, feet, the Force, trying to stop his momentum. But nothing worked until at last he came to the bottom of the rock slide and landed, hard, on a new patch of ground. The glowrod, which had already flown from his hands and proceeded him down, went flying out into an open space. It turned and spun and seemed like it would never stop and he stared at it in curious awe even as he struggled to breathe, feeling the wind knocked out of him and his lungs screaming painfully for air.

Then the glowrod fell out of sight and he was left in total darkness. He heard a distant splash. Very distant. Too distant.

*Oh kriff, now I’ve done it,* he thought. The glowrod had disappeared into some sort of… abyss. Yes. That was a good word for it. Abyss. Very final, very gaping black hole, edge of the galaxy, certain doom...

Luke pushed himself up, wincing and taking deep breaths, air painfully filling his lungs. So here he was, in the dark, near a rather large drop-off. He wondered how far he could dare to move in any direction. He reached out tentatively with the Force, trying to feel his surroundings, trying to connect with the rock.

...*Luke*...

In the darkness, he saw her. Clear as day.

She was standing with her back to him, hair done up in looping braids and a bun, her dress plain and flowing white. She turned, looking at him over her shoulder, then smiled.

“Leia,” he wheezed. “Where are you?”

She just continued to smile, and lifted something to her face… a… a wine glass? He watched as she took a sip with a sparkle in her eye, gave a very slow and deliberate wink, then turned away. It was as if she were standing just across the room, sharing an unspoken joke. But he didn’t know the joke. Then she started to fade, flickering and then winking slowly out of existence just as she had winked at him.

“Leia,” he sighed, disappointed. He’d known it couldn’t be real, and yet, for a moment he’d forgotten where he was and was sure she was really there. Or *he* was really there, wherever it was that she was standing.

Then he noticed that the cave had not gone completely dark. Where the vision of Leia had stood, there was a faint white glow, which illuminated the room enough for him to make out the faint edges of rock. He could now see a narrow path snaking through the empty space where the glowrod had fallen.

Luke stood up, testing his weight, making sure that he hadn’t twisted or broken an ankle. He was alright, a little bruised and scraped up from his plummet down, but intact. He started out towards the path, being far more careful about the placement of his feet this time.

The source of the light was a shallow pool on the other side of the room. Water dripped steadily from somewhere up above, and he could feel the faintest breeze along with it. But the light was not sunlight filtering down a crack from above. The light came from below. He bent down and looked into the pool, unsure how deep it really was.

A pair of stones lay side by side under the water. They were glowing, each a pale ghostly white. One, he thought, had an opalescent sheen, and the other seemed to have an almost greenish tinge. He
reached into the water, and his hand went down, down, down until he was wet up to the shoulder. Then finally his fingers brushed against the stones. He scooped them up into the palm of his hand.

One of the stones seemed to grow darker and brighter as he held it, while the other one faded. Luke looked curiously at them. The one that was still glowing was not white at all, anymore, but a brilliant emerald green. The other one looked like nothing more than a milky colored rock.

Luke stood up and pocketed the now defunct crystal, and floated the still shining one out in front of him. He used it to light his way back over the chasm.

Once he returned to the mouth of the rock slide he was faced with a problem. Namely, that the rock was too slick to climb back up the same way he had fallen down. He made a couple attempts at it, but his feet kept sliding backwards, and there was the distinct possibility that if he slipped and fell again he would go careening straight down into the abyss.

*What I wouldn’t give for some rock piercing claws right now,* he thought. And then an idea hit him.

He reached out into the dark emptiness around him and sent out a thought, a feeling: *Friend?*

He felt a stirring, far off, and concentrated on that point.

After a while, he could hear the snuffling and scraping sound of an animal approaching. Into the circle of green glow from his kyber crystal, the panthira appeared. Luke smiled and palmed his crystal, letting the room go dark as he tucked it in his pocket alongside the other one. He didn’t need the light; now he had a creature that knew its way through the dark.

Luke reached out again with his mind, touching the panthira’s, and he sent it images of what he intended. Himself riding on its back, crawling up the slide. He felt the creature’s consent as it butted its head up against his hand, and he buried his fingers into the thick fur at the nape of its neck, pulling himself up onto its broad back.

The panthira dug its claws into the stone and climbed slowly upwards. Luke was amazed at just how far he had fallen down, as it took quite some time to make the ascent. But then they were finally back inside the chamber where he had left Mara.

“Thank you,” he said, sliding off the feline’s back. He fished out his crystal and tried to look around, but he had trouble getting it to light up again.

“Mara?” he called, hesitant. The chamber was dark and he didn’t sense her presence nearby.

Where had she gone? Why hadn’t she waited for him?

Why should she wait for him, though? She wasn’t his friend. He swallowed disappointment at the harsh reminder, but he forced himself to address the fact. She was not his friend, and he couldn’t afford to think that way. Not about her.

Still, he wasn’t going to just head out of the Temple without her. She may not be his friend and she may have abandoned him, but she was still his companion on this quest and he didn’t think that Jedi (and he was one, even if she was not) were supposed to leave one another behind.

He sent images and thoughts and feelings of Mara out to the beast beside him. He added a few imagined things about whatever it was she carried in her satchel that was edible, for good measure. The panthira perked up at that last part, and he climbed back on.

The cat crawled quietly across the cave chamber, coming to another hidden tunnel on the opposite
side. Luke trusted in his mount not to lead them astray, and he held on tight as the panthira prowled down one passage and then another.

Eventually, Luke could see a pinkish glow coming from up ahead. “Mara?” he called out.

“I’m over here,” she responded, her voice faint.

He followed that voice and eventually rounded a corner to see her.

She was seated cross legged on the ground, floating a bright purplish pink kyber crystal in the air before her. Her hands moved slowly in a circular fashion, and he saw that she had bits and pieces of a lightsaber hilt suspended along with the crystal. He watched as she arranged the pieces in the air, and he realized that she was already building her lightsaber. She had come prepared, with the components in the bag she had been carrying at her hip.

He slipped off the cat and watched as it made a beeline for Mara’s bag, which was lying on the ground next to her. It shoved its snout under the open flap and came up triumphantly with a ration bar in its jowls. It retreated into a corner where it went to work tearing away at the plastic wrapper.

Luke approached Mara cautiously. He wasn’t sure why he was so suddenly nervous. He didn’t really think that Mara would try to do anything, even when she had a blade and he didn’t. And even if she did, he had a cave full of furry friends, now. If he told them she was a danger she wouldn’t stand a chance. (Not that he would). But the sight of her with the crystal, bathed in that almost red glow, made his heart start to thump in chest, and his palms felt sweaty.

She didn’t open her eyes, but she stilled her hands as the pieces of metal slid together into their final configuration. When the crystal was enclosed in its new home the light went out and they were covered in darkness.

He waited, barely able to breathe.

Her lightsaber came to life. The panthira sprang up and bounded away, annoyed and startled by the deadly thrum and buzz of the blade. It disappeared back into the labyrinth of tunnels, leaving Luke and Mara alone again.

The light was the same purplish pink that the naked crystal had been, but even brighter and more garish focused into the blade. It lit up one side of her face but the cast the other further into shadow, and he looked at her for a long moment. She looked back at him. Then she switched it off, seemingly content that it was working.

“Luke?”

“Yes?”

“Can you see me?”

“Yes.”

He could not see anything in the darkness, but he was aware of her through the Force and with his other senses. He heard the rustle and scrap of her pushing herself up, getting to her feet, he smelled the velanie flowers, and knew that she was coming closer. He stood there, senses tingling, and thought that he was ready for anything…

He realized what she was doing a moment before she did it. He should have backed away or dodged to the side to avoid her, but he didn’t. He just stood there and let it happen.
She kissed him, her mouth soft and cool and against his. It only lasted for the briefest moment before she pulled away.

“Why,” he said, too shocked for anything more.

Mara didn’t answer, just slid her arms over his shoulders and kissed him again, longer this time, emboldened by the fact that he was not moving away.

He should be. Moving away, that is. He really should be. He should not be doing this, which was returning her kiss, which was putting his hands on her waist and pulling her just a bit closer, moving his hands up her back to touch her hair, which was just as soft and silky as he’d always imagined it would be…

“No,” he said, coming to his senses and jerking away. He reached up and firmly, but gently, took her arms and removed them from around his shoulders. He lowered her arms to her sides, then let go and finally took a step back.

“Why did you do that?” he asked.

His heart was pounding in his chest and the blood was ringing in his ears. Mara wasn’t answering him. She was quiet, too quiet, and he wished more than ever than he hadn’t dropped his glowrod down an abyss, because now he was going to have to rely on her for some light. And it was going to be very, very awkward.

“Because I wanted to do it,” she responded at last. “I thought you wanted me to do it, too.”

There was something unfamiliar in her voice. Embarrassment. Uncertainty. Shame.

“You should have asked me first,” he said, feeling lame, but not knowing what else to say, really. Everyone thought it was such a great idea to surprise him! No one ever gave him any warning that something drastic and life changing was about to happen. He was never prepared for any of this.

“I didn’t think I needed to,” she said defensively. “I thought you were thinking about it, too.”

“I wasn’t,” he lied.

“I’ve been thinking about you,” she said. “You haven’t been thinking about me?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

That was, of course, another lie. He had thought about her from time to time over the years, but he certainly hadn’t contemplated kissing her the next time he saw her. He hadn’t even been sure that he would see her ever again, but when he had imagined scenarios in which they did cross paths, making out had been far from his plan. In his thoughts she was the girl who was a liar, who had set out to trick him, who had torn his family apart. Why would he want to kiss her? Why did he want to kiss her, now, even as he took another step backwards? This was all very confusing.

Sometimes he had given thought to their last conversation, when he had told her they could never be friends, and he had wondered if she was as naïve as she had suddenly been acting. How she didn’t seem to understand that friendship was not something you built with lies and ulterior motives. He had wondered if she really didn’t understand how relationships between people actually worked or if it was all part of the ruse.
Here they were, five years later, and she still didn’t seem to understand. Or she was still lying, still playing games with him. Games, he reminded himself. Mara liked to play games with his head. She couldn’t be trusted. And he, apparently, could not trust himself. Not when it came to her.

“I think we should go now,” he said. “They’re waiting for us.”

“Yes,” she agreed, and she ignited her lightsaber. It thrummed to life for the second time, but this time her face was turned away from him.

She held something out to him. He took it, and saw that it was her glowrod. She turned away and walked down the passage, lighting her way with her lightsaber. He followed her, casting the soft white light of the glowrod before him. Their entire way out of the cave and then the Temple was cloaked in a deep, uncomfortable silence.

Luke had wanted to ask what it was that led her to her crystal, what voice she had heard and if she had seen anything, any visions, like he had. But now those curiosities fled and were replaced by a jumble of thoughts about what had just happened.

Luke didn’t think there could be any more surprises that day, but he was proved wrong once again, because when he and Mara emerged from behind the waterfall, he saw his father’s spaceship docked out front next to Ben’s.

The sun had inched downward towards the horizon while they were inside the Temple, and the outside world was tinged a soft orange, but Luke still squinted in the relative brightness of it. He zeroed in on the tall silhouette of his father standing a little way off, with Artoo at his side, and Luke jogged over to meet him, excited.

“Father,” he said, “I thought you couldn’t make it!”

“I wouldn’t miss it,” said Father, spreading his arms out to meet Luke with a hug. His father’s embraces were always an experience. Strong and tight, possessive, one might say almost crushing. As if he were trying to make up for all his absences in one hug. When he finally let Luke go he ruffled up his hair and said, “Well? How was it?”

Several thoughts rushed through Luke’s head at once, but he only said, “Good.”

He pulled the kyber crystals from his pocket to proudly show Father. Ben and the others came up slowly, giving them their space. (Except for Artoo, who placed himself firmly within an inch of Father’s legs at all times.)

“Two?” Father said, surprised. “Don’t tell me you’re going to be a double wielder?”

“No, I don’t think so,” said Luke.

“What’s wrong with double wielding?” Ahsoka piped up. Father turned to her, and his mood almost immediately dampened.

Luke knew why. Mara was standing next to Ahsoka, watching them quietly. Luke didn’t know how Father had reacted to the news that he and Mara had gone into the Temple alone together, but whatever had been discussed outside still left a trace of discord. It was amplified when Father looked at Mara, and Luke knew that he hadn’t been happy with the others for orchestrating this.

“Hello, Master Skywalker, Sir,” said Mara in a tiny, polite voice. She even bowed slightly. Luke didn’t think she could have acted any more suspiciously if she’d tried.
He wondered if Father could sense what had happened between them. He didn’t think so. He hoped not.

“Mara,” said Father neutrally, giving her a nod. “How are you?”

“Very well, thank you,” she replied, still bizarrely polite. Luke realized that he had no idea when the last time his father and Mara had seen each other had been, but given that Father was unofficially part of the rebellion these days, and Ahsoka was an active member, he guessed that it had been more recently than five years ago. He felt very much out of the loop.

“I’m only going to build one lightsaber,” he said. “That was all I planned on, anyway.”

“What are you going to do with the other crystal?” asked Ben. He approached and held out his hand. “May I?”

Luke gave over the crystals for inspection. The immediate thought which came to his mind was one he didn’t feel like sharing with anyone, so he just said, “I’m going to hold onto it for a little while.”

“I brought you something,” said Father. “Follow me.”

Luke (and Artoo) followed him aboard the *Twilight II*, which Luke had not seen the insides of in some time. It was markedly different from the *Daring Duchess*. Whereas Ben’s freighter was filled with mostly foodstuffs and other tradeable goods, Father had filled his cargo hold with mechanical parts. Half built droids lounged around in various stages of completion amid all sorts of metal junk. There was a speederbike suspended from the ceiling on chains and an array of blasters and small pulse cannons lying on work tables. Father had quite a lot of munitions, Luke noticed.

But Father passed all these things up and pulled out a small chest, and from that a rolled up leather bundle, which he set on a table (which had to first be cleared off, junk swept aside with one swipe of his arm) and unfurled for Luke to see.

“I thought this would help with your lightsaber,” said Father. Luke looked down at the empty cylinders and all the small bits of metal, rings and clamps, glass tubes, rubber grips and even smooth lengths of polished wood.

“Where did you get this?” Luke asked. He didn’t want to feel suspicious. He wanted to be excited. But somehow the fact that his Father had dismantled lightsaber components in his possession reminded him of things he’d rather not think about.

“Here, there, everywhere,” said Father carelessly. “I’ve been collecting pieces for a while. I knew you’d need them eventually.” He paused, then, more hesitant: “Do you want them?”

Luke felt suddenly ashamed of being so ungrateful, and he said, “Yes. Thank you, Father,” rolling up the leather bundle and tucking it under his arm.

“So, tell me about the cave. How was it?” Father leaned back on the table, relaxing visibly, and crossed his arms, ready to be regaled by Luke’s adventures.

Luke told him. Not everything. Far from it. But he told him about the animals inside the cave, and Father seemed appropriately impressed and proud of him for not getting mauled to death. “Obi-Wan should have given you a weapon though,” he muttered, unable to pass up the opportunity to second guess Ben. “Or gone in beforehand to scout out the cave....”

“The Force is my ally,” said Luke. “And it wouldn’t be much of a quest if Ben cleared out the cave for me. But there was no real danger.”
It was easy to say that now, in the safety of his father’s ship, success behind him and the promise of finally constructing his lightsaber ahead of him. He couldn’t help but feel a little irritated by his father’s implication that he was still a child who needed to be coddled.

“They say that when there were still Jedi in this Temple, they kept the rock panthiras as pets, because of their strong connection to the Force and psychic abilities,” said Father. “I always thought that was just a myth, because the Jedi didn’t allow us to keep pets.”

“I guess things change over the years,” Luke said, with a glance at Artoo.

“I suppose they do.”

Luke didn’t tell his Father about the fact that Leia had appeared to him in the cave, that it was her voice which had led him to the twin kyber crystals. Leia was a sore subject with his father. She was supposed to have been with Father, just as Luke was with Ben, but something had gone wrong with that plan. Father never wanted to talk about it, just saying that she was in a safe place, a place that suited her better, and that she was happier without him. Luke doubted that very much, but his father wouldn’t entertain any arguments about it.

“I want to get started on my lightsaber right away,” said Luke. “How long are you going to be here?” He looked away as he asked the question, bracing himself for disappointment.

Father put a hand on his shoulder. “I can stay for a while. I want to see this lightsaber you build. We should move off this plateau, though. We’re too exposed up here.”

Luke nodded, allowing himself a smile.

They moved the three ships from the plateau down to the hills below, docking them in a triangular formation in a low valley near the base of the cliffs. In the center of the ships they made a camp as dusk fell.

Luke sat under the wing of his father’s ship and set to work on his lightsaber. Father had asked if he wanted help but he said no, because he wanted to make this all on his own, to show Father that he could. He was given his space to do so, with just Artoo there offering an arc wielder or buzzsaw when necessary. Luke might have used the workshop inside Father’s ship, but he liked being just outside, so that he could see the others at a distance.

Father, Ben, and Ahsoka sat around a fire and talked in low voices. Luke was tempted to practice sensory enhancement techniques to eavesdrop, but he didn’t. He had to focus on his lightsaber for now.

A little way off, closer to their ship, Mara and Barriss were practicing with Mara’s new lightsaber. Barriss had a blue blade that shimmered into a deep purple when it met Mara’s. They moved slowly, not really fighting or sparring, but going through forms with deliberate calm, as if practicing the steps to a dance in slow motion. Mara’s movements were graceful and flowing; she had a dancer’s sensibility even as she swung her deadly weapon around to meet another’s. She had tied her hair back into one long roped braid that swayed with every step.

He realized that he had lost several minutes to watching her, and shook his head, frustrated with himself. Focus! She had not glanced at him, not even once, so she had clearly gotten over whatever mood had struck her inside the cave.

Luke gathered up his things and retreated to the inside of the Twilight II, to work alone in his father’s cargo hold workshop. It was peaceful there, and he could imagine Father here, working at a bench
just like he was. Artoo followed him up, beeping contentedly.

When Luke was finally finished making the pieces of his saber, using some of the components that Father had gifted him but also a few more things he found lying around the ship, on the floor under the table or on a shelf of random pieces of junk, he spent some time floating the components together and apart again, using the Force to guide him. It was calming work. It quieted his thoughts and released the feelings of unease that always dogged him.

When he was ready he added the final piece of the puzzle, the kyber crystal. With the crystal at the heart he fitted all the pieces together and held the saber in his hand. For a moment he was hesitant, worried that he had done something wrong and the blade would not spring to life. But then he switched it on and was rewarded with that familiar sound, the hum and sizzle as the workroom was bathed in green light. Artoo made a long “weeeeeeing” noise and he smiled down at the droid. It was only fitting that Artoo was here with him, his only companion in this final stage of his quest to build a lightsaber. It was good that Father and Ben were nearby, together waiting patiently for him to finish, but he was glad that he was allowed to do this on his own.

He wished they let him do more things on his own, to be honest. He was getting past the age where he needed to be looked after. Actually he felt that he was long, long past that age. Perhaps now that he had proven himself capable in the Temple caves and had his own weapon they would see that he was ready for more than just the smuggler’s life. More than just hiding and running while Mother and Father tried to make a difference in the galaxy.

He went outside and found that Mara and Barriss had ended their exercises and joined the others around the campfire. He took a moment to appreciate the scene before he descended the ramp, making his appearance known.

Ahsoka was talking, waving her hands as she spoke. Father and Ben sat on either side of her, listening and watching with unmistakably fond matching smiles. Luke wondered if they knew how they looked at that moment, and if they would change and become more guarded if they realized how alike they were. Barriss and Mara sat a little off to the side, near enough to be considered a part of the group but obviously not quite as close as the trio across from them. Barriss’s eyes were fixed on Ahsoka but her expression was different from Father and Ben’s. Fond, yes, but not so paternal, which only made sense.

Mara alone seemed to not be paying attention to the story Ahsoka was telling. She had her head down and was poking at the fire with a stick, the orange flames the color of her hair reflecting in her lowered eyes and casting deep shadows on her face. She had become more than just almost pretty, he thought, finally admitting it to himself. She was beautiful, though there was something closed off and hard about her now; an angular set to her jaw and her mouth pressed into a thin line, as if she were thinking unhappy thoughts. She didn’t realize that anyone was watching her, least of all him.

He thought that Mother and Leia were conspicuously absent from the group, and it made him sad, but the fact that Father was there, had taken the time to stay and not rushed off to go do something terribly important in a star system far away warmed his heart. Long shadows belonging to each of them stretched out in a circle away from the fire.

He would have to be content with small moments of unity, like this one, even if the circle was incomplete. One day, he thought, everyone who mattered to him would be in one spot. Together. Happy. Safe.

One day.

He walked towards them, and Father turned away from Ahsoka, looking at him as he approached.
“All finished?” he asked.


“Let’s see it, then.”

He sat down next to Father and handed him the lightsaber. Father turned it over in his hands, and Luke waited with baited breath. He knew it was sound, he knew he had done a good job, and he didn’t really need Father to tell him that, but he wanted to hear it all the same.

Father stood up and turned the saber on. “Good,” he said, looking at the strength and steadiness of the blade, then swung the saber around in a few basic sweeps, testing its movement and balance. “Very good,” he murmured, “most impressive. And in such a short time, too. You are quite gifted, Luke. I’m proud.”

Luke’s heart swelled at the unreserved praise, but he simply bowed slightly and said, “Thank you, Father.”

Father turned off the blade and handed the saber back to him. Ben and Ahsoka both smiled up at him. Barriss’s expression was neutral as she sipped a mug of tea, which smelled like the joba flowers that Ben had recently gathered at the last planet they had visited. Luke stole a glance at Mara, but saw only the side of her face as she stared off into the night, her body almost entirely turned away from them.

“Spar with me, Father,” said Luke. He’d never had the chance before. He’d always trained against Leia, or Ben.

“Alright,” Father agreed easily, a smile on his face. “Are you going to kick your old man’s ass?”


Luke would always remember that night as a good one, despite what would happen afterwards. Definitely one of the better ones.

He and Father walked outside the campsite formed between the ships and Father ignited his saber. They sparred, and Luke gave it his all, though he could sense that Father was holding back. Just testing him and observing what he could do more than anything. He kept saying, “Good, good,” or “Obi-Wan has taught you well,” but also things like, “Watch your swing, you’ve left your side exposed” or “not so fast, you’ll wear yourself out. Patience, boy. Wear me down, not the other way around,” and other pointers.

They went on like this for a while, until they were both tired. Luke didn’t want to admit it, he didn’t want the night to end, but Father finally said, “That’s enough for now, Luke. Your skills are greatly improved.”

Luke took a deep breath and ventured, “I think I’m ready to fight.”

“Fight?” Father echoed.

“Yes. I have a blade of my own now, and you’ve seen what I can do. I can join you now.”

Father shifted uneasily. He looked back towards the ships and the flickering campfire, but said nothing.

“I’ve been training for years,” Luke persisted. “I’m ready.”
“That isn’t the purpose of your training, son,” Father said at last.


“I do not intend for you to involve yourself in the fight against the Empire.”


“Is to make sure you can defend yourself if the need arises. Not so that you can go looking for a fight.”

Luke shook his head, his hair damp and sweaty from the exertion of the sparring. “But you said yourself that I have become very skilled. I can be of help to you. You need help to end the Empire. You need my help.”


“Isn’t that what you are?”

Father removed his hand and took a step back. “I don’t want that life for you.”

“Why not? I’m good. I can fight, I can—”

“You don’t understand what you’re asking for,” Father interrupted, chopping his hand through the air in an authoritative motion. “It’s one thing to spar with Obi-Wan or I. It’s another thing entirely to go up against someone with the intent to kill or be killed.”

Luke felt a tide of frustration well up and threaten to wash over him. His Father was treating him like a child even though he had been robbed of his childhood long ago. He had been training all this time with the hope that he could join Father, so that he didn’t have to be a helpless victim hidden away. “If I am in danger just because I’m your son, you owe it to me to let me fight by your side,” he said quietly, speaking more boldly than he had ever dared before.

Father turned away, shaking his head. “You are very powerful, Luke, but you are not ready. You have merely been practicing the idea of fighting. You don’t know what it’s like to go up against fear and anger and an opponent who will exploit both to crush you.” He paused, turning his head a little to the side. “Do you remember, when you were younger, when you sparred with Leia? You were so easily upset by her. All she had to do was laugh, or taunt you, or knock you down once, and you let your emotions carry you away. You always had the skills to defeat her, but she had the ability to get under your skin and render you helpless to control yourself.”

Luke clenched his fists, but tried to remain calm. It wouldn’t do to prove Father’s point for him. “I’m not a little boy anymore,” he said. “Just because I let Leia knock me down a few times years and years ago doesn’t mean I will fold under pressure now. Besides, you haven’t even given me a chance.”

“A chance might end in your death,” Father said. “You must practice emotional control before you are ready.”

Luke wanted to scream that he had been practicing emotional control every moment of his life for years now. “And who’s going to teach it to me?” he asked instead. “If you think that Ben is holding me back then perhaps you should teach me.”

“I’m trying to teach you now, but I can’t be here all the time,” said Father.
“Why not?”

Father sighed and ran a hand through his hair, before waving it vaguely out towards the night sky. “Because I’m trying to fight a war.”

Luke opened his mouth but Father pointed at him and said, “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Tell me again that you want to join the fight. I don’t want you to join the fight. I want you to listen to me, Luke, when I tell you that war is not just a chance to practice your skills or prove yourself. You don’t need to prove yourself.”

“That’s not why I want to join,” said Luke, spreading his arms out wide. “I want to help you end the Emperor so that we can be a family again.”

“Leave the Emperor to me.”

Luke sighed. “I don’t understand,” he insisted. “You tell me that I’m not ready, but you don’t want me to be ready, you don’t want me to ever come up against anything that might challenge me. You criticize how I used to fight against Leia but you don’t want me to face an opponent that would actually give me a chance to deal with those problems. You want me to train with Ben but for no purpose!”

“I told you, the purpose is self-defense,” said Father, crossing his arms, a stubborn set to his jaw. “Sometimes hiding doesn’t work, and I want you to be prepared if you come up against Imperial forces, or just lowlifes who would want to hurt you for whatever reason.”

“There’s more to my training than that, though,” Luke dug his feet in, staring his father down. “I am learning to be a Jedi.”

A sudden sneer worked its way onto Father’s face before he schooled himself into a more neutral expression. “I told Obi-Wan not to fill your head with that nonsense.”

“Maybe if you didn’t leave me alone with Ben for five years you’d have a say in what he teaches me,” Luke said, jutting his chin out, but keeping his voice measured and low.

Father’s eyes glimmered in the darkness, but he had no reply.

“You were once a Jedi,” Luke went on, “the same as Ben. You used to believe in the Light side of the Force.”

A smile tugged at Father’s mouth, but his eyes remained hard. “The Jedi used to believe that the Force was my father,” he said. “That it created me for some higher purpose, to serve the Jedi, to bring back the balance they had lost. If that’s the case it made for a terrible father, more a master than a parent.”

Luke frowned. Ben had told him about the old Jedi prophecy of the Chosen One, and his old master Qui-Gon Jinn’s belief that Father had been the one. He had been a boy discovered to have great power and so was plucked by Jinn from slavery on the miserable planet of Tatooine, but Ben had not gone into very great detail about it beyond that. Mentioning Qui-Gon brought Ben pain and the information Luke got from him was sparse and vague at best.

“Is that why you turned on the Jedi, then?” Luke asked, feeling belligerent enough to try it. “Because
you resented the prophecy?"

Father seemed caught off guard. In all the times they had seen each other the past five years, Luke had not brought up questions about the past. He had wanted to keep their meetings as pleasant as possible. The look of surprise on his face slowly transformed into resolve, though, and he said, “No. I let it go to my head. I resented Obi-Wan and the others because I thought they were holding me back, that they didn’t respect me or recognize my power, just like you seem to think I’m trying to hold you back now.”

Luke felt like he’d been slapped across the face. He was speechless. How could Father say such a thing? How could he compare Luke wanting to be useful, to make a difference and fight for his family to be together… to destroying the Jedi because of some misguided desire for power or delusions of grandeur?

“It’s not the same at all,” he said, after he had a moment to recover his wits. “I don’t want to hurt anyone; I don’t want to destroy anything… I just want…”

“To see the Empire fall?” Father said, with pointed irony.

“Because the Empire is evil, because the Emperor has destroyed our family,” Luke countered.

“The Empire will fall, but I will be the one to topple it,” Father insisted, and Luke wondered if he realized how arrogant he sounded. “It’s my responsibility,” he added, his voice dropping to a softer tone, more regret than resolve. “I helped start it, and I will end it. All I want for you is to remain safe and… not become a killer, like me. Not while I’m still around to protect you from that fate.”

Luke shook his head and turned away. Father talked as if he could remain a dewy-eyed innocent child forever. As if he wasn’t already practically a man. Maybe Father would never see him as a man, no matter what he did, no matter how tall he got or how strong he became in the Force.

“And what if you fail?” he asked. When he was a boy the thought of his father failing at anything would have been absurd to him. But he wasn’t a boy anymore.

Father walked towards him and looked at him with sad eyes for a moment, before reaching out to pull him into a hug. “I won’t fail,” he said. “Let’s not argue about this anymore tonight. You’re tired, I’m tired. We’ll discuss this in the morning.”

He held Luke so tight that Luke could hear the thump of his heart but also the faintest whir of electronics from his cybernetic arm. “Yes, Father,” he relented, his voice coming out small and muffled. The promise of Father staying there through the night took the fight out of him.

Father released him from the death grip hug, but kept an arm across his shoulders as they walked back towards the campfire. The flames had dwindled and the light was fading. Only Ben and Ahsoka remained.

“Get some sleep,” Father ordered, and Luke climbed aboard the Daring Duchess, feeling suddenly exhausted. He’d explored a cave, bonded with rock panthiras, seen a vision, had his first kiss, built a lightsaber, and sparred and then fought with his father all in one day. He deserved to let himself rest, he decided.

But rest did not come. He tossed and turned in his bunk, with Artoo slumbering peacefully beside him, the little droid hooked up to a power outlet in the wall near the foot of the bed. Luke wasn’t sure how long he tried to sleep, his bones weary but his mind alive, his stomach churning with worry and dread. He’d eaten a light dinner before setting to work on building his lightsaber, and it rested
uneasily at the pit of his stomach.

Finally, he got up and went outside, into the chilly air of the night. He looked up at the sky, at the distant twinkle of the myriad of star systems. He had visited some of those systems, but the galaxy was so large, and he felt small and earthbound. The nomadic life he and Ben led was its own kind of prison, one that barred them from seeing the people they truly cared about. He saw it in Ben’s eyes when he looked at Father and Ahsoka, and that made Luke feel more of a kinship to his “uncle” than ever before. If only he could talk Ben into letting him go, but what could Ben do if Father remained stubborn? Not much. There was only one person in the galaxy that Luke had witnessed successfully giving his father orders, and she was far, far away. A face in a hologram, speaking words of hope to those who would rebel… except for her son, who was to remain obedient and out of the way.

“Can’t sleep, golden boy?” came a quiet voice from the deeper shadows beyond the starlight.

He turned to see Mara slink out from beneath the landing gear of the *Daring Duchess*, and he wondered why and how long she had been sitting underneath his ship.

“No.”

“Me neither.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. Then added, “For earlier today, I mean.”

“For what?” she asked, a crispness to her voice.

She wasn’t going to make it easy, was she? “I should not have kissed you back,” he said. “It was unfair of me.”

“I don’t understand.”

“There can’t be anything between us, and I’m sorry if I misled you somehow or gave you the impression that there was… something.”

She regarded him silently for a long, excruciating moment, then nodded. “Alright.”

She turned and jumped nimbly up onto the ship, pulling herself partly with her hands and partly with the force until she walked out along one wing. Luke watched her, wondering what she was doing, before she sat down and crossed her legs, then turned her face up towards the night sky. “Come sit with me,” she said.

“Why?”

“Do you have anything better to do?”

Luke supposed the answer was no, since he couldn’t sleep and found the inside of the ship to be stifling. He had to spend so much time in there as they traveled from star system to star system as it was.

He hopped directly from the ground up to the wing and sat down beside her. They said nothing for a while, just listening to the faint night noises of animals scurrying through the grasslands below and the buzz of insects in the air. Luke had spent the first ten years of his life dreaming of the stars, but had learned to appreciate the sort of things that could only be experienced planetside.

“Do you know how many of them there are?” she asked after a while.
“Star systems?” Luke said, following the line of her gaze, which was fixed on the sky. “No. I don’t think anyone does.”

“Does it ever make you feel insignificant, like nothing you do matters?”

“No,” he said, “I don’t like to think like that.”

“I guess you wouldn’t have to, being the son of the Chosen One and all.”

“That’s not why,” he said, ignoring the jab, but wondering if she had overheard his argument with Father earlier. It was likely. It wasn’t as if standing just a few meters away from the campfire beyond the ships had afforded much privacy. “I just don’t think there’s much use in being hopeless.”

“You don’t know what it’s like to have everything you thought made you special taken away from you,” she said. “That’s hopelessness.”

“I had my family taken away from me,” he said. “That is enough to make a person lose all hope.”

“I’m an orphan,” she said. “You don’t have to tell me that.”

“But I don’t lose hope. It doesn’t matter how big the galaxy is, if you have people who care about you, there’s something to fight for.”

“Well, then,” she said, “I guess I don’t have anything to fight for, but I already knew that.”

He frowned at her self-pitying words, and he was thinking of something to say, when she added, “You think I’m being needlessly dramatic. I’m not. It’s alright; I don’t care. I don’t need anyone. I have myself.”

“You have—”

“My guardians? Please, we already had this discussion.”

He shrugged, watching the moonlight play across her face as a lone, wispy cloud passed by above. They cared about her, he was sure of it. But maybe she just didn’t care about them, and that was the problem. It must be very lonely, indeed, to view the people in your life as jailors.

He knew a little bit about that. It wasn’t quite the same, but it was… close enough.

He knew he shouldn’t, but she looked so forlorn in that moment that he reached out and put his arm around her shoulders. She glanced down, then up into his face, and said, “You’re confusing me.”

“I’m not… I didn’t mean to… this isn’t…” he stammered, a little perplexed at his own actions. “You just seemed lonely.”

She looked away. “Like I needed a friend?” Her voice had an edge, but she leaned into him a little all the same, even as she kept her gaze fixed on the stars.

“Maybe,” he said, then asked, “in the cave, when you heard your name being called… who was calling you?”

She looked back at him, surprised. “Why do you want to know?”

He shrugged. “I was just wondering,” he told her. “When we were in the cave we both heard voices, but I don’t think it was the same voice.”
“Who did you hear?” she asked, narrowing her eyes.

“My sister,” he answered, saying it for the first time out loud. “It was my sister, Leia. And I saw her, too. She led me to the crystals.”

“What did she say to you?”

“Just my name,” he said, then felt a little bad about lying, and added, “and she asked if I was happy.”

“Are you happy?”

He wasn’t sure what to say. In that moment a calmness had come over him, a marked change from the rest of the day. Even having Mara close, pressed up against him with his arm around her, wasn’t nearly as unnerving as it had been earlier in the day. Perhaps the nighttime was soothing; the gentle darkness of the valley after midnight seemed safer than the impenetrable blindness of the cave. He inhaled the scent of her hair, and wanted to say that he was fine, but instead he answered, “No. I miss my family. I’m afraid that we’ll never be together again. I feel like my mother abandoned me and my father doesn’t believe in me. Sometimes I think I’ll never see my sister again.”

Mara said nothing, but her eyes did not stray from his face. He couldn’t see the green in them in the night; they appeared black instead. But there was no laughter there, none of the mocking challenge that he usually associated with her, and he found himself thinking about kissing her again, about how perhaps it wouldn’t be that big of a mistake; certainly not the end of the world. But he stopped himself, asking, “So, what did you hear? In the cave.”

She remained silent, and he worried that she would mock him after all. He had just practically bared his soul to her, told her his worst fear, the least she could do in return was tell him what she had seen or heard in the cave.

“I heard myself,” she said. “It was my own voice. Just me. I told you, I don’t have anyone else to care about.”

“It’s alright to care about yourself,” he said.

“I saw myself, too. And I looked… happy. I’m never happy.”

“My sister looked happy, too,” he said, turning away to gaze out across the hills, which were gray and formless in the silver light of the stars. “Like she was somewhere else, and she belonged there.” Maybe Father was right after all, that wherever Leia had been sent made her happy, suited her well, and gave her peace of mind. Maybe the worry and dread he felt was all his own.

“I hope my sister is happy, wherever she is,” said Mara. That surprised him. She had seemed to dislike Faisellu, saying mean and dismissive things to her and about her and quite literally, only pretending to be her sister. Faisellu had been meant to die, to be a sacrifice in the Emperor’s twisted plans for them, and Mara had come to Osallao knowing that. She had known it all along.

He didn’t say any of that, however. It seemed ungenerous and spiteful to remind her that she had no one, that she was an orphan with no family, and so he let his doubts rumble through his mind by themselves. He realized that he had been holding her close for a while now, but he didn’t want to stop. It was hard to admit how lonely he felt, all the time, and this was nice… this felt right, despite all the warnings that clamored to the surface. Force, what would it be like not to have to worry all the time, about everything and everyone?

She turned her face towards him and he kissed her.
They didn’t say anything after that. What was there to say? They just sat in silence, his arm around her, her head on his shoulder, together but alone with their own thoughts. The bright shining light at the center of her that he could always sense was not gone, it was still there, perhaps even stronger than ever, and he wondered now if he had misunderstood it all along. Maybe it was just a desire to matter in the great big unfeeling universe, to be cared about by someone, whether it was an evil master, a fake sister, or... a friend.

He let his eyes drift closed, finally feeling the exhaustion of the day work its way into his mind. He didn’t plan to fall asleep up there, still holding Mara, but he did. Because the next thing he knew, he was squinting up into the harsh yellow sun, feeling stiff and sore and realizing that he was lying on top of the Daring Duchess, covered in morning dew. A shadow fell over him, and he looked around, still blinking in confusion and grogginess. Mara lay beside him, curled up in a tight ball with her legs pulled up to her chest and her head resting on one arm.

“Comfortable?”

He sat up and shielded his eyes from the sun, looking up towards the source of the shadow. His father stood over them, arms crossed.

Luke sat up, his mouth cottony and gross feeling. But he felt curiously unrepentant. “Morning,” he said, daring Father to say one word about this.

Mara came awake with a jerk and a gasp, leaping up as if she had been dreaming of attack. She looked around wildly for a moment before taking stock of the situation. Father didn’t move even a little bit, still standing there like an implacable mountain of displeasure.

Mara swore and skittered down off the ship, landing a little too hard on the ground but bouncing back up and taking off towards her own at a run. “Mara!” Luke called, but she ignored him completely. He watched her disappear into the ship just as Ahsoka was walking out, and the togruta woman paused, first looking towards her fleeing charge in surprise and then searching around until she found the two figures on the Duchess.


“What in Sith hell are you doing, son?” Father asked.

“Absolutely nothing,” Luke snapped, not even trying to reign it in. He stomped across the spaceship’s hull, taking a less abrupt path than Mara had to the ground. But the jump down was still a little bone jarring, and he found that he didn’t mind at all, because the pain in his knees distracted from the hot feeling of mortification that coursed through him.

Father followed him, saying, “I’m not finished.”

“Tell that to someone who cares!” Luke shouted back, experiencing a thrill at how freeing it was to just tell his father off like that, with no regrets, at least not yet. He stormed inside the ship, equal parts elated, pissed off, and horrified, with Father still right behind him. Ben was inside, drinking some tea in the common area, and Luke didn’t pause to chat as he jogged past, trying to keep ahead of his father and those ridiculously long legs of his.

He went into the refresher and locked the door.

From outside he heard Ben say, in a dryly bemused tone, “Good job with that, Father of the Year.”

“Shut up,” Father snapped, and Ben had the temerity to chuckle. Luke was glad someone was amused by this.
He knew his father would be waiting for him when he came out, so he rehearsed what he was going to say. Something about not being a little kid anymore and being able to make his own decisions about who he talked to and kissed and fell asleep with on the wing of a spaceship.

Things became suspiciously quiet, and Luke ventured back out. Father wasn’t waiting for him, as he had expected. He walked down the hall and found Ben still sitting exactly where he had been. He looked at him questioningly, and Ben said, “I wouldn’t go outside if I were you.”

“Why not?”

Ben raised an eyebrow and went on sipping his tea. Luke shook his head and disregarded the warning, going back towards the hatch. As he neared the landing ramp he heard voices raised in argument.

“...she’s just a child!”

“So is he!”

“Oh don’t give me that, Anakin! You insufferable hypocrite! How dare you! You told me to take care of her and I have done my very best all these years, and I don’t think you appreciate how hard it is to raise a girl in this galaxy!”

It was Ahsoka doing the shouting, and Luke peered out around the corner to see the togruta jabbing a finger emphatically into his father’s chest.

Father laughed, the angriest laugh Luke had ever heard, and said, “Are you forgetting that I have a daughter?”

“Aren’t you?”

“That’s a low blow, Snips. Very low.”

“Maybe it is. But Mara is very important to me and I do not appreciate these ridiculous accusations,” Ahsoka huffed. “Maybe you should worry less about her motives and more about your own son. I’ve had to keep lecherous little creeps off of her before and—”

“Lecherous?” Father exploded, and Luke instinctively ducked back inside the ship. “Did you just call my son lecherous?”

“I didn’t say that,” Ahsoka snarled, enunciating each word like throwing a knife. “However, you may not have noticed that Mara is a very pretty young girl and your son is a fifteen-year-old boy not some innocent dew speckled angel that fell from the heavens ready to be corrupted by an eeeeeevil —”

Luke didn’t listen to the rest, just slunk further back inside the ship and then returned to Ben before Ahsoka could sniff him out and turn her indignation away from Father and directly onto him.

“I didn’t do anything wrong,” he insisted, throwing himself down onto the lounge seat next to Ben. “I didn’t even do anything at all.”

“Oh, I’m sure you didn’t,” said Ben. “They’re both very protective. A little too protective, perhaps, but, best to stay out of their way. Let it blow over.”

Luke covered his face in his hands. He’d had a moment, a special moment, with Mara last night. It was their business; it was just between the two of them. It should have stayed that way. But in the
harsh reality of morning the magic of the night fell away, especially when placed under the scrutiny of Father and Ahsoka, who seemed determined to cheapen it and make it seem wrong. He was so, so, so very sick of being treated like a child. Maybe he should just find a panthira and ride away from it all.

At least Ben was being reasonable. He could always count on Ben to remain sensible and not fly off the hook. That’s what made him a true Jedi, Luke thought, and wished that he could be the same.

He wanted to go see Mara, to apologize somehow for the rude awakening and the shouting match that was happening outside. But he wondered if she would want to see him again, or if she was too upset. She had certainly hightailed it out of there quick enough when she saw Father glowering down at her.

Eventually, Father came back inside the ship, and looked at Luke for a long silent moment before turning to Ben and saying, “I need to head out.”

Luke stood up. “Just like that?” he said incredulously. “You’re leaving?”

“I have to,” Father said. “I’ve stayed too long. We’ve all stayed too long. Ahsoka has received a report of an Imperial supply fleet moving past this sector and we have to go try to intercept it and disrupt it.”

Luke gaped at him, disbeliefing. How could he go from shouting at Ahsoka to casually planning an attack on the Imperial fleet with her in two seconds flat?

“Let me go with you,” he said, sensing that his chance to continue the debate they’d had the night before was slipping away.

“No,” said Father. “You stay with Ben and try not to make any more trouble for me.”

Luke felt a hot surge of anger work its way up from the pit of his stomach and spill from his mouth in the form of a blurted, “You? Trouble for you? You’re making this all about you? That was none of your business, none at all! You don’t have any right to say anything about me or Mara. You’re not around enough to have any say in anything that I do!”


Luke rocked back on his heels, ashamed at his outburst. Not because Father didn’t deserve it, but because it was not the Jedi way. “Yes, Ben,” he said quietly.

“Anakin,” said Ben, turning pointedly towards Father, “apologize to your son.”

“For what, exactly?”

“Embarrassing him? Belittling him? Disregarding his feelings and making things about you? Take your pick,” Ben said, waving the spoon he had been stirring his tea with.

Father glowered at Ben, who gazed back utterly undaunted. Something about his steady gaze made Father take a step back finally, and sigh, “I’m sorry, Luke,” rubbing a hand across his forehead. “Perhaps I overreacted. Just… just don’t do anything you’re going to regret later. Mara is still a very… a very troubled girl. You don’t understand.”

“And you do?” Luke said, hardly trusting his voice to go above a whisper.
“I do. I understand her a lot better than you do,” Father said, but after a glance at Ben, amended, “It’s not that I think she’s a bad person, or that I don’t understand what you’re feeling, after all I was a teenager once—”


“What I’m saying,” Father tried again, “is that neither of you should be, um, doing anything… like that… with each other…at this time… in your lives…”

Luke thought that driving his new lightsaber through his own eye socket would be less painful than listening to his father stumble around the subject like this. He turned away from Father, knowing full well that he was being petulant, but he didn’t care. “Don’t you have a war to fight? The galaxy to save? An Empire to topple?”

“We’ll talk about this later,” said Father. More empty promises, Luke thought, but he just watched as Father turned to go, nearly tripping over Artoo as he made his retreat.

At the last moment, he realized that if Ahsoka was leaving, that meant Mara was too. He needed to go talk to her, he couldn’t just leave things like this. He got up and followed after Father.

When he exited the ship he saw that the hatch to Ahsoka’s ship was closed. They were already preparing to take off. How could they do this? Everything that had been good about last night, from the pride they had shown in him and Mara for successfully navigating the dangers of the cave, to the joy of crafting his own lightsaber, to the supposed camaraderie around the campfire, seemed ruined now. They were rushing off and leaving him behind and he didn’t even get to say goodbye. Lecherous little creep, he thought, remembering Ahsoka’s words. Well, it was good to know what she really thought of him.

He watched the ship rise from the ground and shoot up into the sky, the repulsorlifts flattening the grass around it and making him take a step or two back as he felt the pressure threaten to knock him from his feet. He watched the viewport for any sign of Mara looking out at him, but saw nothing.

Soon he and Ben were the only ones who remained behind on the surface of La’as Vinto. He went back aboard the ship with Artoo at his side, and just like that, things were back to “normal.” Just the three of them and the Daring Duchess with its cargo hold full of smuggler’s goods. Only now he also had a lightsaber, an inert stone that reminded him of his sister, and even more complicated feelings about Mara than ever before.

Luke realized that he had no idea when, or if, he would ever see her again. Just like he didn’t know if he’d ever see Leia again, or Mother, or Father for that matter. Father, who rushed off at the first sign of a battle he could throw himself into headfirst. What if they all died? Why in all the star systems were they taking Mara along with them but leaving him behind, as if he had to be protected at all costs but she could just be dragged into danger with them like it was nothing? He didn’t know whether to feel slighted over once more being treated like a precious baby who couldn’t be allowed to make his own decisions, or outraged that Ahsoka seemed to care more about keeping his lecherous little hands off of Mara than keeping her out of a war zone.

Why were all the adults in his life determined to be the actual, literal, worst? He was so tired of trying to be good and keep it together when no one else did.

“Luke,” said Ben from the open hatch of the Duchess, “come aboard the ship. We had best be moving on. I do want to stop at the spaceport on the other side of the planet before we leave, I hear they have a crop of hora spice plant in season and I want to see about picking up some cargo.”
Luke sighed, wondering how Ben could care about such trivial things at a time like this. Didn’t he realize that none of this… this pointless smuggling and running to and fro… none of it mattered?

Does it ever make you feel insignificant, like nothing you do matters?

Are you happy?

Can’t we ever be friends?

With one last look towards the sky, where the other ships had disappeared into the clouds with nothing but vapor trails left behind, Luke turned and joined Ben aboard the ship.
It began with a dream.

*She held the twins close. They were small, very small, so small. Babies, born premature and slight, with fluttering heartbeats. She held them both in the palm of one hand.*

*She was in the Theed Palace. She was in the garden. The flowers were all dead and the trees reached naked limbs toward the clouds. She walked with Anakin, hand in hand, lovers strolling through ash. And she found she didn’t mind at all.*

*He turned towards her. He had a heartbeat where his face should be.*

“You can’t water the flowers with blood,” she said.

“But it’s already working.” He stepped away from her and she saw that wherever he went there was green again.

*She looked down at the children in her arms. “Ani, I can’t carry them all,” she called to him.*

*But he was gone.*

She woke up troubled.

She dreamt of her children often; that was nothing new. But there was something different and troubling about this dream. It lingered. It stayed in the corners of her mind all through the day.

She began to dream it every night, with slight variations.

*She stood with her back to Anakin, trying to turn her face to see him, but she couldn’t.*

“Why don’t you take your mask off?” he asked.

“I can’t. It’s too heavy.” She felt the weight of her limbs, like trees rooted into the earth, pulling her down. She could not move her arms, so heavy with their precious burdens. “Besides, I’m holding the children.”

“Are you?” said Leia. She was building castles from the ash.

“I’m trying.”

Anakin said nothing. She couldn’t see him. But she could feel his presence behind her. He towered over her, he reached out his arms, his branches spreading to cover the sky.
Blood like rivers flowed through the ash under her feet. The flowers sprouted, spreading petals to the sky.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m watering the children's graves.”

“Why?”

“So that they grow.”

She turned around. But he was already gone.

She awoke in the dark, a thin sheen of sweat on her skin. Anakin slept beside her, barely fitting onto the two narrow military issue cots they had pushed together in her quarters to make one bed. He was not always with her, not nearly often enough, but when they were together on the same base or ship they made the best of it.

Nightmares were Anakin’s burden, not hers. She told herself this as she brushed damp hair away from her neck. It was strange for her to wake troubled in the night and see him breathing evenly beside her. She did not want to begrudge him his peaceful sleep, after all, it was a difficult and rare thing for him. But she almost wished that he was awake so that he could comfort her as she had often comforted him when he was disturbed by dreams.

As if sensing her thoughts, he opened his eyes and reached up to touch her arm. “What’s wrong?” he asked, voice thick with sleep.

“Nothing,” she lied, sinking back down onto the hard cot mattress—hardly a mattress really, more of a thin cushion—and snuggled up against him. He would be gone tomorrow and she would have to miss him again.

He stroked her head and tightened his arm around her. “More nightmares?”

“Nothing,” she said. She hated to trouble him with her bad dreams, when he had so many of his own.

“Are you sure?”

She reached up to brush her fingers across his face. “I’m no Jedi,” she said. “My dreams are just dreams. They’ll pass in time.”

Stress and worry, that’s all they were. That’s all dreams ever were.

She needed to pay another visit to Leia soon. She had last been to see her daughter on Leia’s sixteenth birthday and she was certain that the weighted feeling in her heart over several months passing since then was the cause for these nightmares. That, or she needed to see Luke, though she had seen him more recently than his sister. She needed to see one of her children. That’s what her dreams were telling her.

Padmé had once made the mistake of allowing years to pass without seeing Leia.
In the beginning, when she had first joined up with the Rebel Alliance, she thought that throwing herself into the cause whole-heartedly would make the change come about faster. But it hadn’t. The seeds of rebellion, once planted, took time to grow, especially with the heavy boot of the Empire coming down hard to squash the sprouts.

Three years into her role as Ambassador Amidala, she had taken an extended leave of absence to spend several weeks with Anakin and Leia on a distant, oceanic world that had a small scattering of sparsely populated islands like star systems rising out of the water. They had lived together for a time in an isolated cottage far from any Rebel base or Imperial station, and Padmé had tried to shower her daughter with all the attention that she had been neglecting to give.

But Leia had remained silent and sullen.

She spent most of her time alone in her room, the door shut, with only Threepio as her companion. Or, she would go down to the beach and spend hours there building sandcastles, ignoring both of her parents and rejecting any offer to join her. Each evening when the tide came in the ocean washed her castles away and she would rebuild them in the morning.

Padmé had known that Anakin and Leia had been having trouble, but she hadn’t really grasped the full extent of it, just from the messages she received from Anakin or what Obi-Wan and Luke had told her of the time they saw them.

That first reunion after three years was a memory that was burned into her mind. She had arrived at the cottage first, accompanied by Ahsoka, and so she was there waiting when the Twilight II touched down.

Leia was the first to exit the ship, and Padmé could not stop the tears that came when she saw how changed her daughter was. At thirteen, Leia had grown to be nearly as tall as she was, and when she hugged her she felt as she were not hugging a child but a young woman.

She has grown up and I have missed it, she thought, and felt stricken. She could not say a word. Never again, she thought. No matter what happened, she would not go years without laying eyes on her daughter again.

Leia hugged her so tightly that she bunched up the fabric of her mother’s dress in her hands, her fingers digging into Padmé’s back. “Mama,” she said, whispering it into her shoulder.

“Leia, my sweet daughter.” Padmé could barely choke out the words. “I’m here. I’m here now.”

There would be dark spotted bruises on her skin later, where the scars from the nexu’s claws still ran lines across her back.

Padmé watched as first Anakin’s boots and then the rest of him became visible as he walked down the ship’s ramp, C-3PO shuffling along beside him. He made no move to break up the hug, standing back and simply looking at his wife and daughter with a small, sad smile.

Threepio, on the other hand, threw up his arms and exclaimed, “Mistress Padmé! It is so good to see you!”

“It’s good to see you, too,” Padmé said, but her eyes did not leave Anakin, and she gave Leia an extra squeeze before pulling away.

Ahsoka had come out of the cottage and was standing at a respectful distance, smiling as she witnessed the family reunion. She would leave shortly, to return in a few weeks’ time to end the leave of absence and transport Padmé back to the nearest rebel base.
Leia clung to Padmé like a mynock, and she had to gently disengage her daughter’s hands from her clothing. “Let me say hello to your father, darling,” said Padmé. Leia let go of her, then, and took a few steps backwards.

Padmé would not realize until later how strangely silent Leia had become. So caught up in the emotion of the reunion, she did not at first understand that Leia’s silent reactions were not a result of being choked up or overcome with shyness at seeing her mother once again. She only half noticed the cold glint that came into Leia’s eyes as she watched her parents embrace.

Padmé would come to realize that her formerly precocious and lively girl was now all but mute, only speaking in short and whispered sentences. And when she did speak, it was almost always to Threepio. She would tug at the droid’s arm and he would bend low enough for her to murmur into his mechanical ear and then he would explain what Leia wanted in his prim, droning voice.

Anakin had been sending her messages telling her that Leia missed her and needed to see her, but when they were finally together Leia did not seem content with the getaway Padmé had arranged. She asked after Luke constantly, despite how many times Padmé told her that it was too dangerous for Luke to be there as well.

It was dangerous enough for the three of them to be there together; she and Anakin had sizable bounties on their heads and Leia, though not publicly designated as an enemy of the Empire, was a target of the Emperor nonetheless. She understood Leia’s desire; after all it was the same thing they all wanted, but it just wasn’t possible. As long as the Emperor wanted to steal the twins for his own purposes they could not be together. Not until his power over the galaxy was ended.

It was Threepio who actually did the asking after Luke, on Leia’s behalf. “Mistress Leia would like to know if Master Luke will be joining us. Mistress Leia would like to know where Master Luke is. Mistress Leia is asking if Master Luke is alright and where he is and if he is still with Master Kenobi.”

Padmé absolutely refused to engage in the go-between circus with Threepio. She was appalled at how Anakin seemed to have gotten used to this and take it for granted, speaking to his droid as if he had created him for the purpose of serving as an interpreter for his daughter. As if Leia was a droid herself who didn’t speak Basic. Padmé told him that he shouldn’t be encouraging this behavior, that if he did not entertain her and allow her to use Threepio in this manner, then Leia would just have to start talking to him directly again. But he would just shake his head and respond with different variations of the same refrain: “I tried that, and it didn’t work, and now I just do what I can.”

It was after that less-than-ideal family vacation that Padmé made the decision to send Leia to Alderaan to live with Bail Organa and his family.

She knew that Anakin and Leia would destroy each other’s sanity if they kept this up. It made her heart heavy to admit it, but she could not simply hope they would work things out on their own. And even though allowing things to continue as they had been was now out of the question, Padmé could not justify the idea of putting Leia in harm’s way by taking her back to one of the rebel bases with her. These places were subject to raids by the Empire; they were being actively sought by Imperial agents.

Alderaan was part of the Empire, a hiding place in plain sight. Bail’s position in the Rebellion was that of a core world leader and ostensibly loyal Imperial Senator, who aided and abetted the growing movement against the Empire in secret. He was still a good friend, one who had been present on Polis Massa all those years ago when she and Obi-Wan had arrived with Anakin. He had kept their secrets for many years. She trusted him completely.
Also, she knew that he had already adopted two daughters about Leia’s age. And Leia needed companions her own age. She needed a place to settle down. She needed some stability in her life. Although Padmé had been against the idea of any of them staying in one place for very long, she now realized that the lonely nomadic life had driven Leia into herself, leading to the resentment and selective mutism that seemed to have changed her daughter into a completely different person.

Padmé was determined to visit Leia on Alderaan whenever she could. Part of her knew that this was foolhardy, as her movement in and out of an Imperial controlled star system would be disastrous for everyone involved if she were caught. But she could not let three years go by again. No matter how quickly she wanted to defeat Palpatine, she knew that severing contact with her family for the duration was simply impossible, if she wanted to still have a family at the end.

The thought of the Rebellion lasting even that long wearied her, but she knew that with Anakin’s help things would move quicker now.

She had convinced him to join them, to join her, once Leia was safely spirited away to Alderaan. It was an integral part of the plan. With Leia safe and sound in the Organas’ care, hopefully they could work together to end Palpatine’s Empire once and for all.

Leia would forgive them, in time.

“I knew her.”

“Who?” Padmé asked, looking up into her husband’s tired face. They stood on a rebel space station that was orbiting an uninhabitable planet in a star system far from any civilization. He had just made the long trip from Alderaan.

“Leia. I knew her.” He moved to the nearest viewport and stared out at the nothingness of space.

She didn’t understand what he was saying, but she disliked it. She didn’t like how he referred to Leia in the past tense, or the shell-shocked look about him as he leaned against the ship’s sterile white walls. She moved with him, following him to the viewport and taking his arm, turning him away from the void to focus on her.

“You still know her.”

“No, I mean… in my other life. I knew her then.” He spoke in a disbelieving voice, as if even he was now doubting his double memories. “I mean, I didn’t know her, but I met her a couple of times. She was a senator.”

Padmé dug her fingers into his arm reflexively. “I don’t understand. You said that we all died.”

It was not the sort of admission that she was likely to forget or misremember. He had declared that in this alternate timeline he had killed her and the children and lived in darkness as Palpatine’s servant. It was a horrible thing and she didn’t want to believe it, but this history was a part of him and she could not force herself to forget about it while it still loomed so large in his mind.

He turned to her and said, “I don’t know what to think. I thought that I had… I thought that you died and the children died with you. But it was her, I’m positive.”
“Why are you saying this now?” she asked, furrowing her brow in confusion. Hadn’t this entire alternate life happened a long time ago, now?

“I just never had any reason to think it could have been her,” he said, mystified. “But I saw them. I mean, I met Bail’s daughters when I took Leia to Alderaan. And they weren’t the same girl that I knew before. I haven’t thought about it in all this time but I remember her clearly and now I realize, it was Leia. It was Leia all along. I mean, he didn’t even change her name. It was Leia, do you see? I didn’t remember it but I’ve been thinking about it the entire way here and I know that it was her.”

He had broken away from her grasp and begun to pace agitatedly up and down the corridor. Padmé looked around self-consciously, because the frigate that served as a rebel space station was a bustling hive of activity and they weren’t exactly in a private location. They were in a public walkway leading from the hangar where the Twilight II was docked to where Padmé’s quarters were located, but Anakin hadn’t been able to contain his revelatory news long enough to reach her room.

“Alright,” she said, pulling on his arm again, trying to get him to keep walking with her, “you need to slow down, Ani. I don’t know what you’re talking about. Leia was alive and she was a senator?”

“Yes,” he said. “Leia Organa, Princess of Alderaan, a representative in the Imperial Senate. I met her when she first came to Coruscant. I was with Palpatine the day he welcomed the newest senators and I saw her again a few times after that. I can remember her so clearly because she irritated me so much.”

“What?” Padmé said, taken aback.

“Yes. She was just a teenager, not much older than she is now, but she acted like she was in charge of everyone,” he said, and a smile crept over his face. “She wasn’t the least bit afraid of me, I mean, not that she showed anyway. You have to understand, in those days people everywhere were terrified of me. Sometimes when I walked into a room people would just wet themselves.”

“That’s disgusting.” She didn’t know how else to react to his flippant remark, as if talking about being a terrifying monster whose very presence caused bodily functions to fail was a completely normal thing.

She made brief eye contact with a bothan who was walking towards them down the hall, and he looked as if he were going to stop to speak to them. But she gave him an imperious gaze that said, Keep walking, buddy. He averted his eyes and hurried by. Good. When she was walking around the base she was often flagged down by beings who needed to speak with her on some urgent matter or another, but today she was in no mood to indulge them. Let them find Mon Mothma or Admiral Ackbar or Commander Sato; right now she had personal business to attend to.

“It was just how Palpatine wanted it to be,” Anakin responded with a shrug once the hall was clear. “But Leia, the first time I met her, she asked me if I ate food through a straw or if I could take my helmet off and said that she wanted to know in order to settle a bet.” He laughed. “I was so shocked I didn’t even know what to say so I just walked away.”

“Your helmet?” Padmé echoed.

“Oh… yes… I had to wear a life support suit and a helmet at all times. A souvenir from losing the fight against Obi-Wan,” he said, his voice and his eyes turning dark. The mirth from remembering Leia’s boldness went out of him. “But that doesn’t matter. I don’t want to talk about it.”

She sighed. Of course it mattered. If he was still thinking about it, it mattered. But she just said, “Leia was with Bail, just as she is now. That’s good, isn’t it? A good sign. He kept her safe then and he’ll
do the same now.”

“Kept her safe? He sent her to serve in the Imperial Senate and he didn’t teach her enough sense not to get cheeky with Darth Vader!” Anakin said, far too loud. “What was he thinking? I could have killed her.”

Those words made Padmé go cold, but she tugged on his arm hard and kept walking.

“I almost didn’t leave her with him,” said Anakin. “Now, I mean. I almost just turned around and left and took her with me.”

“Why didn’t you?” Padmé had not been sure until the moment she welcomed Anakin off of his ship that he was going to stick with the plan of taking Leia to Alderaan. She had been half expecting to get a message that it was off and he wasn’t going to join her at the rebel base after all, or that he would show up with Leia and Threepio in tow.

He deflated visibly, his shoulders sagging. He shook his head. “I felt like I had no choice. It’s like the Force wants things to be a certain way and no matter what I do, it turns out that way in the end.”

“And you are trusting in the Force?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. I’m not sure that I should be fighting it, at any rate. I do know that she was able to grow up on Alderaan undetected once, so it may work again. But I told Bail that under no circumstances is she allowed to go anywhere near Coruscant or the Imperial Senate, and if Palpatine ever decides to visit Alderaan she is to stay well out of sight. Can you imagine her just waltzing up to him and asking him why his face looks like a rancor’s ass?”

Padmé could not imagine it. She could only see Leia tugging at Threepio’s arm, reaching up on her tip-toes to whisper into the droid’s audio receptor. Maybe she could imagine her sending Threepio to ask the Emperor impertinent questions.

“Then this is a good thing,” she reiterated, ignoring the question. “If Leia survived in your other life, maybe you didn’t actually kill me, and maybe—”

“No,” he said. “I wish I could believe that, but no. You were dead, you were gone. I couldn’t feel you anymore, and I can always feel your presence, even when we are star systems apart. I would have known if you were still alive.”

“I said maybe you didn’t kill me, not that I didn’t die,” Padmé argued, feeling slightly surreal, as she always did when she tried to contemplate this issue. Her death. She hated thinking about it and yet was drawn to it at the same time. She had such trouble reconciling what she had experienced and knew to be reality with the horror show that lived inside Anakin’s memories. “Maybe...” she ventured, “maybe I did die in childbirth after all.”

She had spent so much time before the twins’ birth assuring him that his fears for her dying in childbirth were unfounded, impossible, and just plain not going to happen. Suggesting that perhaps he had been right, even if only in an alternate timeline, was not something she had ever wanted to do. But anything was better than encouraging his continued self-flagellation, or having to accept that he could have killed her, in any possible version of reality.

He was silent for a few steps, then said, “Perhaps. I suppose I don’t really know what happened, only that I hurt you, and then you were dead... and Palpatine said that I had done it.”

“Palpatine is a liar. I refuse to believe anything he says.” She paused, then added for emphasis, “In any reality.”
“There’s no way to find out the truth, now. That whole timeline is gone. All I have is memories,” he said.

“That’s for the best,” she said, suppressing a shudder at the thought that somewhere in an alternate reality, she was dead and Anakin was still the Emperor’s slave. Or that the twins were alive yet unwittingly in danger from their own father who did not know they even existed.

Anakin went on; “When I realized that I had met Leia I tried to think back to any time I could have met someone who might have been Luke, but I couldn’t stir anything to the surface. So I still don’t have any idea what might have happened to him. I suppose… I don’t know. Maybe Obi-Wan took him? I never did find Obi-Wan… And Obi-Wan has Luke now, just like the Organas have Leia.” He nodded to himself, as if he’d worked it all out. “It’s the Force. I can feel it. The Force is undoing everything I did, as if it doesn’t like that I changed history, and it’s trying to revert back.”

He looked very weary, running a hand through his hair and sighing in… what? Resignation? Defeat? “I wanted us to be together and we’re not. And your idea to send Leia to the Organas, that wasn’t just you, it was the Force pushing you to send her there, as if she belongs there.”

“That’s not true,” she said. “Leia belongs with us; this is just temporary. And we are together.”

Padmé wouldn’t agree that her ideas were not her own but the will of the unknown and mysterious Force pushing and pulling her around, leading her to an inescapable fate. She did not, as a rule, believe in fate. Every step of her life, right or wrong, had been a conscious decision. She was a firm believer in making one’s own destiny.

“Are we together?” Anakin asked. “We’re here on the same base for now, but how long will that last?”

“We’re together no matter where we are,” she insisted. That’s what they had promised each other when they were first married, when their responsibilities to the Jedi and the Republic kept them from being able to be together. “I’m alive,” she added. “And you are not with the Emperor. You are on the right side now. Everything is different.”

“I’m not on anyone’s side,” Anakin replied. “I told you, I’m not going to take orders from anyone around here. I’ll help them out if it aligns with my interests. Our family’s interests. But I’m no rebel soldier or Jedi lapdog.”

“No one is asking you to be a lapdog.”

“I just want to make sure that you know.”

“I know.” They had had this conversation many times while together by the sea. She wasn’t interested in rehashing it now.

They finally reached her private quarters and she pulled him inside, away from the curious eyes and ears of the rebel base. No doubt there was already gossip going around about Ambassador Amidala and her eccentric husband. Rumors about Anakin had begun to circulate before he even arrived, as people sniffed out elements of the classified information about him and reworked it into rumors that he was a reformed Imperial granted a special pardon for turning traitor against the Emperor. These whispers jostled up against other rumors that no, he wasn’t an Imperial, that this was the Anakin Skywalker, the Jedi General from the Clone Wars… don’t you remember? No, he died, didn’t he? All the Jedi died, and besides if he’s a Jedi he can’t be married to Ambassador Amidala, use your head…
Padmé tried to pretend she didn’t hear any of the whisperings going on. People had been whispering about her all her life. She had learned to ignore them. And right now she intended to ignore everyone. She had already turned off her comm unit to avoid the pesky summons from Mothma that was sure to be coming once she realized Anakin had arrived onboard the frigate.

Anakin looked around at the dour furnishings of her small quarters and remarked, “Cozy,” with a touch of sarcasm. “Not exactly the senate complex, is it?”

“No,” she said. “But it doesn’t have to be.”

When she thought of home she thought of their house in northwest Breelden, with its vine covered fence and the reading alcove in the master bedroom. If she went all the way back to the distant memories that were her senatorial apartments on Coruscant she felt as if she were looking in on a different Padmé, one who was still young and naive, trusting in the unshakable rightness of the Republic and the enduring wisdom of the Jedi Order. Anakin was very attached to that place, though.

She slipped her arms around him, relaxing now that they were alone. “We made the right decision,” she said, “sending Leia to Alderaan. If the Force wants her there it will watch over her, won’t it?”

“I don’t know if that’s how it works,” he said. He wrapped his arms around her shoulders and pulled her close. “But I hope so.”

The nightmares did not begin to plague Padmé until about three years after Anakin took Leia to live with the Organas.

She had kept to her resolve to visit Leia despite the danger, and to see Luke whenever she could meet up with Obi-Wan, who was helping to provide much needed supplies to the Alliance. And yet she thought that these dreams were just guilt that six long years had passed since leaving Osallao and still the Empire persisted, still they could not all be together, and it was her fault. Her fault for not being able to make more of a difference… for not being able to make the galaxy a safe place for her family to be together.

It was not until she began to feel the waves of nausea roiling through her on a daily basis that she would even entertain the notion that something else was at play.

She considered that she could be suffering once again from morning sickness, but brushed it aside roughly. It was far more likely that she had the flu. Viruses were known to spread through the rebel forces like wildfire, whether they were traveling with a fleet of spaceships or stationed on a planetary base. She watched for anyone else exhibiting symptoms of sickness and was disappointed that everyone seemed well and the med droids cheerfully reported low numbers of infection.

Since she had gone to the medbay she asked the droids to run a quick pregnancy check just to make absolutely sure that it was not anything she had to worry about.

“Congratulations, Ambassador Amidala,” said the MD droid, floating serenely in front of where she perched uneasily on the examination table. “Our tests show that you are approximately six weeks pregnant.”

_Caraya’s soul what a fool I am._
“Thank you,” she murmured as she slid down from the table and made her escape from the medbay, her feelings in a tumult.

This could absolutely not be happening, even though it was.

She nearly floated through the corridors of the rebel base on Dantooine, barely noticing or responding to greetings from the beings she passed by on her way back to her quarters.

She was forty-three years old, which was, she knew, not an impossible age to become a new mother again. But she had not intended this, she had not been preparing or planning for this, and she was definitely not ready for it. She had long since thought herself to be beyond that stage in her life. Her twins had recently turned sixteen, for Shiraya’s sake!

Her twins, whom she rarely saw, because it was too dangerous for her to be with her own children.

Padmé felt a chill run through her. The Emperor coveted her children the way he had once coveted their father; that was the whole reason for the shattered state of their family, after all. Every time she thought about the Emperor she went cold with rage. How she hated that man. He had once been a friend, a mentor, a fatherly figure, even. Those memories were revolting to her now, after everything. If not for him and his entrenchment in the galaxy this new pregnancy might be joyous news.

Or not.

Years ago she and Anakin had agreed that more children were not meant to be a part of their future. Her first pregnancy had been a difficult one, in more ways than one. It had necessitated her being bedridden towards the end, and the twins had been born two months premature. And besides that, she had suffered a fairly severe bout of postpartum depression… what her midwife, Soolan, had referred to as “the killing sadness.”

But that was all nothing compared to what had happened before. Anakin’s nightmares, his certainty that she would die in childbirth, his brief yet disastrous stint as Palpatine’s servant all because that lying, parasitic human equivalent of swamp gas had played upon her husband’s fears for her. Obi-Wan always said that she could not oversimplify the matter to such a point, blaming her own pregnancy for Anakin’s fall to the Dark Side. But she could not deny that Palpatine had used her as the leverage he needed to convince Anakin to turn on the Jedi.

Padmé didn’t make it to the refresher in time. She sank to her knees, losing her lunch all over her bunk room floor.

It wasn’t as if she thought the same thing would happen again. She was confident that Anakin wouldn’t make the same mistake twice. Palpatine was the enemy. The Dark Side was the enemy. He knew that now.

She set to work cleaning up the mess she had made and told herself to get it together.

She wished Anakin were there, but of course he was not. He was never there when she realized that she was pregnant. To be fair it had only happened twice now. But still. She wished he was there.

Irrationally, she found herself laughing. Sixteen years later and what had changed? Here she was, realizing she was carrying a child, and where was Anakin? Off fighting a war.

The same war, really. The war for the galaxy’s soul.

Only now they were fighting against the ruling power, trying to break free of it, trying to destroy the Empire rather than fighting to hold the fading Republic together. They were the new Separatists.
That wasn’t entirely fair, she knew, because the Rebellion was not merely a dupe of Palpatine, as the Separatist movement had been. It was not run by the Sith Lord’s apprentice. It was not run by any one being, but by those who wished to put an end to Palpatine’s chokehold on the star systems.

She had to keep reminding herself of that, when it seemed as if the Rebellion would never amount to anything. That all their efforts did nothing but prolong the struggle, like flies seizing in a spider’s web.

Anakin had made it his mission over the past few years to search out and destroy Palpatine’s new battle station, the luridly titled Death Star. But the Empire was making that very difficult.

Anakin claimed to have knowledge of the battle station through a separate life, and had alerted the Alliance to its existence via a datadisc full of intel, given to Ahsoka back when she found them on Osallao. Following this information, the Alliance had sent scouts to Geonosis, the planet where he said the battle station was being constructed, to investigate his worrisome claims. They found it impossible to penetrate the planetary defenses, however. The Empire had the space around Geonosis locked down under careful guard, with no civilian air traffic allowed. That alone was good indication that Anakin was correct about something sinister taking place there, but the Alliance had been quite small and scattered in those days, even more so than it was now, and they hadn't been able to do much besides try to disrupt supply lines.

Unfortunately, the action they did take alerted the Empire to the fact that someone was on to them. After a few skirmishes with rebel cells and the Alliance's failed attempts to infiltrate the Imperial operations on Geonosis, the planet was deserted. Well and truly deserted: in addition to the Imperial presence being removed, all the native species and their civilization had mysteriously disappeared. Alliance scouts who visited the planet now reported that it was uninhabited. This was shocking and disturbing for the Alliance, though Anakin did not seem that surprised, only annoyed. "Wiping out the Geonosians was always an option for Palpatine," he said, "if there was any danger of the project's security being compromised."

It made her shiver, sometimes, when he talked like that. Neither of them were strangers to war, not remotely, but when he mentioned Palpatine's thought process his voice would change, slightly, would fall into a clipped rhythm as if he were remembering being by the Emperor's side. His talk became cold and calculating, discussing strategy that involved genocide as a matter of course. It was times like that when she thought she could see the reality of it, when she could truly imagine him by Palpatine's side, running the Empire as Darth Vader, a Lord of the Sith.

Even though others in the Alliance were not privy to the existence of this phantom timeline, she could tell that they felt uncomfortable around him, too. He butted heads with them on a number of occasions. As for the alternate timeline—Padmé had cautioned Anakin not to say anything that would get him written off by the higher ups as a lunatic, and so he didn't go around glibly mentioning time travel. Even a Jedi such as Obi-Wan had been skeptical of the idea, and there were no more Jedi in the Rebel Alliance.

(Well, that wasn’t entirely true, either. There were a few former Jedi and Force sensitives that had come out of the woodwork. Ahsoka and Barriss, obviously, existed—along with reports that a cell based on the planet of Lothal had a Master Padawan pair among them. And of course there was Mara: though she was not a Jedi by any stretch of the imagination, she was growing up well in Ahsoka’s care and had just recently begun brandishing a lightsaber. But, a smattering of wayward erstwhile Jedi and Force sensitive teenagers weren’t enough to create an Alliance that believed wholeheartedly and unreservedly in the mystical powers of the Force.)

The intel Anakin had already provided Ahsoka with years ago had turned out to be quite hit and
miss. The Alliance leaders were under the impression that Anakin had obtained this information prior to deserting the Emperor back on Mustafar. Some of it was very valuable but some of it had, unfortunately, gotten a few people killed. That didn’t do much to create unquestioning trust in Anakin’s ideas or claims. The fact that he’d had to be pardoned of war crimes committed on Coruscant and Mustafar, to be allowed entry into the Rebellion in the first place, was another problem. Telling stories about living an entire alternate life as the Emperor’s number one enforcer who had thwarted and squashed the very rebels he was a part of now could not possibly earn him more trust, she was certain. This was how she justified being less than honest with friends and colleagues like Mon Mothma, though it did pain her at times.

Anakin felt the Alliance had been clumsy and ineffectual with the intel he had provided them, and in failing to destroy the Death Star while it was still under construction and vulnerable, had let it slip away. He could not find where they had relocated the battle station, and did not know where Palpatine was finalizing its construction; his knowledge from the alternate past was of no help now. And that frustrated him to no end.

He was outspoken about his disappointment in the Alliance’s handling of the Death Star problem. The missions to Geonosis had been costly and, ultimately, failures, though some saw it as a success that the Empire had been driven away. Anakin was not one of those people; he saw it as an escape, since the deadly battle station itself had not been destroyed, and was so far along in its completion now as to be capable of hyperspace travel. As a result, Anakin was not well liked by the higher ranking Alliance officers. He was seen as someone who came late to the party, bearing dubious gifts, and criticized the work others had done while he had been in hiding. Padmé thought the lower ranking troops and officers seemed to admire him, though, for his willingness to lead the charge into battle himself, and his Jedi skills. Rex, who had come out of retirement to join the cause, claimed that he would follow his general into a supernova itself if Anakin said they would come out alright on the other side. And, frankly, even if he didn’t. But that was Rex, with his particular brand of clone trooper loyalty and disregard for personal safety.

Anakin was not a General in the Rebel Alliance, despite Rex habitually referring to him that way. He had stubbornly refused any rank or any official title within the cause. That was another things that drove the some of the actual officers up one side of the wall and down another. Anakin considered himself a freelance rebel, doing what he wanted and only playing nice with the others if he couldn’t get by without rebel ships, troops, or supplies. He was, in effect, his own cell… with Ahsoka and Rex orbiting his sun like a rogue star system within the Rebellion’s galaxy. He was also their main contact with Obi-Wan, who delivered much needed supplies on a semi-regular basis.

Anakin got results, more or less. He was on a never ending quest to find and destroy the Death Star, but in the meantime was hard at work making sure the Emperor never felt too complacent on his throne. He had already almost single-handedly wiped out the Emperor’s Inquisitor forces, those shady operatives who existed to hunt down Jedi and Force sensitive children. He was also uncannily knowledgeable about Imperial protocol and could predict their maneuvers with staggering accuracy. And so, those who mistrusted or disliked him put up with him.

Padmé did more than put up with him. She loved him. She needed him with her, now.

But he wasn’t there. He had flown off on a “personal mission” to go find Obi-Wan and… no, she didn’t even want to think about it. She had hated the fact that he was chasing after that old spectre of a cockroach once more, and that had been before she even realized was pregnant. That was when she had kept trying to deny that her dreams meant anything.

No. They still didn’t mean anything. Pregnancy hormones. It explained so much.
She would just have to wait for him to get back. And he would return. He always did.

Her dreams changed.

Now she had one dream, over and over again, a dream that did not vary or shift as the garden dream did.

*She sat up in her bed, the hard cot with its thin cushion, to see a silhouette in the doorway.*

“You are a terrible mother,” the shadow said. Its eyes glowed a dull yellow.

“No!” Padmé reached out her hand, suddenly aware that the shadow held a baby cradled in its arms, a tiny bundle of light faintly illuminating the space around it, fluttering weakly in the darkness.

“Yes,” said the shadow. “You don’t deserve this.”

She wanted to get up out of the bed and go after her children, but she couldn’t. She was paralyzed, stuck in this half risen position, her mouth open and her arm reaching forward.

“Please don’t go,” she cried out, but her mouth made no sound.

The shadow heard her anyway. It laughed bitterly.

“You would only destroy it, the way you destroyed me,” the shadow said, and then it was gone.

Padmé awoke each night from this dream with a strangled gasp, sweat clinging to her clothes and hair, nausea overcoming her. She stumbled to the refresher and vomited until she had nothing left. She sank down to the floor and cried, because she did not know what was happening to her. She did not dream like this, she did not have Anakin’s nightmare curse, and yet here she was. Every night, the shadow rose in her mind and came to take her child away.

The shadow. It. Why bother pretending that she didn’t know who it was? In the dream it was inhuman; she could not think of it in terms of a name, a face that she knew. But upon waking she knew that it was Leia she dreamt of, and that it was Leia who came to take her baby away.

*I will not give in to this irrational fear*, Padmé told herself sternly. *I will not be afraid of my own daughter.*

Leia was safe in Aldera. She had been doing well there. When Padmé came to visit her she spoke as she once had, no longer whispering to Threepio. And the Organas assured Padmé that though Leia was restless at times, she was a good girl—a sweet and kind girl—whom they were happy to have in their care. Leia even asked after her father, sometimes, though when Padmé asked if she wanted to send him a message she would say no.

Padmé often told Anakin to go see Leia, but he would become very withdrawn and say that if Leia was doing so well, it was better than he didn’t mess it up. “I can’t bring Luke with me,” he’d say, as if he thought that was the only thing that would ever make Leia love him again… which was upsetting to Padmé because she was certain that Leia still loved her father very much. She had never stopped. Padmé was sure of it. They were just too much alike, too stubborn to talk to each other like they should. If he would just go see her, or if she would send him a message, everything would be
alright. If only they weren’t such bullheaded fools, things could start to smooth out between them.

These dreams were ridiculous nonsense. It was her own guilt manifesting as a yellow-eyed monster with her daughter’s face. It was her anxiety. It was her distress over Anakin being gone and her having no one to talk to about her pregnancy. It only made sense, in a twisted way. She had sent both Luke and Leia away from her, and it had been a hard decision to make, one that she still second guessed every day. Leia had struggled with the separation far more than Luke, so there, of course, that was why it was Leia’s face in her dreams.

It was all so easy to explain rationally. So why was she still so afraid?

*I will not do this,* she told herself. *I will not let dreams shape my reality. I will not fear my own daughter.*

She was desperate for Anakin to return. She considered dropping everything and going to find him, but she didn’t know where he was. The few times she tried to contact him, she wasn’t able to get a response. That in itself was nothing terribly unusual. He might be out of range or in hyperspace or just… being Anakin and forgetting to turn his comm unit on.

*(Or he might be dead.)*

She was supposed to travel from the base on Dantooine to Atollon in a week’s time, and she was considering asking for that trip to be canceled or delayed. She would say she was unwell, blaming her morning sickness on a bout of the flu, and hope that no one demanded a follow up with the med droids. Padmé did not want to announce her pregnancy to anyone before she spoke to Anakin.

“Hello, Ahsoka,” she said, opening the door to admit her visitor. She laid aside the datapad she had been working with, pausing in the middle of drafting a new speech.

“Padmé, how are you? I heard you weren’t feeling well,” said Ahsoka, stepping forward to give her a hug. Padmé remembered when the togruta has been a tiny slip of a thing she could sweep up in a motherly embrace, but now it was she who felt small.

“Nothing major,” said Padmé, though she felt a pang of regret that she was not being completely honest with Ahsoka. Ahsoka was her dearest and closest friend, normally a trustworthy confidant. Besides that, as a pseudo-Jedi bodyguard she had kept her alive and out of an Imperial prison cell on more than one occasion. They shared a similar purpose in the Rebellion, coordinating with the various cells spread out across the galaxy and working to recruit new ones, and so they had often been together.

“It must be something for you to want to cancel our trip,” said Ahsoka, furrowing her brow, inspecting Padmé as if she could detect sickness with a piercing gaze. “Not that I’m encouraging you to run yourself ragged; that’s just what I’m used to.”

Padmé smiled faintly, remembering the time she had refused to postpone a mercy mission to Akiva because she had a cold so bad she was running a fever and could barely breathe between bouts of coughing. “I’m getting too old for that sort of bravado,” she said, waving a self-deprecating hand at herself.

Ahsoka rolled her eyes, but smiled. She moved to take a seat on the bench which served as a sofa in
Padmé’s quarters, running her fingers absently over the wings on the Shiraya statue that sat on a table near the door. Padmé sat down next to her.

They were scheduled to leave for Atollon together, but Padmé had caved in to her own concerns and requested that the mission be delayed. She knew this was why Ahsoka had decided to come check up on her. She deftly skirted the issue, asking, “How are Barriss and Mara doing? Are they still in the Dunmeza system?”

This seemed like the right diversion, since at the mention of Mara, Ahsoka cast her eyes downward, uttering a troubled sigh.

“Yes. Barriss is well. And Mara… well… you know how she is,” said Ahsoka. “Restless as ever.” She shook her head and frowned. “She wants more freedom. She always has, but we’ve been having this discussion more and more lately.”

“Oh?”

“She’ll be fifteen in a few weeks, as she keeps reminding me. She thinks that means she’s all grown up and can strike out on her own.”

Padmé raised both eyebrows. She had thought that Mara’s days of trying to escape from Ahsoka and Barriss’s guardianship had passed, that they had gotten over that particular hump.

“Where does she want to go?”

Ahsoka shrugged. “Anywhere,” she said. “Just so long as she’s independent. She says she needs to discover herself… we had an argument and she actually said I was no better than the Emperor if I didn’t let her go.”

“Well that’s ridiculous.”

“Yes, but, she can say… hurtful things sometimes. It made me question if I really was just another tyrant trying to indoctrinate a child…”

“You’re not. Absolutely not.”

Ahsoka shrugged. “I’d like to think not, but I have tried to teach her, because that’s what a mentor does. Teach. I’ve tried to impress upon her more than anything that the Emperor’s ways—the things he taught her about the strong being superior to the weak—are cruel and evil. Is trying to teach empathy and kindness indoctrination? I… I don’t know. I tell myself she’s just being a teenager, lashing out, trying to be provocative. She’s been upset with me ever since La’as Vinto, because of… well, you know.”

Padmé sighed. She did know.

Ahsoka added, “She said that maybe she would become a smuggler. Where that idea came from I have no clue.”

“It doesn’t seem like a very well thought out plan,” Padmé observed.

“And I’ve told her that. She just keeps saying that I don’t trust her and that I’m letting Ana—”

She broke off and turned away, self-consciously rubbing one lekku in thought.

“Letting Anakin what?” Padmé prompted.
“Make me not trust her,” Ahsoka said. “Make me think she’s still trying to get back to the Emperor.”

“Anakin doesn’t think that.”

Ahsoka rolled her eyes. “Sure.”

“Yes,” Padmé insisted. “Anakin knows what a difference you have made in Mara’s life. You and Barriss both. She’s not the same brainwashed child she once was.”

“He says he knows that, but he doesn’t act like it,” Ahsoka disagreed. “Especially not when it comes to Luke. He still acts like Mara’s sole purpose in life is to corrupt his precious baby.” She glanced up quickly, as if just realizing that she was talking about Padmé’s son, too. “You know what I mean.”

“I know Anakin is a little paranoid when it comes to Luke,” Padmé conceded.

She had been told about Luke and Mara’s dalliance on La’as Vinto by both Ahsoka and Anakin, independently. She hadn’t bothered to bring it up to Luke the last time she had seen him, since she thought he wouldn’t want his mother to embarrass him by prying into his love life. She thought that Ahsoka was right, it was a whole lot of hand-wringing about nothing, as if teenagers sneaking out to watch the stars together was the end of the galaxy.

She also didn’t find it that surprising, and wondered why Anakin found it so implausible that a girl might actually just have a crush on Luke. But Anakin was still worried that Mara’s interest was due to never having given up on the sinister mission Palpatine had set for her, that of corrupting and converting the twins to the Sith’s way of thinking.

Ahsoka seemed to take this suspicion personally, as if anyone doubting Mara’s intentions was a pointed slight at her own parenting skills. She recently pointed out that Mara had been separated from the Emperor’s influence for many years now, and had in fact spent more time growing up under Ahsoka and Barriss’s care than she had in the Imperial Palace. This was a fair point, and one of the main reasons why Padmé wasn’t that worried.

Padmé had thought this argument was resolved, with everyone in agreement that it was nothing to be concerned over. It had been almost a year since it had happened. But obviously, Ahsoka was still thinking about it and it had not stopped irking her.

Now, Padmé offered a conciliatory, “You know how hard it is for him to trust people, but he trusts in you. We all do.”

Ahsoka smiled. “It hasn’t been easy,” she said. “But it’s been rewarding. And now I can’t even really imagine not having Mara with us. I could never send her away, I—” she broke off, catching herself, and added, “No offense.”

Padmé felt a pang of sadness at this reminder of the decision she had made. She didn’t think that Ahsoka could really understand her position. It just wasn’t the same. So she ignored the unspoken implication that she didn’t care as much about Luke and Leia because she did not keep them always by her side, and said, “It sounds like she’s just feeling restricted. She’s growing up. It’s natural to want more freedom and responsibility at that age.”

“Oh trust me, I know. And Mara doesn’t let me forget that when I was her age I was a Commander in the Grand Army of the Republic,” Ahsoka said with a half smirk. “Oh and she brings you up, too, how you were the Queen of Naboo at fourteen.”

Padmé laughed. “Maybe I should have a talk with her, I could impress upon her how little freedom being the queen afforded me.”
Ahsoka laughed with her, but then sobered and said, “I don’t think she knows what she wants. I told her that if she wanted to take a more active role in the rebellion I would be happy to have her help, but she doesn’t want that. She says we’re wasting our time here, fighting an endless battle that we can never win.”

“That’s Barriss talking,” said Padmé.

“I know,” Ahsoka said, nodding in agreement.

Everyone was tired of the long struggle against the Empire, and Barriss had long been weary with fighting. Her despair during the Clone Wars had pushed her into doing the unthinkable, sabotaging the Jedi by bombing the Temple. And through her actions she had hurt Ahsoka. She claimed, for the record, that she had never meant for Ahsoka to be blamed for it, that things had spiraled out of control. And yet Ahsoka had almost been executed by the Republic at the judgement of Tarkin, and it would have been Barriss’s doing no matter what her original intentions were. She had lost her way, stumbling into darkness, and had hurt the one she loved.

She was very much like Anakin, in her own quieter way, both then and now. She hated the Empire, just as she had once hated what the Republic and the Jedi had slowly become, but she was not wholly in love with the Rebel Alliance, either. She was there because she believed in Ahsoka, and Ahsoka believed in the cause. She would never stop trying to make amends to Ahsoka for what she had done. But unlike Anakin, she had forswn fighting, and had chosen to focus on her healing instead. She still carried a lightsaber, for protection, but did not participate in rebel missions.

Padmé could respect that. She hated the fighting as well. She had always been opposed to war, though she was more than willing to fight back when pushed into a corner. And pushing her into a corner was just what the Emperor had done when he invaded her hiding place on Osallao and came for her children.

Ahsoka fidgeted with the cuff of her armguard, and ventured, “Do you ever worry that maybe they’re right? We’ve been fighting so long. I’ve been fighting since I was a child. The galaxy isn’t any better off. It never ends.”

“It will end,” said Padmé firmly. She took Ahsoka’s hands in hers and gave them a reassuring squeeze. “It must.”

The dreams continued, and now the two separate nightmares got mixed up into one another.

*She was in the garden, or in her bed, she was carrying the children, she was sleeping, she was with Anakin, she was alone.*

*Leia made her castles out of ash.*

*They rose ten stories above Padmé’s head and trapped her in a giant city of skyscrapers, like Coruscant, only now she was a tiny speck far at the bottom, not perched at the top of a penthouse looking down.*

*Anakin was bleeding, always bleeding, raising plants from ash with the blood of his own veins.*

*She asked him to stop but he never would.*
“I can’t stop now,” he said, “look how well it’s working.”

She asked Leia not to take her baby away but she never listened.

“You are the worst mother in the galaxy,” the shadow hissed. “You should never have been allowed to give birth.”

Please stop. Don’t go. Don’t leave me.

But they were already gone.

“Mother,” said Luke, with a hand on her arm.

Padmé awoke with a jolt. That was a new element to her dreams. Luke.

She got up and staggered to the refresher, compelled by that old familiar nauseous feeling. When she was finished she wanted to crawl back into bed, but she noticed that her comm unit was blinking. She drove for it, hoping that Anakin had left a message while she slept.

It wasn’t him, though. Just a message from one of the officers that she was wanted at the medbay. Her heart leapt into her throat. Had the MD droid given up the information about her pregnancy test or the subsequent visits she had paid it since then? That was impossible; it was a violation of the droid’s programming to divulge confidential patient information. If the visit hadn’t been an emergency for an injury sustained on base the other sentient organics had no business meddling in the droid’s record files.

She dressed herself and tried to look as presentable as possible on short notice. The message had been left a couple hours earlier and she told herself that it could be nothing important if no one had come to rouse her.

Still, she hastened her footsteps as she made her way across the base to the medbay. When she arrived, a doctor (a kel dor, not a droid) ushered her towards one of the rooms, where she saw… Luke. And Anakin.

Luke was lying propped up on a cot, dressed in the standard issue white medical garb. His face was bruised and battered, one side covered in angry red gashes. Anakin was seated on the side of the cot, talking to him, but whatever it was he was saying was cut short when he sensed Padmé coming.

She took the scene in with no small amount of confusion and dismay, as it looked like Luke had been in a terrible fight. Anakin looked at her with obvious guilt.

Luke smiled upon seeing her, and waved to her. The movement drew her eyes and she saw that he was waving not with a hand but a heavily bandaged stump.

She reeled when she saw it, hardly able to believe that such a thing could have happened to Luke. Anakin jumped up and caught her by the elbow, steadying her as she staggered backwards.

“Hi Mom,” Luke said, his voice a little too cheerful, a little too slow, the tell-tale sign of strong pain meds. “You’ll never believe what happened to me.”
Luke and Ben arrived on the planet of Mirial, far on the Outer Rim in the Illisurevimurasi sector. They’d flown down the Listehol Run from the Hydian Way and here they were, at last, after several tiring weeks in hyperspace.

Luke had begun to take upon the piloting duties of the *Daring Duchess* more often than not, though it was still Ben who dictated where they went. Ben had never much cared for flying to begin with, and since Luke loved to sit in the pilot’s seat, he had gradually supplanted his guardian as the primary navigator on their travels. And so it was Luke who set the *Duchess* down in a small spaceport town located along the equator of Mirial. It was the winter season on the planet and snow was falling lightly over the hangar where he docked the ship.

They were met by Ahsoka, who was all smiles and hugs.

“Luke, have you grown ta—”

“Nope,” he said, shaking his head and wondering if she was ever going to stop using that as a greeting. He felt a little bad, though, when her smile faltered, so he tried to soften his snappish interruption with a smile and a shrug. He was approaching his seventeenth birthday and had just about given up on the idea that he was going to get taller that year, along with the hope that the Empire would crumble and his family would reunite, all of them in one place. Even Leia.

It was nearly a full year since he had gotten his kyber crystal from the Jedi Temple on La’as Vinto, and he had crossed paths with Ahsoka only a few scant times since. She was always awkward around him, as if she didn’t know quite what to make of him now, but she was still outwardly very friendly, which in turn made it difficult for him to know quite what to make of her. He didn’t know if she knew that he’d overheard the argument she’d had with his father over him and Mara.

Not that that mattered. The few times he had seen Mara since La’as Vinto they had been on their best behavior, and it had nothing at all to do with what his father or Ahsoka thought of them. It still irritated him that they’d both made a huge deal over nothing, but that was neither here nor there when it came to th decisions he made.

That night on La’as Vinto he had told Mara that there could be nothing between them, and that fact still remained, no matter how he felt about her. Their lives were too unstable, their meetings dictated by the will of others, and there was just no time, no opportunity, to pursue anything beyond friendship. Even without their troubled history, it would have been difficult to actually get to know each other under such circumstances. And so they were friends, just friends, passing acquaintances, really, who might see each other again in a month or a year, or never.

Mara understood. Or at least, he thought she did. They didn’t really have a chance to fully discuss things. The last few times saw her they had spent more time practicing their lightsaber dueling than
talking about their feelings. It was nice, in its own way, just to spar with her. It was refreshing to have someone else to train against other than Ben, and besides, she was very good. Quick, agile, surprising. Challenging, yet… fun.

He really did look forward to seeing her again, he wouldn’t bother denying that. It made him happy. Just being around her was enough. It would have to be.

Ahsoka, who had just flown in from the Atollan system, led them through the streets of the small, wintery spaceport on Mirial to the house where Barriss and Mara were located. Luke shivered, thinking that his jacket was not nearly warm enough and that he should probably have pulled a heavier coat out of storage. He had expected it to be a bit more balmy. Although Mirial had vast glacial regions covering the north and south poles, the planet's inhabitable equatorial region was known for having a temperate springlike climate for long, yearly seasons at a time. But it was not that season, now, unfortunately.

Ahsoka and Barriss kept a house on Mirial, a secret place of their own away from the war. It was Barriss’s homeworld and a good place, he supposed, to blend in. Ahsoka had explained that Barriss and Mara would stay there when she was on dangerous missions, particularly when Mara had been much younger. Luke had never been here, and he was curious to see it, because apparently this was the closest thing Mara had to a home now. He and Ben had no such base: the *Daring Duchess* was their home.

“Have you heard from Anakin yet?” Ahsoka asked as they walked, her breath puffing into little clouds. She wore a cozy looking fur lined cloak with a double peaked hood draped across her montrals.

“No. But I’m sure he’ll arrive… eventually…” Ben said, his tone dry. “When he feels like it.” There were few things Ben loved to complain about more than Father’s problems with punctuality. He never made a rendezvous point when he was supposed to.

“Well this meeting was his idea,” Ahsoka pointed out.

“Indeed. So I hope that he graces us with his presence.”

Luke walked behind them. Artoo wheeled along at his side, leaving tracks in the light snowfall that covered the sidewalk. Luke listened intently to their conversation, even as he took in the new, unfamiliar sights of the Mirialan spaceport around him. He did not, yet, know exactly why they were meeting here like this. Ben had insisted that he had no information to divulge, that it was simply Anakin’s request that they rendezvous here at Ahsoka and Barriss’s secluded home.

The buildings around them were made of stone and wood. It did not appear to be the most technologically advanced or architecturally modern city, which was unsurprising. Most planets far out in the Outer Rim territories like this did not have the infrastructure of the Core Worlds. Of course, he had never yet been to the Core Worlds. He and Ben traveled through the backwaters of the galaxy, and so his knowledge of places like Coruscant, Alderaan, or Corellia were still theoretical. Places learned about in Miss Ognoyn’s Galactic Geography 101, long ago, and seen only in images from the Imperial controlled HoloNews or in HoloDramas.

They arrived at an unassuming looking two story house on a street with other buildings of nearly identical shape and size. There was a small snow covered yard enclosed by a fence and gate that didn’t look like it could actually keep anything out. Ahsoka led them up the walk and opened the door (which was operated by a knob, not even an electronic panel), shrugging out of her cloak as she stepped inside.
The inside was cozy and smelled of spices and the warmth of cooking food. The front door opened up right into a small kitchen, and Barriss was there, turning away from the stove to survey them with her usual guarded, cool gaze. Luke thought that her eyes were like the planet she hailed from. But her frostiness lasted only a moment. She smiled warmly when she turned her attention to Ahsoka, who hung her cloak up on a hook by the door before striding over to give her a hug and a kiss.

Luke drifted over to the doorway that led out of the kitchen into the sitting room, glancing around but trying not to make it too obvious that he was looking for Mara. In the background Ben and Barriss were now exchanging small pleasantries, things like how was your trip, did the security checkpoint give you any trouble?, what a lovely home, and is that shaak steak stew I smell?

The sitting room was sparsely furnished. There was a small shrine in the corner which drew his eye; a squat, presumably Mirialan, deity sat upon a small throne with candles flickering gently around it. Along one side of the room there was staircase leading up to the second floor, which looked to consist only of an exposed hallway and a pair of doors leading off to the upper rooms.

He saw Mara step out onto the landing, sunlight from the open door behind her framing her as she paused with her hand on the railing, looking down. Her hair was loosely braided over one shoulder, glowing golden in the late afternoon light, and she wore a short green dress that matched the color of her eyes. She saw him standing in the kitchen doorway, and he waved to her. She turned one corner of her mouth up in a smile and lowered her eyes, pushing away from the railing to skip carelessly down the stairs.

“Hello,” she said, “how are you?” Before he could answer she turned immediately towards Artoo and said, “Oh you brought your droid. Hi there, um…”

“R2-D2,” Luke supplied, while Artoo beeped out what might have been a greeting or an insult. It was sometimes hard to tell whether the droid liked Mara, or not.

“Artoo, yes. I’ll remember one of these days,” she laughed, and gave Artoo a condescending pat on his dome. He squawked.

“Well, I do bring him everywhere I go,” Luke pointed out. But he didn’t really want to chit chat about Artoo, so he said, “It’s nice to see you, Mara.”

She turned her attention back to him. “How have you been?” she repeated. “Is that a new jacket? I like the color.”

“Um, okay. I’m doing alright,” he said. The jacket wasn’t new, and it was a utilitarian grayish beige, hardly something to comment on. From the quirk of her mouth he guessed she was mocking him in some way he didn’t quite understand. She reached out to touch his sleeve, and he blurted, “You look nice. Your clothes, I mean. They look nice. And you as well.”

He winced at his own words, wishing instantly that he could take them back and replace them with something less dopy. She just laughed and turned away, walking past him into the kitchen, leaving him to hope that Artoo would take pity on him and zap him into unconsciousness.

“Mara! I brought you something!” Ahsoka said, wrapping Mara up in a hug as soon as she approached. Ben had taken a seat at the table and simply nodded to her in greeting.

“Oh, um, that’s nice,” said Mara, while Ahsoka went over to her cloak by the door and reached in its pockets.

Ahsoka pulled out a small, round object that Luke recognized as a falling-star globe, a common
children’s toy. Not exactly what he would have expected Ahsoka to bring back from her travels.

“Here you go,” said Ahsoka, thrusting it towards Mara. “I don’t think you have this one, yet.”

Luke sensed the flush of embarrassment that rushed through Mara as she reached out to take the falling-star globe. He didn’t really even need to use the Force, because the redness that crept over her face was indication enough. All the laughing ease she had exhibited only moments before fled.

“It’s the city of Meraexes on Daselba Prime,” said Ahsoka, with a smile that was uncertain as she cocked her head to the side, watching Mara’s reaction closely.

“Thanks,” Mara said in a mumble, averting her eyes.

Luke looked between the two of them, noting the earnest desire to please coming from Ahsoka and the barely concealed mortification radiating from Mara. It seemed like a lot of commotion over a falling-star globe, which was a souvenir that could be found at just about any spaceport in the galaxy.

“Do you collect those?” he asked.

“I guess so,” Mara said with a nod, as she turned the globe over and over, the artificial stars streaking across the skyline of the city as it orbited in her nervous hands.

Ahsoka laughed a little too loudly. “She sure does,” she declared, her gaze shifting to Barriss for a moment, as if seeking reassurance. “Why don’t you take Luke upstairs and show him your collection?” she suggested.

“Really?” Mara said, her head jerking up, an incredulous tilt to her eyebrows.

Ahsoka leaned with overly careful casualness against the kitchen counter, and shrugged. “Sure. Just, you know, leave the door open…” she said, with an unusually high pitch to her voice, as if she were negotiating with a guard dog instead of her teenaged charge.

“Oh gods,” Mara muttered with a full body cringe, and turned abruptly to leave the room.

Luke wasn’t entirely sure he was meant to follow, considering how uncomfortable Mara seemed with… all of it. But she stopped in the doorway and motioned to him, saying, “Come on, then.”

He glanced to Ben, then exited the kitchen in pursuit of Mara, who was already ascending the stairs at a light jog. Artoo wheeled behind them and started to carefully inch his way up the steps, since he was a well-mannered droid who knew better than to use his jet-lifters on the wooden steps.

He followed her across the landing, running his hand along the smooth polished wood of the bannister. She led him to the door she had come out of only a few minutes earlier. When he stepped inside he got an idea why Mara seemed so embarrassed about the globe. Her bedroom didn’t have much to it, but everywhere he looked there were globes scattered around on shelves, tables, the floor, and in the windowsills.

“Behold,” she said dryly, sweeping her arm over the room, before setting her newest acquisition down on the corner of an antique wooden desk that was littered with various things in addition to the many falling-star globes. Hair brushes and clips. Bottles of lotion and other toiletries, stacks of datadiscs, a holocube. It reminded him, for a brief moment, of his sister’s side of the bedroom they had shared a long time ago. Except that Leia would never have been so messy and was not nearly so attached to tchotkes and floral perfumes.

“It’s nice,” he said inanely, because that felt like the thing to say upon seeing someone’s room for
the first time. In actuality it looked like a disaster, like a storage room of a gift shop if it had been hit by a tornado. But, it did have a homey look, with its vintage furniture and the sun slanting in through the foggy glass windows, illuminating dust motes dancing through the air as if they were in a snow globe... the distant, simple cousin of a falling-star globe. The room smelled like her, too, which made him inclined to like it. He knew it was probably creepy to notice this so acutely, but he would never be able to shake the association of velanie flowers and Mara. It reminded him of the cave... or the times when they had sparred and she had leaned in close and smiled and winked and tried to knock him off balance.

“It’s very comfortable looking,” he added.

“Sure it is,” said Mara, not buying his niceties for a second. She picked up some clothes that were strewn around the floor and shoved them under her bed in a belated attempt at making the place looked presentable. “I’m not as crazy as this makes me look.”

“It doesn’t make you look crazy,” he said, standing awkwardly in the doorway, watching her hastily pulling the coverlet over her unmade bed. Artoo, who had finally made it up the stairs, nudged into his legs from behind, so he ventured into the room to make way for the droid.

“Pfft,” Mara snorted. “It does.” She turned around and surveyed him with her hands on her hips. Then she jutted her chin out towards a chair in the corner and said, “Go ahead, welcome to Mara’s Insanity Cupboard; have a seat, make yourself comfortable.”

He laughed a little at her nervous self-deprecation, and followed her orders. He picked up a globe from the shelf next to the chair and asked, “Have you been to all these places?” Usually, the star-globes sold at spaceports featured a landmark or cityscape from the planet where they were located. The one he held in his hand depicted the infamous poison gardens of Anak.

She nodded, still standing next to the bed, her entire pose on edge, as if she expected him to suddenly start mocking her. “I have, or Ahsoka has. She always brings them back from missions. This... all this... I just started to do this when I was a little kid and now she thinks I really love the things.”

“You don’t?”

She didn’t answer at first, looking pensive as she brushed some loose strands of hair behind her ear, then shrugged one shoulder and looked away. “It’s not about that,” she said softly.

“What’s it about, then?” he asked, careful to keep his tone non-judgement and patient, but also not overly curious. He had learned that Mara could be like a kithu-deer; nervous and flighty. If you approached her too fast and head-on she was likely to bolt.

“It’s silly,” she said, moving towards the shelves. She ran her finger along the edge of one shelf and frowned at the dust that came away, then shook her head and brushed her hand clean on her skirt. “You’ll laugh at me.”

“I won’t. Artoo might.”

Artoo beeped in protest. That got half a smile from her, before she looked away again, her hair slipping loose, hiding her face.

“I’m looking for something,” she said, speaking to the globes lined up on the shelf instead of to him. “One particular... scene. I don’t know what it’s of, but I’ll recognize it when I see it.”

“What does it look like?”
“I don’t know. But when I see it I’ll know it,” she said firmly. “I used to have one when I was very young. I broke it… I can remember wanting to know how it worked but when I took it apart my mother got very angry with me. It must have been hers. It must have been important… to her. I don’t know. It’s the only thing I can remember from before….”

He nodded.

“It’s silly,” she reiterated. “And foolish, and sentimental. I keep meaning to throw all of these out, but I’m not really here as much as I used to be… so I don’t bother.”

“It’s not foolish. If it helps you remember or if it makes you happy….”

“But it doesn’t make me happy,” she said, lifting one off the shelf, giving it a shake, and putting it back down with a scowl. She watched the stars fall over a city of twisting spires. “It bothers me. It’s not even a happy memory.”

She turned away from the shelf to look at him. “My only memory of my parents is my mother being angry at me for breaking something. That’s not worth holding onto.”

He stood up and moved to stand next to her. He put a hand on her shoulder, but only very lightly. “I’m sorry.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said, stepping away and forcing a dismissive shrug. “I don’t care about it. I’ve just been putting off cleaning this room out because it’s a lot of work.”

“If it would make you feel better to get rid of them, I could help you clean it out,” he offered.

She stiffened, then shook her head. “Don’t concern yourself with it. I shouldn’t have told you about this. You’ll think I’m maudlin now.”

“I don’t think anything like that.”

“I do.”

“There’s nothing wrong with caring about your parents, or missing them, even if you never knew them. Anyway, I’m not one to judge.”

He got an idea, suddenly. He thought of a way to show her that he, too, had things he focused on, attachments to family that he missed. Maybe she would relax if she didn’t feel like she was the only one under inspection.

“Let me show you something.” He turned to Artoo. “Can you show us my parents, Artoo?”


Artoo made a complaining grunt, but Luke could tell that he was about to comply.

Mara flung herself down carelessly onto her bed, crossing her legs up underneath her and resting her chin in her hands, watching with wordless expectation as Artoo searched his memory banks for the requested moment.

Luke lowered himself onto the floor, sitting beside the bed near Artoo. Mara sat above him, close enough that he could have reached out to touch her leg if wanted to, but he didn’t, of course.

After a moment, Artoo broadcast a small, flickering holo of Luke’s parents standing side by side on
what appeared to be some kind of balcony. There were trees in the edges of the image but otherwise the background was of open air and what might have been a lake. It was hard to tell from the limited scope of the image, which was focused primarily on the humans. His mother was wearing a white dress and veil, though of course in the holo everything was tinged blue. His father was dressed in traditional Jedi robes and wore the distinctive Padawan braid over one ear, which explained why there had never been any wedding holographs displayed in their home on Osallao. Whenever he’d visited classmate’s homes there had been scenes very much like this one mounted on walls or set on mantels; younger versions of his friends’ parents smiling out from the past in a one or two second loop… holding hands or gazing mawkishly into each others’ faces. Families without secrets who had the luxury of putting their lives on display for neighbors to see.

His mother turned away from the railing and said to his father, “I want to remember this moment forever. Every detail just as it is.”

Father smiled down at her fondly and lifted his right hand, about to caress her face, then hesitated as if realizing for the first time that it was robotic. He dropped it back to his side, switching to his left. “We will,” he said, then bent down to kiss her.

Mara made a soft gagging noise from the bed. Luke glance up to see that she had fallen onto her side and was covering her face with her hands. She peered out between two fingers. “Your parents are gross. They’re the sappiest people in the history of the galaxy,” she moaned, but there was a hint of a teasing smile tugging at the corner of her mouth, just visible behind her hand.

Unaware of the judgement coming down on her from the future, the holo of his mother turned to look over her shoulder, and said, “Remember this for us, Artoo.”

The image lasted a couple seconds longer, as Mother and Father turned back to each other, then it flickered off.

He’d watched this scene many times, as it was the only thing Artoo would offer up.

He hadn’t even known to request it, but once, only a few months after he had first been separated from his family, Artoo had shown him the brief holo-memory file unasked. The little droid had known it was what he needed.

Luke had always tried to show Ben a brave face, but he had become so despondent that he allowed himself to cry in private, alone in his bunk when he was supposed to be sleeping and Artoo was in low-power mode, hooked up to the recharger. The droid has known, anyway, and had finally wheeled close to to his cot, making low concerned trilling noises.

“I’m fine, Artoo. I just miss my parents, and Leia,” he’d said. I’m so lonely I feel like I could die, he had not added.

Artoo had whirred for a moment, considering how he could fix this, and then they were there beside him. Luke’s parents, very young, holding each other’s hands on a patio surrounded by vines and trees.

He didn’t share all this with Mara, only said, “I used to watch that all time when I was younger. When I was lonely.”

She rolled onto her stomach and dropped her hands from her face, letting one arm fall over the side of the bed. Her fingers brushed his shoulder as she said, “That’s embarrassing.”

“Is it?” he said, nodding and rolling his eyes to indicate the globe collection scattered across her
She swatted at his head, and he ducked away with a laugh. “Watch it, golden boy,” she said, mock threatening, with a smile that was half concealed as she lay with her face resting on the mattress. A moment passed and yet her hand remained on his head, fingers trailing through his hair. He went still. This was not a friend’s touch… or rather, it was too friendly. Too soft, as she lightly traced his ear, then the line of his jaw. He caught her hand in his own and held it.

He looked at her and her smile faded. She curled her fingers in his palm, and lifted her head, about to say something.

At that moment, unprompted, Artoo broadcast an image of Leia into the room.

She was about ten, close to the age when Mara had first come to Breelden. She was leaning over, her hand reaching out towards Artoo, her small face screwed up in concentration. “Are you recording?” she asked. Then came the sound of Artoo’s confirming beep.

Technically, he was always recording—that’s how any droid saw with their photoreceptor “eyes” and how they stored memories. But Leia had not shared Luke’s interest in the mechanics of droids and so she’d thought Artoo had to turn it on and off.

Leia stood up and and cleared her throat, smoothing her dress down and fidgeting nervously. She was about to practice a speech for school. She had used Artoo for this many times as a child; particularly for the public speaking class she had enrolled in as an elective the year before everything went to hell.

When he asked Artoo to show him memories of his sister, it was always one of these practice sessions that the droid offered up. Artoo did not, it would seem, believe in showing memories that a human hadn’t specifically asked him to preserve.

“Alright,” said Leia. “Are you ready?” Artoo beeped again. She began to recite a poem from memory, her voice halting as she tried to conjure the lines; “His golden locks time has… hath… turned to silver, no, to silver turned. Turned. Turn-ed. Ugh! I hate this poem why did I have pick it?”

The Artoo of the past beeped and she replied, “Yes, yes, Uncle Ben suggested it to me. Oh, time too swift, swiftness never ceasing… oh swiftness never ceasing, I mean. Okay I have to start over from the beginning, I’ve really butchered this.”

She frowned deeply, her tiny face scrunched up in frustration. Then she started from the top and started to recite it again, a little smoother.

There had been many nights when Artoo had sat faithfully beside his bed while he tried to fall asleep, plagued by loneliness and worry, the unease eating away at him from the inside. Artoo would often play him a recording of Leia on a loop. How many times had he fallen asleep to the steady sound of his sister’s “speech giving” voice? Too many times. It was, as Mara had said, embarrassing. He had her report on the native fauna of Dathomir memorized backwards and forwards. He’d dreamed of lizards and veeka.

Luke and Mara sat in silence watching the holo play out. Whatever Mara had been about to say was a moment lost. But he still held her hand in his.

Leia was onto the third stanza of her poem when Ben appeared in the bedroom doorway, giving the doorframe a polite rat-a-tat with his knuckles before saying, “Ah, one of my favorites.” It took Luke a second to realize he was talking about the poem, but that became apparent when Ben closed his
eyes with a smile and echoed the words that HoloLeia was speaking, “Beauty, strength, youth, are flowers but fading seen; Duty, faith, love, are roots, and ever green.”


Ben paused, then opened his eyes and looked around Mara’s room, but was circumspect enough not to comment on it. Instead, he said, “Dinner is ready, and I received a message from your father. He’ll be here shortly.”


Anakin stretched out on the couch in Ahsoka’s living room and surveyed the people around him with a strange mixture of contentment and dissatisfaction. The two feelings should have been mutually exclusive, but they weren’t.

The small sitting room was crowded. Although Padmé and Leia made a large hole in the picture, he counted himself lucky that they were still safe and alive in this timeline. The fact that Leia didn’t want to speak to him and he hadn’t seen her in three years seemed like a soft punishment compared to the life he had once lived, with Padmé and the twins unknown to him, so he tried not to stew over it too much. Not while there was work to be done.

Here, in this moment, were almost all of the people who mattered to him in the universe, and it was a wonder in itself that he had that many.

Even seeing Barriss and Mara here was a welcome sight. He knew that Barriss wasn’t fond of him and he didn’t care much for her either, but that hardly seemed to matter anymore, because she had been by Ahsoka’s side for so long and was making his former Padawan happy. As for Mara, he took a great deal of satisfaction from the knowledge that she was in Ahsoka’s care, free from the Emperor’s grip, no longer a plaything twisted into a weapon for his Master to use. He could only imagine how angry it must make Sidious to keep losing his pet projects. But more importantly, she was like a daughter to Ahsoka… and that made Ahsoka happy, so it made him happy. Unlike him, she deserved a family. She deserved to not be alone.

He’d arrived late in the evening… and as Obi-Wan pointed out, had missed dinner, but he didn’t care. He wasn’t here to sample Barriss’s cooking.

He had brought Rex along with him to meet up with the others, because even though the former captain of the 501st had aged at double the normal human rate he was still a capable fighter and battle tactician. It was good that he was a part of the Alliance to Restore the Republic, but even better than he was still loyal enough to Anakin to follow him on a personal mission like this.

It wasn’t just loyalty, though, that had gotten Rex to agree to this. He had unfinished business to take care of, just like the rest of them.

“I talked to the witnesses myself,” Rex was saying, “so I know this report is legitimate. Maul was seen on Malachor by two of our rebel operatives. Jedi. Depa Billaba’s old Padawan and a new young’un he found on the streets, good lad, names Ezra; about Luke’s age.”

“And he’s part of the Alliance?” Luke asked, glancing over at Anakin pointedly.
“Yep,” said Rex. “Works alongside the Lothal cell. Helped us set-up the new base on Atollon, in fact.”

Anakin looked at Rex as the Captain spoke, trying to pretend he didn’t feel Luke’s eyes boring into him. Now was not the time to start up another debate about Luke joining the rebels and fighting against the Empire. Just because someone else in the galaxy was willing to get their kid killed was not, as far as he was concerned, a compelling argument in Luke’s favor.

“I didn’t know Depa had a Padawan,” said Obi-Wan mildly. “Good to hear that he made it. Did she… was she one of the survivors?”

Anakin shifted, trying not to show his growing impatience. Obi-Wan had, so far, not reacted even a little to the fact that there were several sightings of Darth Maul around the galaxy. Obi-Wan’s old nemesis had been a ghost for 16 years, in both this timeline and the last, so the fact that he’d wiggled out of hiding should cause him to feel something.

Anakin had thought that Obi-Wan would be far more interested in Maul than in the unimportant details like Depa Billaba having a Padawan who was still knocking around.

“He was assigned to her just before the very end of the Clone Wars,” said Ahsoka. “Sadly, his Master didn’t make it… but he escaped the… the purge. I’ve met him and his Padawan a few times, now. They’re good people.”

Barriss lifted an eyebrow. “Did you happen to know about these ‘reports’ of Darth Maul, too?” she asked.

“No,” said Ahsoka. “I was just waiting for Anakin to get here before we discussed it.”

Barriss’s face barely flickered in response, but Anakin could tell that she was irritated by that.

“Anyway,” said Rex, “They had a run-in with Maul on a planet in the Chorlian sector: Malachor. Maul managed to blind Kanan… that’s Depa’s padawan… but he and Ezra got away with their lives, amazingly enough. They say Maul took out three Inquisitors who had tracked them to the Malachor system and stole their ship.”


Anakin shrugged. “They’re like monkey-lizards,” he said. “Step on one and the Emperor sends out two more.”

“What were they even doing on Malachor?” Barriss asked. “I’ve only heard of that place in whispers… it’s supposedly forbidden for Jedi. I thought it was a myth.”

“It’s not a myth,” said Anakin. “It used to be controlled by the Sith, thousands of years ago. It’s been uninhabited for a long, long time. It’s cursed.”

He said it in a matter-of-fact tone. Everyone looked at him a little uncomfortably, as everyone always did when he mentioned the Sith or shared knowledge about their history. That is, everyone except Luke and Mara, who just looked incredibly wide-eyed and curious. They were lucky to even be included in this discussion, since he had no intention of dragging children along to confront Darth Maul. But he had known it would be pointless to try to make them go away, since they’d just have eavesdropped anyway.

“They were there because, apparently, the young one… Ezra… has received spirit visions from Yoda,” said Ahsoka, as if that were completely normal. Apparently Yoda was talking to everyone
through the Force these days.

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow at that, and Anakin thought, *Finally the old man is intrigued. Figures. Just mention Yoda…*

“And Yoda told them to go to Malachor…?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Yes. They found Maul there, apparently. He tried to kill Kanan and abduct the boy,” said Rex.

“Yoda,” Barriss said with unconcealed contempt. “When is that vicious little green monster going to get his ancient butt out of that swamp and fight his own battles?”

Anakin felt a moment of deep satisfaction as it was Barriss’s turn to be stared at in horror. He and Mara were the only ones smiling. Barriss sighed and said, “What? I’m green; I can say that.”

“Barriss, please, we’ve talked about this,” said Ahsoka. “Yoda means well. I just wish I had been there, too,” she added, clenching her fist and smacking it into her palm. “It’s been a long time since I had Maul in a corner.”

“You fought Darth Maul?” Luke asked, wonder and curiosity in his voice. Anakin wondered how much Obi-Wan had told Luke about Maul… not very much, he imagined, since all of their encounters had resulted in a great loss for Obi-Wan, and he had a distaste for unpleasant memories. That was something they had in common.

“Oh, yes,” said Ahsoka, looking down and brushing imaginary dust off of her pants, seeming to intend to leave it at that.

“Tell him about it,” said Mara, sliding forward to the edge of her seat. She was sitting next to Luke… (very close, which had not gone unnoticed) and she nudged him with an elbow, adding, “she’s told me about this. It’s amazing. Tell him about the wolves, Ahsoka.”

Ahsoka laughed, dismissively, self-deprecating, and said, “Well obviously it didn’t end up in Maul’s defeat. So there’s not much to tell.”

Mara made a scoffing noise, impatient with Ahsoka’s modesty, and said, “It was the very end of the Clone Wars, she was on Mandalore fighting Maul’s Shadow Collective. They were all there,” she motioned around the room. “Well everyone but Barriss, who was in prison… but anyway… they were going to fight Maul. They had him dead to rights, but then your father and Obi-Wan had to leave.”

Anakin didn’t like where this was going. Mara’s enthusiasm for Ahsoka’s old heroics was heartwarming, and all, but she was not just telling a story about the good old days. This wasn’t just a war story about when they were all comrades in arms… he remembered how this story ended and it wasn’t a chain of events he wanted to rehash. Especially not in front of Luke.

“Why did you have to leave?” Luke asked, and Anakin cringed inwardly. There were things they did not talk about. This was the big one.

“We were called back to Coruscant on an urgent mission,” said Obi-Wan. “The Supreme Chancellor had been kidnapped.”

“The Supreme Chancellor? You mean…”

“Yes,” said Ahsoka, cautiously, her eyes flitting to Anakin and then skittering away again. “The Emperor. But he wasn’t the Emperor then. Anyway, that left me alone…”
“Not alone,” said Rex with a warm smile, “you had me and the 501st.”

“Yes,” she said, returning the smile fondly. “I did. Until…”

“Until the clone troopers attacked,” said Mara with obvious and unsettling relish.

Rex’s smile faded, and he nodded, his eyes grave. Anakin wanted to just fade out and not hear what was being said, not see the pain in his old friends faces as they remembered what had happened when he betrayed them all. Yes, Palpatine had given the order to the clones that turned them against the Jedi, but it had only happened once the Emperor had secured his loyalty and was assured of his cooperation. Hearing this story was like being on trial. Anakin didn’t know how to make the conversation stop… weren’t they supposed to be talking about Maul? About where he was now, today, about what he was doing and how to stop him? Not retreading ground better left alone.

Luke, on the other hand, looked like he was about to get whiplash from trying to watch everyone’s faces closely. And Mara sure as hell was not helping to let the subject die.

“Tell them about the wolves!” she prodded. She touched Luke’s arm and told him, “You’ll love this, it’s just like you with those panthiras.”

“Alright, alright,” Ahsoka said, wearily. She smiled slightly, no doubt affected by Mara’s appreciation of the stories she had shared about her youth… but it was clear that she didn’t look back on it as a grand adventure. Recalling what had happened at the end of the war was not remembering a victory, but a defeat. Still, not one to disappoint Mara, she started to recount what had happened. “I was meditating, preparing for the battle against Maul and his Shadow Collective, and as I reached out into the Force, I touched the minds of the creatures that lived deep in the woods of Mandalore. I was intrigued, of course, so I decided to befriend them. I was so busy communing with them, that at first I didn’t notice the… I didn’t feel the… well I…” she stopped, having obvious difficulty with the next part.

“She didn’t notice that the 501st was coming to kill her,” said Mara.

Anakin had heard enough. He stood up without a word and left the room.

Alone in the kitchen, he tuned out the murmur of voices from the next room, trying to excuse his actions to himself by deciding he was suddenly very hungry and wanted to rummage around in their conservator to see what kind of leftovers they had. Yes. That was it.

There wasn’t much in the conservator, besides raw ingredients. A tub of what looked like stew, a slice of marble cake with Ahsoka’s name scrawled on the plastic covering… and a pitcher of bantha milk.

“…you need to be more aware…” came floating in from the other room and he clamped down mentally, refusing to listen to whatever they were saying to each other. He didn’t want to know. He didn’t want to hear about it. Intrusive images forced their way in, running through his head anyway. Pictures of Ahsoka running for her life, pursued by clones, the very same clones he had given to her to help her… images of Rex struggling against the order from Sidious which triggered his mind control chip, trying to turn him from a man into little more than a battle droid in an instant…

*No,* he thought, yanking the milk out of the conservator and slamming it down on the counter with a resolute *thump.* Why, after all these years, were there always new reasons to feel guilty? To remind him that he had only fixed half a mess and all the rest was still there, all the rest of it was still ruined?

He sensed someone approaching from behind and heard a softly cleared throat from the doorway.
He turned, expecting it to be Ahsoka, or Obi-Wan, maybe. But it was Barriss.

She crossed the kitchen and opened the cupboard doors, pulling down a pair of glasses. “Getting a bit crowded in there,” she said by way of explanation.

He nodded, watching her carefully out of habit. She held out a glass towards him and he lifted the pitcher, pouring out a stream of the thick blue milk. Barriss opened a different cupboard and pulled out a bottle of tihaar spirits. She uncorked it and raised an eyebrow at him as she poured a bit of the clear alcohol into her milk. He nodded again, and she tipped the bottle over his glass.

“Mara has a mouth she doesn’t know how to shut, sometimes,” Barriss said frankly as she sipped her enhanced milk. “I’ve gotten used to it. She says ‘when you were in prison’ like other people say ‘when you were on vacation that one time.’ She’s still very young, and she loves to hear about the things we did during the Clone Wars, bad or good it hardly makes a difference. It all seems like just a game to her.”

“It’s not a problem,” he said. “I’m glad she has that luxury.” The Emperor, he reminded himself, would already have had her out assassinating people by this time in her life. No time for innocent exuberance or incautious speech.

Barriss made a small snort into her glass, as if she didn’t necessarily agree. But she said, “I suppose so. When I was her age I was in my first battle, fighting for my life in the Geonosian arena. But you know that; you were there.”

He nodded. Barriss was only three years younger than him. They had both been Padawans at the outset of the war, but as soon as he turned twenty he had been promoted to Jedi Knight, General in the Grand Army of the Republic and leader of the 501st Clone Troopers, and promptly given Ahsoka as a Padawan; all while Barriss still remained a learner under Luminara Unduli’s tutelage.

He wondered if Luminara was still out there somewhere, knocking around a distant corner of the galaxy. She had died in an Imperial prison cell in his other life, but who was to say what her fate had been the second time around? He could see her wiggling out of an Inquisitor’s hands and disappearing forever. He also wouldn’t be surprised that she hadn’t sought out Barriss. Unduli had often struck him as one of the more detached and uninvested Jedi Masters—she seemed downright proud of her effortless lack of attachment to her Padawan.

When Barriss had been in trouble she seemed perfectly content to write her off as dead and move on, even going so far as to lecture him on not being willing to shrug his shoulders at the thought of Ahsoka dying an untimely, violent death before she lived to see sixteen.

Anakin remembered talking with Luminara after Barriss was put into a Republic prison cell—stripped of her Padawan rank and expelled from the Jedi Order as Ahsoka had so recently been. Anakin had been reeling from Ahsoka’s decision to leave and had thought, somehow, that Luminara might be similarly affected by the dark turn and subsequent loss of her own Padawan.

“It’s not your fault,” he had said, offering her empty comfort, one failed Jedi Master to another.

She had looked vaguely surprised that he would even need to make such a statement. “Of course not,” she’d said, in that dreamy, soft voice of hers. “Barriss’s choices are her own.”

That had made him want to take it back. Of course it was her fault. Barriss had been her responsibility to raise, to train, to show the right way to be. How could Barriss have gotten so lost and turned around under Luminara’s watch?
How could she not count herself a failure? Her Padawan was no longer a Jedi. She had failed… just as he had failed Ahsoka.

It was laughable looking back at the fact that he had been the master and guardian of Ahsoka, seeing as how she was only six years younger than him and had entered the Jedi Order the same year as he had. Of course, prior to the war their paths had never crossed because he’d been old enough to fast track into being a Padawan learner while she remained in the nursery with the other younglings of her year. But the fact remained that when he thought about those early days of the war he still looked back in wonder at the blundering, foolish boy who thought he was all grown up and ready to be the most powerful Jedi ever...

Whenever Luke complained that he was being treated like a child, Anakin wanted to shake him, to make him understand that he was, he was a child still, just like Ahsoka had been a child as she fought for her life, how Padmé had been a child when she was the queen, how Anakin had been a child leading a legion of clone children into battle for an 800 year old Jedi Master and the Sith Lord who ruled the Republic. He wished he could make Luke see how wrong it had all been and how fortunate he was now, to be allowed to be exactly what he was. A teenager. A kid. Oh, but Luke never listened. He obeyed, for now, but he didn’t understand.

“Do you miss it?” Barriss’s voice broke in on his thoughts.

“What?”

“The feeling that you’re doing the right thing? The conviction that all of the Jedi are wrong and you are right?”

He thought for a moment, then admitted, “I never really felt that way. I tried to convince myself I was doing the right thing, but the more innocents you have to kill to keep the peace the more you have to question that conviction. And question whether or not you even care.”

“If you knew it was wrong then why did you do it? Because you didn’t care?”

From anyone else that question might have seemed confrontational, but Barriss seemed genuinely curious, as if she sincerely just wanted to compare his motivations to her own.

So he told her: “I thought that I didn’t have a choice, that I had to do whatever it took to save Padmé, and that Palpatine was the only one who would help me. He was the only one who offered a solution beyond ‘just let go.’ And the Jedi were against Palpatine, so I had to be against the Jedi. It was really that simple.”

“You know, I envy you that,” she said. “The simplicity, I mean. I thought I was alone, that all the Jedi had fallen to the dark side and I was the only one who knew it. But I didn’t know what to do about it… and then I thought I did. Show the Jedi what it felt like to have bombs exploding in their home. Make them live in a war zone, the way they had turned the rest of the galaxy into one. The explosions… you don’t know how they haunted me. I dreamed of them constantly, until all I could think about was blowing the smugness off the Council’s faces…”

“The council, or Luminara’s?”

She looked surprised for a moment, but then she nodded. “Have you ever wanted to just bash your Master’s face in with a rock… even though you love them?”

He smiled bitterly, and instead of answering outright he just clinked his glass against hers in a toast. She laughed suddenly, an unexpected sound, and he wondered if they were bonding. He didn’t mind
—she was part of his family now, after all.

Her smile faded. “I was wrong, though,” she said.

“Not entirely. The Jedi did lose their way. We lost our way.”

“But answering violence with violence did nothing. It just created more darkness. I’m glad that you arrested me, to be honest. I’ll never forget the look on Ahsoka’s face when you brought me to her trial. When she realized it was me. If you hadn’t stopped me, I might have let her die, I like to think that I would have ended it once I found out that they intended to execute her… but who knows? I can’t claim that I wouldn’t let my cowardice cause her death. I wasn’t happy to be arrested at the time, but part of me was relieved that I could stop. Stop everything… the fear, the fighting, trying to cover my tracks.”

“Did you really think that it would all just work out?” Anakin asked, thinking back to long ago—doubly long for him—when he had confronted Barriss once he had realized that it was she who had stolen Asajj Ventress’s lightsabers and everything else had clicked into place.

“I don’t know what I thought. I was afraid, confused… a stupid child. Children shouldn’t be fighting wars.”

“I agree with you there,” said Anakin, his mind automatically turning to Luke and Mara, who were still in the sitting room… probably soaking up Ahsoka’s tales of adventure as an ex-Jedi fugitive at the tender age of seventeen.

“So you’ll agree to look after them here while we go after Maul?” he said, broaching the plan he had formed. Rex, Ahsoka, Obi-Wan and himself would go in search of Maul, following the leads they had gathered, while Mara and Luke remained on Mirial with Barriss. Ahsoka had already agreed to the plan, and had in fact seemed rather pleased with the fact that he trusted Barriss and Mara enough to suggest leaving Luke with them.

Barriss sighed heavily. “I don’t think you should go after him,” she said. “Let the past lie. He’s not part of your war with the Empire. Why go looking for him now?”

“He may not be Sidious’s apprentice but he is still dangerous.”

“The same could be said for you.”

“I’m not currently going around blinding members of the rebel alliance,” Anakin pointed out. “But, if the people I have wronged in the past were to come looking for me I would not blame them. I would, however, defend myself. I do expect Maul to put up a fight, but we will be more than equal to the task of taking him down.”

She sighed again. “This is the same old discussion about whether we should fight at all, and I’ve already had this argument with Ahsoka and lost,” she said. “If you can convince Obi-Wan to join you, I will attempt to look after Luke while you are gone… though I have a feeling I won’t be protecting him from anything so much as trying to keep him from going after you. Your son seems to be growing very tired of you protection, and from what I have seen he can take care of himself.”

“One day,” she went on, sipping her drink, “you will have to let go. You will have to let him do what he wants.”

“He wants to fight a war. I thought we were in agreement about children fighting wars?”

“Whenever there is a war, there will be children fighting it, whether they should be or not. The
question is whether you force them to fight, or force them not to.”

“You sound like Luminara.”

She just shrugged. “Do I? Maybe it’s because I’m getting old. We all turn into our old masters someday.”

“Speak for yourself.”

“You care about Obi-Wan a great deal, for all your griping about him.”

“I never said I didn’t. But I’m not like him. At all.”

“You were always a strange pair,” she observed. “Mis-matched, it was often said.”

“That’s because it was Qui-Gon who chose me for a Padawan, not Obi-Wan. We were never really meant to be a team,” he said. He didn’t even bother to comment on the implication that the other Padawans had gossiped about him. This was something he had known already.

At that moment Ahsoka appeared in the doorway. She crossed her arms and leaned into the doorframe, tilting her head to the side. “Are you two going to come back anytime soon? We still have plans to make.”

Anakin nodded. He’d hid in the kitchen long enough. He followed Ahsoka back into the sitting room, and said, “So, Obi-Wan, what do you say? We’ve got some reliable reports that Maul is on Mindor. He was last seen there and I intend to travel there tomorrow, possibly find Maul himself or follow his trail to the next system. Ahsoka and Rex are coming with me. Are you in?”

Obi-Wan was seated with one ankle resting on the opposite knee, an arm laid out across the back of the sofa and the other hand stroking his beard thoughtfully.

“What do you plan on doing with Maul once you find him?” he asked.

Anakin exchanged a glance with Ahsoka and Rex.

“Is this an Alliance sanctioned mission?” Obi-Wan pushed. “Are you going to arrest him and take him to a rebel prison?”

“He’s not technically wanted by the Alliance,” said Rex, “since he’s not affiliated with the Empire. Some are glad he helped take out more Inquisitors. But he’s definitely not friend, either, seeing as how he blinded Jarrus.”

“So what is the plan?”

“Kill him, obviously,” said Anakin bluntly.

“For revenge?”

“For justice,” Ahsoka spoke up. “He killed Satine. She was defenseless and he murdered her.”

“I know,” Obi-Wan said evenly. “I was there. But I’m concerned about you two. Vengeance is not —”

“We’re not Jedi, not anymore,” Ahsoka cut him off. “And yes, sometimes it’s personal. Sometimes you just have to make things right.”
“Will this make things right?” he countered. “From where I’m sitting, it won’t bring back Satine, and it won’t bring back Qui-Gon. Look, I was more than willing to pursue Maul when he was on Mandalore during the War, but things have changed drastically since then.”

“How so?” Rex asked. “Forgive me, General, but from where I’m sitting, it’s not about bringing back Maul’s former victims. It’s about preventing him from making new ones. He’s just resurfaced and he already ran afoul of one of the few Jedi left in the galaxy. He’s up to no good, sir. He must be stopped.”

“Rex is right,” Anakin said. “Maul isn’t trying to make amends or live out his life in peace. We know that for a fact considering what happened on Malachor.”

“That is true, but—”

“Obi-Wan, I don’t understand why you are so resistant to this. I think even Yoda would agree that Maul needs to be stopped.”

“He’s afraid of losing someone again,” spoke up Barriss. “Really, listening to the four of you is exhausting. You never talk about what you are actually thinking.”

“Barriss—” said Ahsoka softly.

But Obi-Wan sighed, “No, no, she’s right. I am afraid I do not see the benefit in going after Maul, especially with the intent to kill him… he will only fight back and…”

“We’ll end him,” said Anakin, unconcerned. “Frankly I believe I could take care of Maul by myself. Asking for your help was a gesture of goodwill, Obi-Wan. After everything he’s done to you I thought you’d want to be a part of this.”

“Yes, Anakin, I am aware that you still think you can take on the entire galaxy by yourself,” Obi-Wan said acerbically. “But you continue to miss the entire point.”

“The point of what?”

“Of turning your back on the Darkness, of embracing the Light, letting the Force guide you,” Obi-Wan said. “I’ve seen you walking the same exact path that you once did, and it kills me, Anakin. You haven’t learned anything. All this fighting, all this bloodshed… you still think that you can solve all your problems with a lightsaber.”

“Is this really about Maul?” Anakin asked. “Is there something else you want to talk to me about?”

Obi-Wan shook his head. “It’s about the reports I hear. The violence you have enmeshed yourself in. I’m worried.”

“I’m trying to make the galaxy a better place,” Anakin said.

“Regardless of the cause you fight for, Anakin, anger and hate is a path into darkness. It always has been, it always will be. And this worries me more; this conviction you all have that I want revenge, that I would want you all to put yourselves in danger to help me get it.”

“It’s not just about you,” Anakin said. “He’s dangerous, he’s plotting something, and we’re going to stop him. We’re going after Maul whether you come or not. I’m giving you the option to join us, not asking your permission. We’ll do it with or without you.”

Anakin looked at him in surprise. He had been very quiet—he and Mara both—watching and listening with the intent expressions of bystanders at a sabacc tournament. Anakin had forgotten for a moment that this was another argument that would need to be had.

“No,” he said. “You are to stay here.”

Luke shook his head and replied calmly, “No. I’ve made up my mind. I’m going with you.”

“Luke, this is not the time. We can have this discussion later.”

“There’s no discussion to be had. I’m coming with you. I’ve been giving this a lot of thought—there is no practical reason for me to stay with Ben. And you need me.”

“I…” Anakin paused, trying not to say something that sounded too dismissive, but would get his point across. He settled on, “I am fine on my own.”

“No, you’re not. I am going to come with you on this mission to hunt down Darth Maul and then I am going to stay with you. I’ve trained with Ben long enough. I’m ready for whatever you have to teach me. And, you need me,” he repeated.

“Luke this is important,” Anakin said. “Maul is not the kind of adversary to face on your first mission. Your first fight should not be against him. He’s too dangerous.”

Luke stood up. “You said yourself that inviting Ben to go with you was a gesture of goodwill. If you really think that you could take him by yourself, then I have nothing to worry about.”

“That’s… that’s not the same. Having you along would only slow me down. I’m sorry.”

That worked its way under Luke’s calm demeanor. His jaw twitched, but he did not react otherwise, which both irritated and pleased Anakin. “I won’t slow you down,” was all Luke said.

“This isn’t a game,” Anakin told him.

“And I’m not playing around,” Luke rejoined. “It’s time that I joined you. Past time. I’ve had my lightsaber for a year now. I’ve been working on mastering the Force for the past six years. I can handle a real fight.”

“Not against Maul. You’ll just—”

“I’m not taking ‘no’ for an answer this time,” Luke interrupted. “We leave in the morning, yes? I’ll be there. You won’t be able to stop me.”

“Luke—”

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, over dinner Mara was telling me about the HoloTheatre here in town and I’ve never been to one of those, so we’re going out.”

“We are?” said Mara, then, “I mean, yes, we are.”

“No you’re not, it’s—”

“Come on, Mara,” Luke said, reaching out to her. She took his hand and pulled herself to her feet, giving Anakin a look that could have been gleeful or terrified and was likely both.

“Should we…?” Ahsoka said, looking at Barriss questioningly.
“Be back by eleven,” was all Barriss said.


Obi-Wan watched them with a raised eyebrow. Rex covered his face to stifle a chuckle, turning it into a cough, and Anakin could feel his face turning red. He followed Luke and Mara into the kitchen, stalking after them angrily. “Son, do not walk out that door,” he ordered. “We are not finished talking about this.”

Luke paused, but it was only so that Mara could grab a coat from the rack by the door.

“I’m leaving,” Luke said. “Stay here, Artoo. Oh, and Father, I’ll be back in plenty of time to move my things into the Twilight II and prepare for our trip in the morning.”

The sheer insolence was something he would have expected from Leia, but not Luke. Anakin narrowed his eyes. It must be because of Mara. If not her influence, then at least the adolescent need to posture for her. That had to be it. Luke wasn’t usually this way… was he? Anakin brushed that thought away, trying to ignore the nagging feeling that he really didn’t know his son that well, at all.

“You are not going anywhere,” he growled, using the same voice that had once made both twins fall in line. “You are staying right here.”

Mara shrugged into her coat and looked to Luke. He put his hand on the door knob and said, “No.”

He opened the door, staring Anakin dead in the eye. Cold, blustery air snaked its way into the kitchen, swirling around their legs.

Anakin took a step towards them. “Luke, don’t make me stop you.”


Anakin froze, his heart suddenly leaping into his throat. He couldn’t think of a single thing to say.

“That’s what I thought,” said Luke, and he slipped out into the night, pulling Mara after him. Her face was alight, her mouth a perfect “O” of surprised delight as she looked back over her shoulder. She lifted a hand towards the door and shut it behind them with the Force, leaving Anakin staring at the wood grain in consternation.

He spun around and saw the others gathered together in the kitchen doorway.

“What was that?” he blurted, looking at Obi-Wan and breathing hard. “Did you hear that? What just happened? Did you tell him?”

“Tell him what?” Obi-Wan asked.

“The choking comment, Obi-Wan,” he huffed, having little patience to spare for coyness. “How the hell did he know to say that?”

“Oh. I have no idea.”

“What do you mean?” asked Ahsoka. “Am I missing something?”

“I’m sure it didn’t have anything to do with… that,” said Obi-Wan delicately, ignoring her question and the way she looked back and forth between them rapidly. “Unless Padmé said something to him, because I certainly did not.”
“Said what about what?” Ahsoka demanded. “What is ‘that’? What does this have to do with Padmé?”

“Nothing.”

“Tell me what you’re talking about.”


If it had actually happened, it would be everything. But it hadn’t, so it wasn’t. Padmé and Obi-Wan were the only two people who knew what had happened on that alternate Mustafar, and they were the only two people who needed to know. No one else had been there. It was no one else’s business.

“What’s important,” he added, “is that Luke just… just…” he waved his hand, unable to put it into words.

“Yes, we all witnessed it,” said Barriss. “I don’t understand your anger. If you wanted Luke to behave like a normal child then this is exactly what you were hoping for. They’re going to watch a HoloDrama, after all.”

“Did you miss the part where he’s just ‘decided’ that he’s going to fight Maul and that he’s joining me to fight in the Rebellion?” Anakin looked over at Rex, who was still sitting on a chair, looking amused. “I blame you for this,” he said. “All that talk about what’s-his-face…”

“Ezra,” said Rex, unconcerned.

“Yes, all this talk of a child fighting Maul and helping to set up bases—”

“I believe, sir, that you requested I come along and share the reports I’ve gathered on Maul,” said Rex. “That’s all I was doing. With all due respect, I doubt your son just got the idea in the last half hour and decided to act on it. He was planning this before I said a word.”

“What about you, Obi-Wan? Did you know about this?”

“No. I am just as surprised as you are,” answered Obi-Wan. “He made no mention of this plan, I mean, beyond talking about it constantly for the past several years.”

“This isn’t funny. Luke has always deferred to my judgement before, or at least, listened to what I told him whether he liked it or not.”

“I am aware.” Obi-Wan sighed and turned, going back into the sitting room. He lowered himself into a chair and said, shaking his head, “To be honest I think he is right. I have taught him all that I can. He is as ready as he will ever be to face enemies such as Maul. But more importantly, I think you do need him.”

Anakin followed him into the other room, but did not sit. He paced up and down past Barriss’s shrine, the candles flickering a little as he passed it each time. “It’s not that I don’t want Luke with me,” he said. “Of course I want my son by my side. But—”

“But you don’t like it that he is defying you,” said Obi-Wan. He smiled wryly. “Don’t let your stubbornness and pride keep you away from your children forever, Anakin. They’re growing up too fast for that.”

“Obi-Wan is right,” said Ahsoka.
Anakin sighed and dragged his hands through his hair, digging his fingers into his scalp. “I’m tired,” he said. “And I’m not going to wait up for Luke to come sauntering back smugly from the movies. We’ll discuss all of this in the morning. But I’m leaving to go track down Maul, either way. You can come with me, or not.”

He nodded to Ahsoka. “Rex and I will be aboard the *Twilight II* if you have need of us. Otherwise, meet us at 0600 and we’ll get ready to depart.” Turning to Barriss, he said, “Nothing has changed about my plans for Luke, as far as I’m concerned. I am trusting you to keep an eye on him while we’re gone.”

Barriss exchanged a meaningful look with Ahsoka. “Of course,” she said dispassionately.

“Rex, with me,” Anakin said, jerking his hand as if he were on a battlefield directing his troops.

“Of course, General,” said Rex, obviously merely humoring him. “Whatever you say.”

Anakin tried not to let that get to him. No one here had any real respect for him. Not these days. But what did he expect? Luke was completely correct: Anakin had no actual way to stop him without resorting to violence, and he wasn’t going to do that. He couldn’t go around killing anyone who disobeyed him or second guessed him, least of all his son. That wasn’t the way things were, anymore. And it certainly wasn’t the way to deal with his family, the people he loved and would protect with his own life. But he wished there was some middle ground, something between respect borne out of the abject fear of death and this unspoken agreement they all had that he was just some washed up, irrelevant lunatic who they could ignore whenever it suited them.

It was much simpler to deal with his enemies—inquisitors, stormtroopers, gangsters, slavers, bounty hunters working for the Empire. They all feared him, still. He was almost looking forward to finally tracking down Maul. There would be no need to negotiate, no need to reason with the erstwhile Sith apprentice. That was not the kind of language they spoke.

“Aren’t you cold?” Mara asked as they walked down the snow covered sidewalk. She looked snug in a dark purple coat lined with synthetic silver fur.

Luke was freezing cold, but he would have died before admitting it. “No,” he said, his breath a vapor of lies dissipating into the night, swirling up towards the street lights. “The euphoria of rebellion sustains me,” he added, and was rewarded with laughter.

“The look on his face,” she crowed, grabbing ahold of Luke’s arm and pulling herself closer to him. “I thought he was going to snap and just kill you, for a second.”

“So did I,” said Luke, focusing on the pleasant warmth of her arm looped through his and her side pressed up against him.

“You should have given me some sort of warning about what you were planning, though,” she admonished.

“I didn’t have a plan,” Luke admitted. “I just decided I wasn’t going to let him tell me ‘no,’ and… well, then I needed to make a dramatic exit or we would have just sat there arguing all night.”

She laughed again. “That makes it even better. He was so shocked.”
Luke smiled quietly. It was very satisfying to get in the last word with Father, for a change. But he worried that he had only succeeded in holding his ground in the spur of the moment. Tomorrow he would have to renew the fight, he knew, because Father would just try to leave him behind anyway.

“Do you actually want to go to the HoloTheatre?” Mara asked. “Or was that just an excuse to leave?”

“Yes, and yes,” he said with a self-deprecating chuckle. “I mean, I’m up for it. It’s not like there’s anything else to do to pass the time in this place. Unless you know of something?”

She shook her head, the action muffled by the hood she had pulled over her hair. “There’s really just the theatre, and a few cantinas. So… I mean, unless you want to go to a cantina and get drunk out of our minds…”

“Would they even let us in?”

She looked at him with a sly smile. “Well, they’d let me in. I’ve gotten into a couple of places before. Not as a customer, but as one of the dancers. They don’t care about your age if you’re a part of the entertainment.”

He gazed at her, shocked. “Why would you do that?”

She shrugged. “Why not? It’s fun. I like to dance, and it’s a good way to make extra credits.” She lifted a finger to her lips. “But don’t tell Barriss or Ahsoka. I’m saving up my money.”

“For what?”

“I’m gonna buy myself a ship,” she declared. “And then I’m going to go wherever I want, whenever I want.”

“That sounds nice.”

She gave his arm a squeeze. “You can come along. It would do you good to get away from it all, too.”

“I’m going to go with my father,” Luke said resolutely. “I’m going to help him fight the Empire.”

“Do you really think he’s going to let you?”

“I won’t give him a choice,” he insisted, as much for himself as to her. What was Father going to do? Tie him down to Ben’s ship? Luke didn’t think Ben would go along with something like that; he was more confidant in Ben letting him go than Father cooperating, and then Father would have to choose between letting Luke join him or watching him go off on his own. On his own, without his family, like Mara apparently was planning to do.

They arrived at the theatre, which was one of the few buildings lit up in the night. HoloComplex, a neon sign flickered, along with the titles of the films they were showing.

They went inside, and stood together debating which movie to see, and for a moment he wondered if this was the sort of things other kids their age did on a regular basis. He didn’t really care about any of the summaries of the films, but he pretended to have an opinion just for something to say to her. Should they see the one about the plucky twi’lek from the Rylothian countryside making her way in the big city-planet of Coruscant, or the new musical called “The Handmaidens of Naboo”? What did it matter? Tomorrow they were going to travel across the galaxy in search of a Sith Lord who had murdered the people Ben held dear. He didn’t care what he watched but he didn’t want to
take Mara home and go back to the Duchess for a restless and lonely night in his berth: he wanted stay out, to stay with her.

Eventually they decided to see the only drama that wasn’t “imported Imperial garbage,” as the woman selling tickets—a yellow-skinned Mirialan with a waterfall of rectangles tattooed down her cheeks and neck—called all the core world films. This one was a locally made film, produced in the largest city on the planet, the “cultural hub of the Illisurevimurasi sector,” she told them. “Alright,” said Luke, with a shrug, while Mara rolled her eyes.

“Cultural center of the backend of the universe,” she said as they walked into the viewing room. “She’s never even seen Coruscant, I’ll bet.”


“You will, someday. It will be the most amazing thing you’ve ever seen,” she said, allowing nostalgia to creep into her voice. He watched her eyes take on a soft, fond glow as she said, “There’s no place like it in the galaxy.”

“I look forward to it.”

They took their seats. The only other beings in the room with them were a pair of elderly women and a lone man, all Mirialan. The drama started and they realized about five minutes in that all the actors spoke their lines in Mirialan, and the projection didn’t even have the decency to supply Basic subtitles. Luke didn’t understand a word of what anyone was saying, so Mara sat beside him, leaning in close to whisper explanations to him, which was actually more distracting than helpful.

The movie was a historical drama that began during a war that had happened between Mirial and another planet, several decades ago. The main character was a great hero who led Mirial to victory, but then he was betrayed and imprisoned, so he left his homeworld and turned to the mercenary life, eventually gaining a lover (a Human woman) and a best friend (a Rodian man).

Mara murmured translations of the lines quietly along with the characters, but eventually the twi’lek in the audience turned around and angrily shushed her. Luke could feel her tense, and she returned the Mirialan glare with an icy, dagger-filled gaze until he finally shrank back and turned around in his seat. “Anyway,” she whispered to Luke, a little louder now, her breath brushing warmly against his cheek, “he just promised Rella he was going to retire but you know he’s not going to….”

The man’s love interest, Rella, died close to the end of the film, and at the very end he died as well, perishing in a fight with the man who was responsible for her death. Luke was not impressed. The best friend, the Rodian, was the only one left alive and the drama ended on a shot of him stoically mourning the deaths of his comrades. The movie was, Luke thought, needlessly depressing.

“At least Cohl killed Havac at the end,” Mara said as they left the holocomplex. Luke hadn’t said anything, but she must have been able to sense his dissatisfaction, his spirits dampened by the grim story they had just witnessed. “He died avenging Rella.”

“I suppose,” said Luke glumly. “I didn’t want any of them to die, though.”

“It’s an historical drama,” she pointed out. “They couldn’t change what really happened.”

“Couldn’t they? It’s not real life, not really, they could have made the story better. I mean aren’t dramas supposed to be fun? Not like real life.”

“I… don’t know. Maybe, if that’s the kind of thing you want. I guess we picked the wrong film,” said Mara with a sigh. “Should have stuck with the Imperial garbage,” she mocked the accent of the
ticket seller. “They always end on a high note. Because everything is always good with the Emperor taking care of us…” Her voice trailed off, as if she wasn’t sure if she was mocking Imperial propaganda or echoing an earnest belief she had once held.

“It’s fine, I’m glad we watched that one. I liked having you translate. It was more interesting that way.”

She smiled. “Barriss would probably have chewed through her own arm having to listen to me muddle my way through it. I probably got it all wrong.”

“You did fine.”

“How do you know?” she said, and poked him in the side. “You don’t speak Mirialan.”

“I do; I was just pretending not to understand so you’d narrate the film for me.”

“What?” she exclaimed, stopping in her tracks. Her eyes flashed. “Are you serious?”

“No,” he laughed. “I had no idea what they were saying. Or did I…?”

She smacked him in the arm, huffing and turning away, and he just laughed once more.

“What now?” she asked, as they started walking again.

“We should head back, shouldn’t we?” he suggested, though he didn’t really want to. “It’s late.”

“It’s not late,” she disagreed. “Look, the cantinas are still open. Let’s go inside.”

She pulled him inside the nearest cantina, and he was happy to go. Inside was stark contrast to the quiet streets; the cantina was full of mostly Mirialan customers, and a gliz band played on a stage in the back.

They went over to the bar and Mara slapped her hand down on the countertop, leaning over and shouting, “Hey Pol!”

The bartender, a Besalisk, turned around and gave her a look up and down. “Arica,” he said, “come here to dance?”

“No, I’m here to drink,” Mara proclaimed.

“Is that so.” The bartender’s eyes slid to Luke and then back to Mara. Two of his hands were busy mixing drinks, one was polishing the bar, and the other reached up to scratch at the bony crest on his head. “What’ll ya have? The usual?”

“Yup,” she said, “a red dwarf it is,” then turned to Luke. “What do you want?”

“Can you make a Cloud City Special?”

“What’s that?”

“White hot chocolate, spice liqueur, Corellian brandy, and rum. Oh, and mallow foam, if you’ve got it.”

Pol whistled. “Fancy sounding drink. Are you sure you can handle all that?”

Luke shrugged, ignoring the taunt. He’d practically grown up in cantinas, hanging in the back while
Ben stopped for a drink or to negotiate with his contacts. He’d started ordering his own drinks when he was thirteen and Ben hadn’t stopped him. He would have been happy to drink just a regular hot chocolate, tonight, but knew better than to order non-alcoholic drinks in a cantina. That usually got unwanted attention, strangely enough. Drunk people were suspicious of the sober among them. The Cloud City special was frothy drink that both resembled clouds and made you feel as if you were in the clouds.

Mara tapped her feet to the gliz music and smiled at him. “Come on,” she said, “let’s sit somewhere quiet.” She tugged him towards some booths in the corner, saying to Pol, “We’ll be over there, bring us our drinks, will you?”

“Sure, sure Arica,” said the Besalisk drily. “I’ve got nothing better to do than wait on you hand and foot tonight.”

“You’re the best,” she said with a wink.

Mara shed her heavy purple coat, stuffing it up in the booth, and patted the seat next to her.


“Well I can’t use my real name,” she scoffed, as if it were a ridiculous question.

“Do you really think the Emperor would track you down that way?” Luke asked. There were lots of Maras in the galaxy, and a small Mirialan nightclub did not seem like the most obvious place to look for her.

“The Emperor? I was thinking of Ahsoka,” Mara said. “She would not approve of me coming here at all.”

“Why not?”

She waved a dismissive hand. “Oh, you know, the same old stuff. ‘You’re too young, be careful, objectifying male gaze, boys taking advantage of you, blah blah I used to be a teenager once but I’m old and boring now, blah and et cetera’. ”

“She’s just looking out for you.”

“Well I don’t need her to. I can look out for myself.”

“She means well.”

“I know,” Mara said, then let out a long sigh. “They all mean well, all the time.”

Pol brought them their drinks, muttering about it under his breath, and when Mara said, “Thanks!” he just hiked his pants up and walked away.

“He loves me,” she said, staunchly, “I’m the best dancer he’s ever had come in here.”

“I’m sure that you are.” He took a sip from his drink, and thought that the chocolate was a little too tepid, but otherwise Pol had mixed up a pretty good Cloud City Special for never having heard of it before.

Mara swirled around the blood red liquid in her own glass before downsing a large swallow. “Can I try some of that?” she said, nodding towards his.

“Sure.” He handed it over. She took a drink and made a face.
“It’s so sweet, how can you drink that?” she said, but took another sip anyway.

“Leave some for me,” he said, taking it from her. She just stuck out her tongue and leaned back in her seat, reaching for her red dwarf… a drink that, if he recalled correctly, tasted like fire ants dancing on your tongue.

“So,” she said. “What now?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know.”

“I don’t.”

She smiled at him over her glass, then set it down and scooched closer to him in the booth. She rested one elbow on the table and cupped her chin in her hand, staring at him expectantly. He smiled back, nervous, his eyes focusing on the curve of her smile, her mouth already stained a bright red from the drink.

She reached up and, with one finger, bopped him on the nose. “You’re cute.”

“Are you drunk already?” he asked, blushing. He knew red dwarfs were potent, but really…

“No,” she said, grabbing her glass and throwing back an impressive amount in one long gulp. “I never get drunk. I could drink this whole bar dry and still kick your ass in a duel.”

“O-h-h-h-h-kay,” he said, uttering a soft, scoffing laugh.

“You think I can’t?” she asked belligerently, setting the now empty glass back down with a clank. She pushed herself upright and leaned into him, saying, “Just gimme an excuse, buddy.” But she was still smiling, and nothing in her tone or the look in her eye said she wanted to fight. “What do you say? Wanna fight?”

“I’ll pass,” he said. “I think you’re a little overconfident…”

The last syllable was swallowed up in a kiss. He wasn’t even sure if she had moved in or if he had, but they were in the middle of it before he had time to think about it. Her lips tasted like the red dwarf, making his tongue tingle with the sensation of a burning star. But he didn’t even care. On Mara’s mouth, it was delicious.

His drink cooled down and the foam melted, dissipating into the liquid, forgotten.

“Ahem,” came the phlegmy rumble of Pol clearing his throat. Luke turned around, looking at the Besalisk where he stood by their table.

“Hate to break this up,” said Pol, with obvious glee. In one hand he balanced a tray with a shot glass filled with fizzing amber liquid and a square of paper folded into a triangle. He motioned across the room with his other arms. “But I’ve got this for you, Arica. Compliments of the gentleman over there.” He pointed to one particular bar patron, a human man in a golden jacket who lounged to the side of the sabacc table.

Mara reached across Luke and plucked the card from the tray. “I’m a big fan, please honor us with a dance,” she read in a bored voice, then tossed it back down. “Can’t he see I’m busy?” But that didn’t stop her from taking the drink and knocking it back in one swallow. She shooed Pol away.
“Where were we?” she said, reaching up to twirl her fingers in Luke’s hair. But his mood was somewhat dampened. Her mouth tasted sour, now, the lingering traces of the amber shot in her kiss.

He pulled away.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” he said, looking at his forgotten drink, still two thirds full. “I’m just not sure we should be doing this.”

She sighed heavily, slouching back against the booth. “Don’t be petty.”

“I’m not—I… that’s unfair,” he stammered.

“Do you want to leave? We could go somewhere else.”

“Maybe I should take you home.”

“I don’t want to go home. Ahsoka and Barriss are there.”

“It’s late, we should really—”

“Stop being so concerned about the time.” She sat up straight again. “I have an idea. We could go to your ship.”

“Why we would we do that?”

“For fun,” she said.

He shook his head. “I… I don’t think we should. That sounds like a bad idea.” He paused, as she stared at him with an unsettlingly unreadable expression. “Besides,” he added, “Ben will probably be there.” The house was too small to put up all of the guests.

“Then Ahsoka’s ship,” she said. “No one will be aboard that one.”

His heart was pounding nervously in his ears. He drummed his fingers on the table, but stopped himself as soon as he noticed he was doing it. “I don’t know Mara I don’t think so,” he said, all in a rush. “We shouldn’t.”

“We shouldn’t or you don’t want to?” she asked.

“Both,” he said.

She frowned deeply. “Why do you do this? Why do you make me do this?”

“What? I’m not making you do anything.”

“You are, though. You make me think you feel the same way about me and then you… you make me feel like a fool.”

“I didn’t say that I didn’t like you. I just… I know what you’re suggesting and I don’t think we should.”

“Why not?”

He didn’t answer, just grabbed his drink and tried to avoid the issue. A cold Cloud City Special was
not special at all, though… it tasted oily and too sweet, sickly sweet. He made a face and set the glass down after one attempt at a sip.

“Oh for pity’s sake,” Mara said, and grabbed the glass from him. She seemed intent on finishing his drink for him, all at once.

“Don’t do that,” he said, trying to stop her, but she just held up one hand to fend him off when he tried to take it from her. “I think you’ve had enough,” he said.

“I’m just getting started,” she said, hiccuping as she dropped the empty glass back onto the table.

“Please don’t.”

“Luke, I don’t know what you want from me. I just don’t know.”

“I don’t want anything from you.”

“Don’t lie. I see how you look at me. I can sense how you feel about me. But you disapprove of me. I always do the wrong thing. I always say the wrong things. I don’t know what the right things are.” She pressed her hands to sides of her head, pulling the skin of her face taught. He could feel the frustration radiating from her, permeating the Force around the them, and he didn’t know what to do about it.

“I don’t want you twisting yourself in knots trying to figure out what I want.”

“Then just tell me.” She reached out and touched the side of his face, brushing his lips, then ran her fingers down his arm and took his hand in hers.

“I don’t know! I don’t know what I want,” he said, pulling his hand away. “I just wish you would stop pushing me. I said I didn’t think it was a good idea. Just… why can’t you listen to me? For once?”

“Ah,” she said, leaning far back, a bitter smile marring her features. “See? This is the same as it ever was. I’m all wrong; I’m not listening, I’m pushing you, I’m being terrible. I’m cruel.”

“That’s not what I said.”

“But that’s why you don’t like me,” she said, airily this time, turning away. “You never did. You always like Fai better; you thought I was mean.”

“Are you talking about when we were kids?” he said, confused. “That doesn’t have anything to do with this. That was ages ago.”

“It has everything to do with this,” she countered, turning back to him. “You still think of me as the girl who ruined your life. Admit it.”

“I don’t. You’re the one who seems fixated on that. Not me.”

She huffed. “You know, you ruined my life, too.”

“What? How.”

“I lived on Coruscant, the center of the galaxy, in the Imperial Palace,” she said, pronouncing each word with emphasis, practically spitting the “p” in “palace” at him. “The Emperor treated me special, like his daughter, not like the others. I was going to be someone.”
There it is, he thought. It all clicked into place in an instant.

Maybe it was good that she’d been drinking. Alcohol brought out honesty, if nothing else.

“And how did I ruin that?” he asked. “I don’t remember making you leave Coruscant.”

“But I was made to leave because of you,” she said. “He sent me away because he cared more about your Skywalker blood than all the years I spent working hard to be the best at everything, to never fail any test or task he laid out for me. I tried so hard and it was all for what? So I could go fetch him what he really wanted. That’s it. That’s all it was for.”

“You resent me for that,” said Luke calmly.

“No,” she said, miserably, but he didn’t quite believe her. She had said that he ruined her life, and she had meant it. She slid her arms onto the table and flattened her forehead against the hard surface. Her voice was muffled. “I resent him. I hate him. I hate everything about him. He was just using me and he didn’t care.”

“The Emperor is evil. He doesn’t care about anyone but himself,” Luke told her, putting a hand on her shoulder. “I’m sorry,” he said. “But do you see… this is what worries me.”

“About what?” she asked, lifting her head.

“This,” he said, motioning between them.

She just stared at him as if she truly did not get it.

He sighed.

In a backwards way, her resentment of him explained why she was so interested in him. It was just the Emperor’s interest, secondhand. It wasn’t hers. It wasn’t real.

He’d known that she couldn’t possibly be serious about him. This just explained the nagging doubts, confirming them, giving words and form to the bad feelings.

He was disappointed. He did like her. He wanted to trust her. He wanted her to like him for him, not because she couldn’t shake the Emperor’s interest in him and had absorbed it as her own.

He didn’t blame her, but he didn’t want to do this if that’s all this was. If none of it was genuine, it would only end up with them hurting each other. And he didn’t want that. He didn’t want that at all.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he said, trying to pick his words carefully. “I don’t want to take advantage of you.”

She fell back and laughed. “Are you protecting my virtue?” she exclaimed, with a mocking sneer. “I’m not a child. I’m fifteen, now. I can make my own decisions.” She turned away from him and pushed the empty glasses across the table, looking at the residue clinging to the insides of them with a frown.

“It’s not about that,” he denied. “I just… we’re going our separate ways, soon, and I just don’t want to start something that we can’t finish.”

“Then let’s not. Go our separate ways, I mean.” She grabbed his hand and held on tight so that he couldn’t pull away. “Don’t you ever get tired of being so responsible and obedient?” she asked.

“Even when you rebel you’re the model son—telling your father that you’re going to go with him
and train with him. Why not just forget him altogether?”

She leaned in, a new fire in her eyes. “We could run away. Both of us,” she said, deadly serious. “Forget Jedi training. Forget the Rebel Alliance. Forget the Emperor and just do whatever we want.”

“Is that really what you want?”

“Yes,” she insisted.

He looked down at her hand wrapped around his.

“That’s not what I want,” he said. “I want to make a difference. I want to end the Empire and I want to be a Jedi, like my father used to be.”

“Your father doesn’t want you to be a Jedi.”

“So? We’re not talking about what my father wants.”

“Is that why you don’t want to be with me? Because you’re trying to be a Jedi? Are you going to follow their stupid old code? Are you going to emulate Obi-Wan and being alone all your life?” She gripped his hand a little tighter and edged closer to him with each question.

“I don’t care about that. I care about you, Mara. I don’t think you know what you’re saying. You’re drunk. You don’t really want to run away with me.”

“I know what I want,” she said, and dropped his hand abruptly. There were white marks on it where her fingers had pressed into his flesh. “I want another drink.”

“I want what I want,” she said, and dropped his hand abruptly. There were white marks on it where her fingers had pressed into his flesh. “I want another drink.”

“Mara—” he protested, but she ignored him, climbing over him awkwardly on her way out of the booth.

“It’s really late, we should just go back home.”

“I don’t want to go back home,” she muttered, staggering to her feet, taking a moment to steady herself. Then she lifted her head proudly and strode with deliberate steps towards the bar.

“Please don’t be this way,” he said, getting up to follow her. “I’m just concerned about you.”

“Don’t be.” She slammed her open palm down on the bartop and said, “Hey! Pol, ya sleemo! Give me another drink. A sizzler this time.”

Pol, who was in the middle of talking to a group of Mirialan girls at the other end, paused for the briefest of moments and looked over his shoulder. Then he turned back as if he saw no one.

“I don’t think he’s going to serve you,” Luke said. “We should go.”

“No,” Mara said. “I’m going to dance. You can watch me.”

“No—”

But she pushed past him roughly, heading for the stage. She flipped her braid over her shoulder with a whip-like snap and gave him a look over her shoulder before she jumped up on stage and grabbed hold of a long silver pole. She jumped up, gripping the pole about halfway up to the ceiling, then spun around, doing a few acrobatic flips and turns. She didn’t seem quite so drunk anymore; not a clumsy move in sight. Luke glanced around at the various bar patrons, his gaze coming to rest on the gold-jacketed man who had sent Mara the drink earlier.
Pol came over and leaned on the counter behind Luke. “You know Arica long, boy?”


“Your friend, the little reddish human over there, who else?” Pol replied, shaking his head as if he thought Luke was exceptionally stupid.

“Oh, right,” Luke said, feeling exceptionally stupid for forgetting about the assumed name. “I guess so.”

“You should watch out,” said Pol. “She’s a mean drunk. I’ve seen her break a fella’s arm for gettin’ handsy with her. Good dancer though.”

“She could do a lot worse,” was all Luke said.

It seemed to amuse Pol greatly, though, and the Besalisk uttered a hearty laugh. He slapped Luke’s back and it was bone-jarring. “You want another drink?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“You sure? You want another one of those fancy chocolate drinks?”

“I’m alright.”

“You look like you could use a drink,” Pol disagreed. “I don’t blame you. Keeping up with Arica, and all. Tell you what, this one’s on the house.”

“Fine, just give me a whiskey.” It was Ben’s favorite drink. It tasted like regret and sadness.

“Atta boy,” said Pol, and went to work. Luke kept his eyes on Mara. She was doing things with the pole that would probably make Ahsoka very upset, if she were here. He wondered how it was that Ahsoka could be so protective and yet not realize that Mara was dancing regularly at a cantina, and had sleazy looking “fans” buying her shots. He wondered if either Ahsoka or Barriss even suspected that Mara was saving up her credits and planning on running away. Wasn’t keeping her close the only job that Father had given them? How could they fail so badly?

Mara could probably fight this whole bar single-handedly, so perhaps he shouldn’t be bothered. But he was.

Those old creeps were enjoying it too much.

Pol set down a tall goblet of whiskey on the bar, pushing it towards him. Luke drank pensively, wondering if he really was going to end up like Ben. Old and alone.

It seemed likely, in that moment. He was, after all, nearly seventeen and had yet to do anything beyond kissing another being. And if it wasn’t for Mara taking it upon herself to kiss him, he wouldn’t even be able to say that much. Now that things were wrecked with Mara he doubted he’d have another chance with anyone, ever.

Mara kept glancing over towards him, to make sure that he was watching, no doubt. No worries, there. It was hard to look anywhere else. She tried to be subtle about it, turning her head just a little and then quickly away again, or locking eyes with him for a moment while she spun around the pole. But she had no smiles for him; there was something sharp and hard in the way she glanced at him. She hung upside down and winked at one of her appreciative audience members—Gold-Jacket
himself. Luke felt the curdle of what he knew must be jealousy in his stomach.

Eventually, Mara jumped down from the pole, practically glowing, her spirits obviously lifted. He could feel it in the Force. Dancing had been better for her than meditating. Well, good. Good for her.

She bent down and gathered up the credits that people had scattered at her feet, pocketing them with smiles for the small but adoring crowd that had gathered by the stage. The band played on like unstoppable gliz music machines. Mara laughed. The sound resonated throughout the room as she hopped down from the platform. Gold-Jacket slipped an arm around her waist and leaned to whisper something in her ear.

Mara glanced towards Luke. He looked the other way, pretending to be suddenly interested in what was going on away from the stage. There was nothing going on; just a few bar patrons sitting at tables nursing their drinks, or making out in dark corners.

He knew that no one could lay a hand on Mara if she didn’t want them to. So he stifled an instinct to Force push the man into a wall. He took a long swallow of whiskey, savoring the bitter unpleasantness of the drink. The whiskey here tasted even worse than usual, and he was glad.

“Yes, Arica is good for business,” said Pol thoughtfully. Luke looked at him; he was polishing the bar and stroking his chin. “If I could get her to come in on a regular schedule, that is. So people would know to come watch her. But she’s hard to pin down, that one. Disappears for months at a time. I don’t suppose you know where she lives?”

As if I would tell you, Luke thought. “No,” he said. He turned back to where Mara was, and saw that she had moved over to the sabacc table with her new friend. Gold-Jacket had sat down again and she… she was perched on his lap, one arm slung languidly over his shoulder.

The edges of his vision went blurry and dark for a moment. Luke shook his head and it cleared.

“You gonna do something about that?” Pol asked.

“No. She knows what she’s doing.”

“Good,” said Pol. “Wouldn’t want to have to throw you out for causing a ruckus.”

“I need some air,” said Luke, thinking I’d like to see you try to throw me out.

He pushed himself away from the bar and shook his head again as a black haze crept in around his sight. He staggered a little and reached out a hand to steady himself. Maybe, he thought, that last whiskey had not been such a great idea.

Halfway to the door things got blurry again, the lights sliding into streaks in his eyes and the music veering off key, slowing down. But maybe that was just part of the song.

He heard Mara’s laughter, clear and loud and mocking. He crashed into a table and someone shouted angrily, shoving him away. “Watch it!”

“Sorry,” he mumbled. He gritted his teeth and focused on the door. He refused to look back at the sabacc table, refusing to see Mara making out with someone else.

The cold night air hit him full in the face. It was, by now, well after midnight and the temperature had plummeted. He welcomed it. It was bracing.

Luke staggered down the sidewalk, one hand on the wall to keep himself upright. It was snowing
and the flakes fell in a steady drift.

His legs didn’t seem to want to hold him up anymore. His knees buckled underneath his weight and he slid down to the pavement, dragging his hand along the wall, trying to dig his fingers into the grooves between the bricks. But his hand could not grip anything. He reached out to the Force for strength, but that, too, was fading, receding away like the tide going out.

He lay in the falling snow, watching the snowflakes tumble down towards him. But then the blackness crowding his vision blocked even that out. He felt a creeping paralysis overtake his limbs and his mind.

*I’ve been poisoned,* he thought. That last drink. Pol. How else? Who else?

But why?

*Mara,* he thought, calling out into the Force. *Help me.* But it was a silent scream, a fading sigh into the ever increasing darkness of his empty mind.

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Mara wanted to die.

Or scream.

Or laugh.

Or dance.

Or break the necks of everyone in the room.

Why did Luke leave? That wasn’t what he was supposed to do. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. He wasn’t supposed to abandon her. Why didn’t he care?

“What’s the matter, pretty darlin’? Not having fun?” asked the repulsive man on whose lap she sat. His name was Telkorin—he was a fixture at this particular cantina and had been trying to get her to do more than just dance for him for a while now. He boasted that his jacket was made entirely of real gold threads.

“I want another drink,” she said, pushing away the hand that slid towards her thighs. She hadn’t expected to have to take it this far. She’d thought that some sort of feeling would stir in Luke when she got up to dance.

But instead of coming to her after she was done he had just ignored her. And then… left. Abandoned her. Deserted her. He wasn’t even *jealous.* Did a Jedi feel jealousy? Had he managed somehow to stamp that out?

Or did he really just not care?

Telkorin snapped his fingers and Pol came waddling over. Mara only half-listened to the drink order—not caring what she had, as long as it was strong enough to make this hurt and anger go away.

“Mara…?” she sensed a call faintly, in the very back of her mind. “Mara… help me…”

She jumped to her feet.

“Hey,” said Telkorin, “where do you think you’re going?” He grabbed her wrist, pulling her back. She twisted his arm around with a crack, shoving him down face first onto the table.

“It’s been fun, but I have to go,” she said, and left him there without a backwards look. She ran to the door, where Luke had disappeared only a few minutes before.

Outside the street was dark with falling snow. She looked around and in a moment saw a body lying on the ground a few yards away.

“Luke!” she cried, and ran over, sinking to her knees in the snow.

He was unconscious, eyes shut with snowflakes gathering in his lashes. He was so still, appearing to not even be breathing. He looked frighteningly like a dead person, but she could feel the pulse of his life in the Force, his signature still present, though faint.

“Luke,” she said, shaking him by the shoulders. “Wake up!” She patted his face, kissed his still lips, but nothing brought him back. She sat back on her heels and looked around, but there was nobody there to help her. The streets were all empty; no one else was foolish enough to be out in the black cold night.

Except… that there was.

From the alley behind the cantina came the crunch of footsteps in fresh snow. Mara felt a tingling at the back of her neck, an instinct of danger, and she rose into a defensive crouch over Luke’s lifeless body.

A figure obscured by a heavy cloak emerged from the shadows.

It stopped a few feet away and uttered a sinister chuckle.

“Jedi children,” it said, its voice low and dark. Velvety, like the lining of a coffin. “It’s too easy.”

“Who are you?” Mara reached for her lightsaber, pulling it from a holster strapped to her leg, hidden under her skirt.

“Someone who has no interest in you, little girl.”

The figure reached up to pull the hood of its cloak away from its head, revealing the face of a Zabrak male. His face was red and black and his horns were grown long. He surveyed her with yellow eyes that brimmed with contempt.

“Don’t bother with that, you’ll just get yourself killed,” he said, his voice oily and rich like the darkness that permeated his aura.

Mara pulled the hilt free, igniting her bright purple blade.

“I’ll die before I let you touch Luke,” she said.

“You really don’t know who I am, do you, child?” he asked. He lifted a hand towards her as if to fling her aside with the Force.

“I don’t give two squirts from a nerf’s anal glands,” she said, holding her ground. “But I can guess.
You’re Darth Maul, aren’t you?”

“Impressive shielding,” he said, lowering his hand. “And it’s just Maul now. I haven’t been a Sith apprentice for thirty years.” He smiled, and it was a ghastly sight. “Longer than you’ve been alive. Long than you will live.”

“I’m not afraid of you,” Mara said, gripping her saber, knuckles white. She had never been a real fight… not with another Force user.

“Darth Sidious told me all about you, about how you were nothing compared to Vader, how easily you fell and let you brother die. How you let your mother be destroyed.” She smiled. “He had no respect for you and didn’t consider you a threat, so I don’t either.”

Maul circled her in prowling, cautious steps, regarding her with his unsettling yellow eyes. “How do you know my treacherous old master?” he snarled. “Are you not the little Padawan of Lady Tano?”

“I am,” she said, tracking him warily, stepping around Luke as she turned. “But before that I was an apprentice of the Emperor; his heir apparent. He was grooming me to serve as his Hand.”

“And yet, here you are,” said Maul, amusement lilting in his tone. “Another discarded failure.”

“He didn’t discard me,” she retorted in a flash of anger. “He lost me. I was taken from him by Vader. Skywalker.”

“I see. And Skywalker gave you to his Padawan as a gift. Don’t you get tired of being passed around like an unwanted fruit? Trust me, child, if Lord Sidious had wanted you back, he would have managed it by now. Whatever delusion you harbor about being his heir apparent is, I can assure you, just that. A delusion.”

Mara responded with a bitter laugh.

She had figured that out for herself years ago. And yet Maul’s words still stung. Sidious had sent her on a mission and she had failed, so he had abandoned her. It was only the mercy of Luke’s father that had allowed her to live. It was only the benevolence of Ahsoka and Barriss that had allowed her to continue her training.

Some days she felt gratitude for this. The people who were supposed to be her enemies had given her a new life.

Some days she hated them for it, because they had given her no choice. The life she lived was not her own.

She knew that her life with the Emperor had not been her own either.

So she told herself that she didn’t miss it.

But in the face of Maul, all alone, with Luke lying unconscious at her feet, she needed to believe that she was still Mara Jade, the most promising child of the Emperor’s arsenal. She always survived.

“I am not afraid of you,” she repeated, holding her saber high. “And I won’t let you hurt Luke.”

“Luke’s not the one who is going to be hurt,” said Maul. “In fact, I went out of my way to not hurt him. Just slipped some paralyzing snake poison into his drink. You should be more worried about yourself right now, child.”
Mara bared her teeth at him, waving her lightsaber in a taunting motion. “You should have drugged me, too,” she declared.

“Oh but I have a use for you,” said Maul. “You see, I have no real reason to want to hurt this boy. But he is the apprentice of Obi-Wan Kenobi, so I am going to take him. You can make yourself useful to me by delivering the news to Kenobi and his friends. See how well this works out? This way I have no reason to kill you. Think it over, child, before you do anything rash. Do you really need to fight an old Jedi’s battles for him?”

“Stop talking,” snapped Mara. “You want Luke, you’ll have to go through me. I’m not your messenger girl.”

“Very well,” said Maul, and lunged forward. From his sleeve erupted a red blade.

She met him halfway, striking against his red with her purple. They crackled together in a violent hue. His eyes glowed with menacing glee as he leaned over her, beating her backwards with his formidable height.

Mara gathered every ounce of strength she had, both physical and in the Force. She pushed Maul off of her and spun around, gathering momentum to drive him away from Luke.

Maul was relentless, bounding back and then coming for her again. She met every swing of his blade but knew she could not keep up this defensiveness for long.

She jumped forward, leaving Luke where he lay. She ran at Maul, unleashing a flurry of fast blade movements, trying to unsettle him with quick, darting, glancing blows piled up one after another.

It worked, at first. His eyes widened and he had to work to parry her blade. But he was fast, too, and none of her swings slipped past his saber.

Mara kicked off the wall of the cantina, propelling herself into the air and somersaulting, aiming both feet at Maul’s head. He ducked away and swung his blade up at her legs, but she shielded them and swept his saber to the side.

She tumbled to the ground and rolled back to her feet. If she wasn’t going to die she was going to have to rely on her agility, her ability to dance around Maul and hopefully wear him out.

She ran at him again, and they became locked in an endless exchange of blows, she darting and spinning and dancing around him, trying to keep him on the defensive. She got him out into the street, away from Luke, but he showed no signs of tiring.

In fact, he seemed to be enjoying himself. His eyes shone with a wicked glee and he taunted her, calling her “little girl” and “bumblebee.”

“You fight like Lady Tano,” he cooed in that sultry sneering voice of his. “If she only had one blade, of course.”

She swung for his legs and he jumped out of the way, springing up like a gazelle, incongruous for his heavy frame.

“Ah ah ah,” he chided, “not those, my dear. They were a gift from my mother.”

She swung again and he caught her up high. Their blades locked together, Mara’s arm stretching out, reaching up to equal Maul’s height. He smiled down at her and suddenly a second blade shot out from the end of his hilt. It was aimed directly at Mara’s throat.
Her senses gave her half a second’s warning and she moved back only enough for it to catch her shoulder and slice through her braid. She screamed as the smell of burning flesh and hair mingled in the clear, cold night air. She felt the heat of the it pass by her ear, singing her earlobe.

Her remaining hair fell loose around her shoulders as she staggered back, clutching the burnt line across her upper arm where the blade had grazed her.

Maul twirled his double-bladed saber in a flickering red circle and laughed.

“Give up child,” he said. “You are going to be my messenger girl whether I let you stumble back home or they find your dead body in the snow. I’ll write my missive with your blood if I have to.”

Mara raised her blade and ran at him, screaming in rage and pain. Her guard was completely down, so determined was she to throw all her energy into driving her saber into his eyes.

He held up one hand, again, and pushed her hard with the Force. She flew through the air, lifted up and tossed back like a ragged doll. She struck a lamp post and landed in a heap on the curb. The light swayed back and forth above her, shed a layer of snow from its cap. When she hit the pole something broke inside of her, several somethings… her arm, her ribs, maybe her spine. She did not know. All she knew was the blinding pain of the snapping and shattering. When she hit the ground all the air went out of her lungs and her head slammed into the pavement. Her vision went dark.

She tried to get up, to shake her head clear, but she could only let out a pained cry and fall back, her head a swarm of dizzying lights. She could feel the shift her ribs, the crush of her lungs struggling to fill.

In a moment, Maul was looming over her. He had Luke draped across his shoulders as if he didn’t weigh a thing.

“Tell Obi-Wan Kenobi to come to the Trikarle ruins, alone, if he ever wants to see his Padawan alive again,” he purred. Then he nudged her in the side with his boot, smiling as she screamed. “Don’t fall asleep now. You wouldn’t want to freeze to death.”

And then he left.

She knew she could not stay where she was. She knew that she had to move. She had to get up. She had to get home.

Mara dragged herself to her feet, gasping for breath. It hurt like hell, but she could still stand with her broken ribs. Only one arm was broken, and she still had her legs. She tried to see this in a positive light. She touched her side gingerly, hobbling forward in a bent over position.

*I have to get home,* was the only thought in her head

She stumbled down the street, agonizingly slow. She had left her coat inside and she began to shiver violently, overcome by the bitter cold.

But it would not occur to her until much later that she should have gone into the cantina for help. All rational thoughts had fled when her head hit the ground.

*I have to get home.*

She didn’t know how long she walked, dragging herself through the snow, every breath a step of agony, until she couldn’t do it any longer.
I’ll never make it home, she thought, sinking to her knees again. She looked at the ground and thought about falling face first into the snow and lying there forever. It was too early for the cantinas to empty out, too late for anyone else to be out and about. No one would find her until they came upon her broken, frozen corpse in the morning.

She lay down, feeling the shattered bones in her arm grind together, but she was exhausted with the pain. I must heal myself, she thought, sinking into the dirty slush on the side of the road. Barriss had taught her healing techniques, ways to reach into the Force and use it to knit together wounds and restore strength… but everything she knew seemed far away at that moment. Barriss was far away.

She slept and she dreamt of Faisellu, of dark eyes and a voice telling her that she was better than this.

Did I ever tell you that you were my hero? You always survive. So why don’t you get up?

She felt a warm hand on her cheek. She opened her eyes and saw a dark figure leaning over her, and she wondered if Maul had come back to finish the job. Then the figure pulled back and shed its coat, and in a moment Mara was dimly aware of herself being lifted up and wrapped up in the scratchy, warm folds of a woolen cloak. She didn’t feel any pain as she was moved. She didn’t feel much of anything at all.

“Mara,” said a voice, and she turned automatically towards it, looking up into the scowling face of Luke’s father. It wasn’t an angry scowl, she thought dimly, shutting her eyes again. There was something like worry there. What was he worried about? What was going on?

“What happened?” he asked, and she struggled to find it in her memory. What happened… what happened… what… Oh.

“Maul,” she said thickly, feeling as if her tongue had frozen to the top of her mouth. “He’s here… he’s not on Mindor… he’s here. He has Luke.” She tried to pull herself upright, clawing at his shoulder with her left hand as her right arm dangled uselessly to the side.

He disentangled her fingers from his shirt and said, “Calm down, it’s okay, little one. Stop struggling. You’re going to be okay.” He brushed aside the wet hair that was plastered to her face and put a hand on her forehead, asking, “Where did he take Luke?”

She wondered what he was trying to do. Could he understand her? Was he trying to read her thoughts?

“The Trikarle ruins,” she said through frozen lips, not even sure any of her words were intelligible to him. “You have to go… you have to save him…”

“Shhh, it’s going to be alright,” he said. He pulled her broken arm across her chest and wrapped the coat around it, securing it in place. She was sure he hadn’t heard her, or didn’t understand.


“I heard you,” he said, gathering her up in his arms and rising to his feet.

“Leave me, there’s no time,” she insisted.

He didn’t even reply to her, just started to walk quickly through the night, carrying her like a bundle of broken sticks.

“Luke,” she mumbled, exhausted, unable to say any more.
She began to slip in and out of consciousness. She was aware of being carried, of being in someone’s arms, but then she drifted and she was in a hammock, rocking back and forth, staring up at a summer’s sky. The smell of velanie flowers was in the air and someone, somewhere, was humming a lullaby.

Mara…?

Mara…

Are you awake?

Are you awake, Mara mine?

A breath of summer whispered words of love into her ear, and then the voice began to sing:

*Rosemarra blooms in mourning, wormwood in daylight,*
*baby bought a bitter herb and had a bit to bite,*
*Mama made a marrow stew of me at night,*
*have you ever seen a better bone to pick a fight?*
*Sorrow stole my baby, oh what a sorry sight…*

She laughed and she reached out to the voice. A woman without a face loomed above her, tickling her toes and singing to her, and she laughed… and she laughed… and she laughed…

“Stay with me,” came Skywalker’s voice, carrying with it the dark and the night and the cold falling snow.

She didn’t want to stay with him. She wanted the hammock and the flowers and the summer day, her mother singing her a song.

“Wake up,” he insisted. “We’re almost home. Don’t die, don’t… are you awake? Mara? Nonononono…” and then he uttered a string of Huttese curses so vile they alone brought her reluctantly back to the present. The painful, horrible, present.

She tried to remember how she had got this way, and asked, “Where’s Luke? Did you save Luke?”


“Maul,” she cried, “Maul has him.”

“I know, I know. Don’t think about Maul. Or do. I’m going to kill him. Do you want to hear about how I’m going to kill him?”

She closed her eyes.

“Mara?”

“Yes,” she sighed.

“Allright,” he said, and began to recite a litany of ways to break, mangle, eviscerate, and chop the Zabrak into a bloodied, unrecognizable paste. Despite his efforts, she fell asleep to the sound, to words of violence murmured like a nursery rhyme.
The next time she awoke, he was gone.

She was in the sitting room, lying on the couch.

Barriss’s pinched face was above her, lips moving in a silent Mirialan prayer, the diamonds on her cheeks stained with the trails of tears. Her hands moved lightly over Mara’s body, her eyes closed, and Mara could feel the Force flowing through her, taking all her hurt away, soft as a summer’s breeze and bright as a falling star.

Chapter End Notes

- Luke and Mara really should have gone to see "Handmaidens of Naboo," they would have had a better time. Think The Handmaiden but with song and dance numbers!
- For what it's worth, this is my idea of gliz music and the band playing in the cantina.
- Yes, Lando created the Cloud City Special. He posted it on the HoloNet version of Pinterest, no doubt.
- References to Mirial and Mirialan culture are partially from wookieepedia but also from this handy guide.
Luke came to consciousness as he had left it: cold. He blinked his eyes open slowly, not really aware of the how, the why, or the what of anything beyond that he was cold and he was lying somewhere hard and unforgiving.

Poison… he remembered, suddenly. He’d been drugged! That got him up in a start… or it would have, if he’d been able to move quickly. His body was considerably more sluggish than his mind, and all he succeeded in doing was flopping over onto his side.

He was in the dark, nothing to see, but he reached out with his senses and got an indistinct idea of his immediate surroundings. He was lying on a stone floor… not duracrete or plastisteel but actual stone bricks, old and slick and worn down with time. He was in a small, enclosed space, stone all around and outfitted with a wooden door that was rotted with age.

Beyond that was a hallway and more small rooms like this one… and that was about all he could sense, reaching out into the Force. His connection to the Force felt as dull and addled as the rest of him. Was this a prison? he wondered. He struggled to gather the strength in his limbs to sit up. It was slow going and he prickled uncomfortably as blood rushed back into arms and legs that had been dormant for a long time. How long? Too long, whatever it had been.

He felt nauseous and suddenly dizzy, and as he tried to stand up he felt a pounding in his head and a roiling in his gut. Half a second later he was vomiting onto the aged stone bricks. His mouth tasted of chocolate, bile, and whiskey.

On the bright side, he actually felt better afterwards. A little clearer, as if the last vestiges of the poison had still been lingering in his stomach and was now soaking into the floor instead of him.

But who had drugged him? And where were they? Where was he now?

Whoever it was didn’t seem to think very highly of him, because they had not even taken his lightsaber: it was still secure in its hiding place in the inner lining of his jacket, where he always carried it. Also, when he got to the door he discovered that it wasn’t even locked. Not that it would have mattered if it was, because the wood felt soft and old enough to just knock from its hinges, not to mention cut through with his saber. Wherever he was it was an ancient place. Underground.

Luke lit his saber, taking a moment to get acclimated to the greenish glow in the darkness. He thought about his predicament for a moment. He had been drugged by Pol, or someone else had slipped something into his drink, which admittedly wasn’t difficult since he hadn’t been paying attention at all to his surroundings. He could hear the lecture from Ben in his head already, reprimanding him for not being mindful, for letting his feelings for Mara override even basic common sense.

Mara. He wondered if she knew what had happened to him? She could still be inside that cantina, for all he knew, not knowing or caring that he’d been drugged and taken away. Or she could have
left and gone looking for him, but how would she know where to look? Probably she’d gone home and thought he’d gone back to the Duchess. He wondered when anyone would notice that he was gone, or if they even would. Ben might assume he was with Mara all night, not realizing something had happened until the next morning, when he didn’t show up to join them on their mission as he’d promised he would.

After he’d passed out someone had taken him here, but hadn’t searched his pockets and found the saber, or bothered to tie him down or lock him up. That was the curious thing. He wondered if they knew enough about him to even suspect that he might have a weapon like this hidden on him. But why would anyone kidnap him if they didn’t know who he was? It was puzzling.

Well, he wasn’t going to figure it out just by sitting here.

He reached out into the Force again, trying to sense if there were any living beings nearby. He felt nothing.

He headed down the hallway, treading slowly with eyes wide open despite his sureness that he was alone. There was something very unsettling about how easy it seemed to just walk away from his holding cell, and he kept thinking that he would sense some danger at any moment. A booby trap or guard or something. Were his senses still so dulled that he was just stumbling into a trap?

Up ahead was a flight of stairs, crumbling with age and covered in creeping moss. That led him to another long, dark hallway.

Eventually, he saw the soft glow of firelight up ahead, and he followed it to the source.

He came to a large room that was lined with guttering torches held up by iron sconces on the walls. The room was empty, save for columns that created a path up to a raised platform at the end, where a statue loomed shadowy and large over the steps. It looked just like the figure that was in Barriss and Ahsoka’s living room, only much larger. The way the torches lit it from below was eerily similar to the way the candles had ringed its feet.

Up above hung tapestries that were frayed and rotting, their colors lost to time, worms, and mold. They swayed gently in the air that fed the torches. The one nearest to him was intact enough and well lit enough to make out the symbol upon it, a circle enclosing four diamonds and a wave. The diamonds reminded him of the tattoos on the backs of Barriss’s hands and across her face. It had something to do with the Mirialan religion, and he wondered if he were in some kind of church, or shrine, to their goddess.

Luke paused. There was someone in this room; a living being lurked in the dark beyond the torchlight, hiding behind a column, watching him. He felt very exposed standing in the light. But he knew there was no use in hiding at this point. They had brought him here, so clearly he had never had the element of surprise on his side.

“So,” said an oily voice from the edge of the room, “the young apprentice awakens.”

A figure in a black cloak stepped out from the shadows and strolled over to the steps at the base of the statue. He sat down and lowered his hood, revealing the red and black face of a zabrak.

“Who are you?” Luke asked, though he had a pretty good idea.

The zabrak leaned back against the stairs, resting his elbows on the steps above him and affecting a thoughtful air. “Why don’t you call me… old master?”

Luke laughed automatically in surprise. After being drugged and dragged into a dark underground
ruin of some sort, he had not expected this sort of greeting from his kidnapper. “Uh, I don’t think so,” he said. “Do you have a name?”

“I once had a name,” replied the zabrak, “given to me by my mother, but that name was taken away long ago… long, long ago…”

“Oh, I’m gonna just ask; are you Darth Maul?” He held his lightsaber up at the ready, though the zabrak did not seem like he was intending to leave his comfortable spot on the stairs.

“How perceptive,” said Maul with a yawn. “You have heard of me, I see.”

Luke nodded. “A thing or two.”

“You really don’t need to keep waving your lightsaber around,” said Maul, motioning dismissively towards him. “I have no interest in fighting you.”

“Great, I’m not interested in being here, so I’m going to leave, if you don’t mind,” said Luke, edging backwards towards the way he’d come in.

“Oh but I do mind,” Maul objected, sitting up straight. “I went to all that trouble to bring you here. Why don’t you stay and we can discuss things?”


“Hmmmm… how about… Obi-Wan Kenobi?” Maul leaned forward and steepled his fingers together. There was an unmistakably eager gleam in his yellow eyes.

“What about him?”

“You are his newest padawan, are you not?”

“There’s no more Jedi Order, so there are no more padawans,” said Luke.

“Semantics,” Maul scoffed, waving his hand in a dismissive circle. “You travel with Kenobi and train with him. He is teaching you the ways of the Force, and you carry a lightsaber.”

Luke shrugged, even as he kept his saber up. “Fine, you’re right, I’m training to be a Jedi, and Obi-Wan is my teacher.”

“How is Kenobi these days?” Maul asked, and the question seemed strange to Luke. It sounded like an old friend’s curiosity.

“Why don’t you ask him yourself?” Luke countered with a question of his own. “I’m not sure why you brought me here. Am I supposed to be bait to lure Obi-Wan into a fight? You didn’t really have to go to all that trouble. They were already looking for you.”

“By ‘they’ I assume you mean Lady Tano and your father,” said Maul. “I am quite aware that they have been tracking me across the galaxy. In fact, I was counting on it. It allowed me, in turn, to track them. I knew they would lead me to Kenobi sooner or later.”

Maul stood and took a few steps towards Luke, who backed up the same number of steps. He watched Maul warily. Part of him wanted to rush Maul, to get it over with and fight him, but another part was cautious. He’d never been in a real fight before, and Maul was a legendary Sith, who had defeated Ben’s master in battle. Luke had hoped to be able to help track him down and fight him, but
in his mental picture, he had Father, Ben, and Ahsoka all on his side. Now he was alone and still recovering from the effects of being drugged. It wasn’t ideal.

“It is my fondest hope that Kenobi will be joining us soon,” said Maul. “I left him a message which I expect he has received by now.” He chuckled, and Luke wondered what was so funny about that.

“What are you planning to do when he gets here?”

Maul spread his hands out. “I will make him suffer and die,” he said, clenching both hands into fists. “I will end the long game we have been playing once and for all.”

Luke didn’t really know what to say to that. He glanced around, taking stock of the exits from the room, and wondered how fast Maul could run. He had robotic legs, so really, it depended on the craftsmanship.

Maul crossed his arms behind his back and smiled. “Enlighten me, young one: what has Kenobi told you about me?”

“He doesn’t really talk about you.”

Maul snorted angrily. “Doesn’t talk about me…! I don’t believe you. You knew who I was, after all.”

Luke just shrugged. “He told me enough. You killed Qui-Gon Jinn, and Satine Kryze, people who were important to him. You’re a criminal who has escaped justice.”

Maul laughed; a derisive, unsettling sound that gave Luke a very bad feeling about the direction their conversation was headed. “Justice?” Maul spat. “I spent over a decade trapped in a heap of trash, lost to madness, because of your master. I was discarded by my own master for my defeat at the hands of Obi-Wan Kenobi. He took my legs!” he cried, sweeping a hand towards his torso and cybernetic legs.

“Fine, alright, you’ve suffered,” said Luke, calmly. He looked up at the ceiling then quickly back down again. “I’m sorry for you.”

“Spare me your pity, boy,” Maul said viciously, and Luke wondered if his sarcasm had been lost on the old Sith. “And stop inching towards the door. I can see your thoughts—you are thinking that if you just run away I won’t be able to catch you. I can assure you that I will.”

“You should have tied me up,” said Luke, with a shrug, “if you didn’t want me escaping.”

“I had no need of that. You’re just a boy. A very impatient boy.”

“What can I say? I don’t have much patience for being kidnapped,” Luke said with an easy smile. He switched off his lightsaber, and Maul’s eyes narrowed suspiciously.

Luke gently tossed his saber hilt up into the air, never looking away from Maul, and his captor had an instant to pucker his forehead and glance up, following the weapon’s trajectory, before Luke reached out with the force to switch the blade on. It tore through the aging tapestries that hung from the rafters above, and the heavy shrouds of the past fell down onto Maul’s head. Luke called his saber back to his hand and bolted while Maul angrily tossed the cloth aside.

It was only a moment’s diversion, but Luke hoped it would be enough. He wasn’t about to fight Maul alone—he wasn’t keen on dying alone in the dark like this, and he didn’t want to do anything on Maul’s terms, in the spot Maul had chosen.
His only thought was getting out and getting to his father, to Ben…. Once they were together, Maul didn’t stand a chance.

Obi-Wan shut his eyes and drew a deep, steadying breath. Beside him he could sense Anakin’s agitation. He opened his eyes again and surveyed Anakin for a moment, taking in his mood. He was about to say something, but Anakin cut him off:

“Don’t,” was all he said. He kept his eyes fixed ahead, not looking at Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan turned to Ahsoka. She had a distant, worried look, and he wondered, not for the first time, if she should really be here. He never would have thought it would be the case, but she seemed more upset than Anakin at the moment.

Rex had volunteered to fly Barriss and Mara back to the nearest rebel base, where Mara could be safely taken to a medcenter and looked after without inviting Imperial attention. Barriss’s force healing could only do so much for the girl, and Mirial, despite its distant location in the Outer Rim, was a territory controlled by the Empire. Taking her to a Mirialan hospital was too risky; there would be too many questions about just what exactly had happened to her.

Obi-Wan thought that Ahsoka’s mind was out there, with Mara and Barriss, not here, and perhaps it would have been better if she was physically with them as well. But she had insisted on coming to face Maul. And she was, besides Barriss (who could not leave Mara’s side), the only one who knew where the Trikarle ruins were located.

The ruins had once been, according to Barriss, a celebrated center of worship for the acolytes of Trikarle, the religion named after its main deity, Trikara. The main tenants of Trikarle were enlightenment through peace, tranquility, and harmony. Trikara’s temple was a blessed place filled with gentle souls. But many hundreds of years ago this particular spot had been abandoned and left to fall into ruin, because it was said that a great evil had infiltrated the settlement and permeated the once holy spot with darkness.

Obi-Wan stifled a sigh at the thought of going to such a place to face a Lord of the Sith. Neither Anakin or Ahsoka were in a good mental state. Anakin was fluctuating between rage and helpless worry, and Obi-Wan knew that if anything happened to Luke it was going to be difficult to keep Anakin from ripping Maul to pieces. And after what had happened to Mara, he wasn’t sure that Ahsoka wouldn’t be right there with Anakin bloodying her hands.

He recalled how limp Mara had been when Anakin carried her into the house. She had barely been present in the Force. At first, Obi-Wan had thought the girl was already dead.

Unbidden, Satine’s face pushed its way to the forefront of his mind. Her hair falling back from her face as she died, as she went limp in his arms.

But vengeance was not the way of the Jedi.

Vengeance was the path to the Dark Side.

He looked at Anakin again. He was always teetering just on the edge, Obi-Wan thought. His heart ached at the idea of losing him to the Dark Side again, of seeing that mad gleam in his eyes and knowing that he had somehow failed him, had let it come to this. Anakin’s love for his children was what kept him grounded, but it was also a dark, terrible love… the thought of them being hurt or taken away from him for good created a turmoil within him that Obi-Wan could feel rushing like waves through his former padawan’s mind, ripping at his heart.
It ripped at Obi-Wan’s heart, too. But in a different way.

He thought that he understood the struggle with attachment that Anakin had always faced… but only to a certain extent. He could never understand how Anakin had let his love for Padmé carry him to the darkest of places. Even when Qui-Gon and Satine had died, Obi-Wan would never have dreamt of hurting innocents to save them. Better to let them go as the Force willed it, or cradle their memories privately in his heart of hearts, than to burn the world down to the ground, as Anakin had done.

He loved Anakin, despite everything. Yes, of course he did. But what must he do if Anakin pushed him aside again, turning away from the light in grief or rage, to embrace the false comfort of the Dark Side, instead? He could barely stand to think about that possibility. He did not know what he could do. What he would do.

Even now, while he cared for Luke greatly, had always felt a special joy at watching the boy grow, he felt less pain at the thought of Luke dying than he did at the thought of him falling as his father had once done… of losing the innocence and light in his soul and succumbing to darkness.

He did not think that would ever happen, though. Perhaps it was his mother’s steadying nature tempering the volatile aspects inherited from Anakin, but Luke had always been one to take things as they came. He was not immune to impatience or anger, but he processed those things differently than Anakin did. They did not, so far as Obi-Wan could tell, eat Luke up from the inside out.

He had great hopes for Luke. Hopes that Maul would not dash. Obi-Wan felt a pang of remorse at the reminder that Maul had taken Luke. He should not have let this happen. He should have been there. But at the same time he knew that he could not keep Luke by his side forever, that the boy would have to face these dangers on his own.

“There it is,” said Ahsoka, interrupting his reverie. She pointed with one gloved hand, and when he squinted, he could make out the indistinct shapes of dilapidated buildings in the snow.

It was quite late at night, really more like the early morning by now, and the world was dark. Winter nights on Mirial were extra long. They carried their lightsabers out to illuminate their way through the falling snow, but even then it was difficult to make out their destination.

Obi-Wan reached out into the Force, feeling around for any hint of Luke’s presence. Where Anakin was like a burning flame in the Force, and being near him felt like being near the fiery center of a star system, Luke’s presence felt like sunshine warming a planet’s surface, and being near him was like being a tree turning its leaves towards the light. Obi-Wan thought that, perhaps, he did feel something like Luke far away.

“It’s me he wants,” thought Obi-Wan. Luke had been targeted not because he was the son of Anakin Skywalker but because Obi-Wan was his guardian. It was Maul’s way. Just as he had targeted Satine in order to hurt Obi-Wan. Why Maul’s twisted mind worked this way, Obi-Wan did not know, except that it was the maniacal blindness of the Dark Side at work.

Maul had struck first, killing Qui-Gon, taking away the only person that Obi-Wan had loved, at the time.

The fact that Maul had returned, seeking vengeance for his lost legs and the years he had spent in exile, was something that Obi-Wan chalked up to the doctrines of the Sith. Selfishly, Maul only
understood his own pain, and could not comprehend that he had already stolen someone of importance from Obi-Wan. He could not let go because the Sith did not believe in letting go of anything.

Obi-Wan wondered if Anakin had really once been that way. He tried to remember back to Mustafar, to Polis Massa, to the wild look in Anakin’s eyes before he went down, and the way he had later said I’ve hated you for a long time. Those words had cut so deeply. And they only truly made sense once Anakin spoke of the alternate life he had led, a life without Padmé or the twins, a life spent at Palpatine’s feet. Over a decade of being a Sith Lord. And yet it still gave Obi-Wan’s mind a turn to think that Anakin could ever have been like Maul, nursing a deep and dark hatred for him over the long years of isolation.

The fact that even now, after having killed Satine, Maul was still seeking revenge, was a testament to the enslaving nature of the Dark Side. It fed off of negative emotions, growing them back ten fold. While Obi-Wan had spent years trying to let go of his sadness and regret over the losses of the past, Maul had fixated on them until there was nothing left on his mind.

And now he was continuing the cycle, taking Luke away, as if that would return his legs. Obi-Wan could almost pity the foolish creature that Maul had become. Almost.

They entered the ruins of the old Mirialan temple, descending a spiraling set of steps. Let’s do this, indeed, Obi-Wan thought grimly, following in Anakin and Ahsoka’s wake.

“Where are you, little Jedi?” came Maul’s voice, echoing through the ancient corridors. “Come out and I won’t hurt you. I promise.”

Luke snorted to himself, leaping over a pile of rubble at a dead run. He careened forward into the darkness, nothing but the green glow of his lightsaber and his Force sense to guide him. He felt that he was going up, which had to be the right way to go, but soon he came to a flight of stairs that led down again, and there was no other option besides turning back. And, since Maul was in pursuit, that was not actually an option.

Luke pressed ahead and hoped that this was an anomaly, that soon he would find a path that lead upwards again.

“All you are accomplishing is making me angry!” Maul called, but his voice was more distant. “If you come back now I promise to only hurt you a little!”

Maybe I should go back and fight him, Luke thought, skidding around a corner to find another flight of steps leading downwards. What kind of messed up architect had designed this place? He reached out into the Force, trying to detect how far the corridors went underground, but his senses were muddled and clouded.

He did get a feeling that the hallway where he stood was in particularly bad shape, construction wise. There were heaps of rubble lying around, bits of the wall and ceiling caved in, and as he probed with his mind he could pinpoint a few more places where the bricks were about to give way, dislodged by aged tree roots and crumbling from the trickle of water. He reached out and pulled here, pushed there, until everything did give way. He dodged out from the avalanche he had caused, running down the steps as the walls and ceiling imploded in a cloud of dirt and stone dust. Then he turned and surveyed his handiwork with no small amount of satisfaction.

That should take Maul a while to get through, if he was even determined enough to dig his way through it at all. Luke jogged down the rest of the steps and looked up and down the corridor that
split at the bottom. The only way this could go badly, he mused, was if he had just cut off the only passageway to the outdoors. But that was absurd. Surely this complex had more than one entrance or exit.

As he went farther, he got a sense that he was not alone. There was a smell, a musty animal odor, and the traces of life in the force. This was a good thing, he thought. Like the old Jedi Temple on La’as Vinto, he could befriend whatever creatures lived in these ruins, and perhaps even turn them back on Maul.

Instead of looking for a way out, he redirected his energies to finding the source of the force signature. It was an increasingly powerful feeling, as if whatever he sought was a large beast. Luke licked his lips, his mouth dry, but told himself that there was no need to be afraid. He just had to trust in the Force.

A low, guttural growl that shook the stones beneath his feet came from a room at the other end of the hallway. Luke didn’t nearly jump out of his boots—because he was too well trained for that. No sir, he was not startled at all. He maybe just staggered a little, that was all.

He reached out towards the growl with his mind, thinking, *Friend?*

He got an unfriendly feeling back.

Looking back over his shoulder, he thought, maybe he should forget about this new plan. Go back to the old plan. The get out while the going is good, plan.

There was a stirring. A scraping across the stones, like a heavy bulk rising and… and… sliding? Yes, sliding along the corridor, swirling up the walls and over the ceiling and along the floor.

The air became foul. There was a shift, from the cold dampness of the underground to a hot, moist wind like the exhalation of breath.

Up ahead, two large, glowing eyes opened in the darkness, reflecting back the green of Luke’s lightsaber. The eyes blinked, narrowed, and came closer. The slit pupils were fixed directly on Luke.

*Friend… I’m a friend…* he thought frantically, backing up. He got back a distinct feeling of hunger and rage. Whatever was coming for him was, in a word, ravenous. It didn’t want to be friends.

He held up his saber with one hand and with the other pushed with all he could muster in the force, hoping to send the creature reeling back or at least frighten it away.

He was met with resistance, an actual push back within the Force. The beast roared at him. The sound shook the walls around them, dust sifting down from the cracks, and Luke stumbled. He maintained his footing, just barely, and decided that now would be a good time to run like hell.

*Wait a minute,* he thought, after already turning to sprint back the way he’d come, *I blockaded the hallway.*

That moment was the first time in his life that Luke Skywalker was fully convinced that he was about to die. His own mortality rose up before him like a spectre, a giant dragon with gnashing teeth and clawed feet. Or maybe that was the actual giant creature behind him….

He could hear it coming after him, not running along the floor but twisting like a corkscrew, the sound of many legs grappling onto every surface around it, coming at him in a spiral of certain death. He pivoted around and directed his momentum back at the creature, swinging his saber towards it in a long arc. He felt resistance as blade met scales, glancing off the creature’s hide. It screamed, and
there was Force power in its voice, which threw him off balance, both literally and in his mind.

This creature wasn’t just big, it was Force sensitive. It reared back when Luke struck it, but it felt more surprised than hurt in his mind. The tenuous connection he had formed with it was just enough to get a sense of its feelings, but not enough to actually communicate with it or influence its thoughts. There was a wall there, unlike the panthira, and Luke was afraid that there was no getting in. At least, not in his current state.

He used both hands to push back in the Force, and was able to halt the creature. It seemed suddenly wary of him, or at least of the lightsaber, and it drew back a little. Luke looked into its eyes and saw nothing that he could appeal to, so he went on the offensive, lifting his saber at a thrusting angle and going for the eyes, which was the only part he could see that wasn’t covered in tough, scaly hide.

A giant paw came out of the darkness and clocked him in the side, sending him slamming towards the wall. He was able to shield himself just in time, softening his impact with the Force, and he bounced up again, rolling to the side. He was underneath the creature now, and he smiled despite it all as he jabbed his lightsaber upwards, hoping to find some vulnerability in the creature’s belly.

His saber hissed as it plunged into the monster, and the dragon screamed a deafening howl of rage and pain. It stomped down hard on Luke, flattening him to the ground. He choked out a harried gasp before twisting the saber and hearing another cry from above, from the chest that was pressed against him, so that it felt like the creature’s howls were inside his own head, reverberating through his lungs and shaking his limbs.

But it wasn’t dead yet. It flopped over, thrashing violently at Luke, whipping him with a sharp tail and clawing at him with its multiple taloned feet. Luke pulled his blade free and used to to deflect some of the blows, but he could feel the wet burst of his own blood as the creature cut into his face. He held tightly to the hilt with both hands, at first, but then put out one hand to force push the beast away from him.

The crushing jaws clamped down on his arm; a tearing, rending feeling shot pain through his flesh, the delicate bones of his wrist splintering and crunching together. It was hot and wet inside the mouth of the beast, and then he didn’t feel anything at all where his hand should be. He yanked his arm back, screaming in pain and shock as he looked at the mangled stump. It was gushing blood. In a surge of adrenaline and terror he swung his saber wildly, inexpertly, as he only had his left hand to use.

He did not, at first, notice when the creature went still. But eventually he realized that he was stabbing at an inert, unmoving lump that was absent in the Force. He fell to the side, exhausted, his saber slipping from his hand. His right arm was still bleeding, and bleeding a lot. He could feel the blood puddling around him, though maybe that was not all his own that he felt. No matter. He was going to bleed out if he didn’t do something about it, and quick.

Luke pulled his saber back into his left hand and slumped against the wall. He ignited the blade and closed his eyes, gritting his teeth as he anticipated the pain he knew was coming. He drew the blade along the mangled end of his arm.

It made a clean, cauterized cut, burning away the stringy bits of flesh where the creature’s teeth had ripped away at his hand. It didn’t even hurt as much as he thought it would, though he heard someone screaming and he thought it might be him. He dropped the saber and lay there for a few minutes, drifting in and out of consciousness. The only thing that kept him from passing out completely was the rank smell of the dead beast next to him and the cold, unyielding hardness of the floor.
That, and the knowledge that he couldn’t just lay there and wait for Maul to find him.

Luke struggled to his feet, pushing himself up along the wall, and stared down sadly at the dead creature on the floor. It had a long, snakelike body with several pairs of legs running the length, which extended past the extent of his lightsaber’s glow. There were scorch marks and stab wounds along its long underside. A forked tongue lolled lifelessly out one side of its mouth. His hand was somewhere inside there, he thought, but he wasn’t keen on trying to get it back out.

“We could have been friends,” he said to the lifeless body. “I would have fed you… you didn’t have to try to eat me.”

He heard a noise from back up the hall, from where he’d come, and tensed. Maul’s voice came snaking down towards him, calling, “Come back, boy! It’s no use running, you’ll never escape that way. I have you cornered.”

Luke switched off his saber and retreated down the corridor, clambering over the dead body. He cradled his right arm protectively to his chest.

“You cannot hide in the darkness,” said Maul, closer now. “I am of the darkness. I have lived in the dark my entire life; the darkness raised me, taught me, saved me. The darkness has kept me going all these years. It is my friend, not your shield.”

Luke decided right then and there that there was no way he was dying at the hands of that melodramatic blowhard.

Not today.

Not any day.

He shuffled along the wall, sliding his back along the cool bricks, till he rounded a corner. Then he took a deep breath and waited, focusing on the techniques Ben had taught him to hide his Force signature and quiet the other telltale signs of his presence. It was almost like meditation. The burning stump of his hand threatened to derail his ability to center himself, but he could not let that distract him. He just couldn’t afford to.

He heard Maul approaching and saw the red glow from his saber lighting the hallway. The zabrak stopped over the remains of the creature, and made a low humming noise. “Well, well, well,” he said. “Isn’t this a sight.” He paused, sniffing at the air, reaching out into the Force. “The boy is stronger than I thought…” Then he called out, “Where are you, young Skywalker? Are you still alive? Don’t tell me you slew the dragon and then crawled off to die. What a good story that would make, if there were anyone here who cared enough about you to tell it.”

Luke gripped his saber hilt silently, wishing he had spent more time becoming proficient in left handed dueling. He’d practiced it—Ben had made sure he could use either hand if he needed to—but he was still much better with his right and naturally favored it.

“Did you know,” Maul continued, creeping down the hall towards where Luke waited, “that when I was a very young boy, far younger than you, my master tested me by throwing me down into a pit with a creature much like this one? Dragons are nasty beasts, just enough sentience in the Force to be dangerous, not enough brain there to reason with. No. I survived, of course. I always do. That was a day to remember, though. I’m impressed that you managed to kill this beast… naturally it’s less impressive if I find your dead body at the end of this monster….”

He neared the corner and Luke leapt out at him. Or he meant to. In reality it was more of a stagger,
and Maul brought his blade up to catch Luke’s before he could land his blow.


Luke wasn’t laughing. He brought his saber up again, aiming for a killing blow.

Maul deflected every thrust and returned Luke’s blows with strikes that carried far more weight and strength. He drove Luke backwards down the hallway. Luke retreated, entering another large chamber. He tripped over something and crashed to the floor, scrambling back to his feet even while holding Maul back with his saber.

It was bones. The chamber floor was scattered all over with bones.

Of course it was.

“Don’t try my patience, boy,” Maul hissed. “I don’t want to kill you, at least not while Kenobi isn’t around to watch. But if you don’t give up this pointless fight I will end you.”

Luke kept retreating, backing away, though he was more aware of where he placed his feet, now. Maul stood still, holding up his saber and igniting a second blade that extended from the opposite end of his hilt. He smiled over the blade and said, “I have only begun to demonstrate my power. I could squash you like an insect.”

Luke lowered his saber, panting, his arm tired. All of him was tired.

“You don’t look so good,” said Maul, mocking. He twirled the saber lightly, tossing it from hand to hand, for no other reason than to show off his dexterity. “Poor little Jedi children… when will you learn not to trifle with me? Though I must admit you are in better shape than your girlfriend; you’re still standing, after all.”


“Oh, yes, did I not mention earlier? Your friend, the little dancing girl; she tried to stop me from taking you. That was a mistake.” Maul made a tsk tsking noise and shook his head, rolling his eyes in delight. “I made short work of her, but then she didn’t run and hide the way you do. She wasn’t interested in hiding, oh no, she was all full of fight and sass… until I finished her off.”

“No!” Luke cried out, and all of a sudden, he wasn’t tired anymore. He felt absolutely nothing at all besides a surge of rage and grief that propelled him forward onto Maul.

Maul stumbled backwards, shocked by the sheer fury that was coming for him. Luke drove him backwards, swinging viciously at his legs. It was all a blur to Luke—he would not even be able to recall, later, the details of his own actions. But, in a matter of seconds he had sliced through Maul’s metal appendages, severing first one and then the other from the robotic torso connected to what was left of Maul’s body.

Maul collapsed to the floor, dropping his saber, his eyes wide in terror. He held out both hands to push Luke away, and his force push was strong enough to send Luke reeling back and to knock his own saber from his grip. It sailed across the room and landed in a pile of humanoid bones. But Luke bounced right back up and before he even realized it, he had reached out for the nearest object and had one of Maul’s legs in his hand. He lifted it high, meaning to bring it down across Maul’s head. Normally it would have been too large and unwieldy to heft in such a manner, but—

“Luke!”
It was his father’s voice, calling out from the doorway. Luke staggered, paused, looked up, then shook his head, his mind clearing.

He dropped the leg to the floor and felt all the adrenaline and rage melt from him. His legs buckled underneath him.

Father caught him as he went down. He sank to his knees, holding Luke up, and Luke allowed himself to go limp, finally not needing to fight to hold it together anymore. He was dimly aware that Ben was there, and Ahsoka too.


“Is Mara alright?” Luke asked instead. He watched as Ahsoka removed a set of vibrocuffs and a shock collar from her belt and set to work restraining what was left of Maul. Maul was sputtering angrily, screaming about how Kenobi would pay for this. Ben grimly took a handkerchief from his coat and gagged him with it.

“Mara is fine,” said Father, and Luke thought he was a terrible liar.

“Is she… is she alive?”

“Yes.” Father laughed shakily. “She’s alive. I think. She’ll be alright.”

Ben was squatting next to them, now. He looked into Luke’s face with a furrowed brow. “Luke, my boy. How are you doing? Are you alright?” he asked.

Ahsoka, standing over Maul, crossed her arms and said, “He was about to beat Maul to death with his own leg—I think he’s fine.” There was a smile in her voice and on her face as she looked down at him, and Luke felt that she approved. He gave her a weak smile in return.

Ahsoka’s words reminded Anakin of Maul’s presence. He patted Luke on the shoulder and transferred him to Obi-Wan for support. Now that the initial shock of seeing Luke battered and mutilated was wearing off, he felt more secure that Luke would be alright. Alright, enough, for him to deal with other things for the moment.

He stood up and strode over to Maul, who gazed up at him balefully.

“I should kill you right now,” he said, thinking of all that Maul had done. All that he would still be doing if he weren’t restrained and hobbled.

“Anakin, no,” said Obi-Wan. “We have him restrained. There is no need for this.”

“And what are we going to do with him?” Anakin asked, turning around. Obi-Wan knelt next to Luke, an arm around his son’s shoulders. He was gazing back at Anakin with concern and disapproval.

“We will take him back to a rebel base, turn him over to them,” said Obi-Wan.

“So he can just escape?” Anakin shook his head. “He’s too dangerous.” He thought of Mace
Windu, all those years ago, saying the same thing to him about Palpatine. If only he had listened to Mace. If only Obi-Wan wasn’t so damned determined to cling to the Jedi way when there was no more Jedi Order. If only, if only, if only….

“What kind of an example are you setting for your son?” Obi-Wan asked, gesturing with his free hand to Luke.

“I’m fine,” said Luke, “don’t worry about me.”

“To be fair,” Ahsoka spoke up again, “we just rescued Maul from Luke, not the other way around.”

“None of this matters,” said Anakin. “Maul is dead set on coming after you, Obi-Wan. He’ll never stop trying to hurt you and the people you care about. Put him in a rebel jail cell and he’ll find a way to get out sooner or later. He’ll never stop. You know it.”

“No. I won’t allow this to happen.”

“Why are you defending him?” Anakin asked, frustrated. “Are you going to just sit there and look me in the eye and tell me that his life is more important to you than Luke’s? And what about Mara? What about all the other people he’s going to hurt if I don’t put an end to him right here, right now?”

“It’s not Maul’s life that concerns me,” Obi-Wan objected. “It’s yours, Anakin. Do not repeat the same actions of your past. Do not kill a defenseless prisoner in cold blood. Don’t go down that path again.”

Anakin sighed. It was not as if this would be the first time he had ended the life of an unarmed prisoner since he had turned his back on the Emperor, on his life as Darth Vader. He thought back to Aurra Sing, back to an Inquisitor or two.

He did what was necessary, when it was necessary. He had promised himself that he would no longer kill innocents, as Palpatine had once made him do. But Maul was no innocent. Not by a long shot.

He turned to Ahsoka.

“What do you think?” he asked. “What should we do?”

She glanced from him to Obi-Wan, then between Luke and Maul.

“I don’t know,” she said, shaking her head, her lekku jerking back and forth. She repeated it, quietly. “I just don’t know. Whatever you decide, I’ll support.”

That wasn’t exactly the kind of response Anakin was hoping for. Her solidarity was appreciated, but he would have liked for her to counter Obi-Wan, or agree with him; something besides turning it back on him to decide.

Anakin looked back at Maul. He was breathing heavily, staring at them intently, though he could not speak.

Anakin didn’t care for that. Something about killing a prisoner who could not speak felt more wrong than striking one down unarmed. He reached down and yanked Obi-Wan’s handkerchief free.

“What about you?” he asked. “Give me a good reason not to kill you.”

Maul was silent. He licked his lips and ran his tongue over pointed teeth. “I am at your disposal, it
would seem,” he said. “Bested by one Skywalker and the prisoner of another. My grievance is with Kenobi, though.”

“Oh no,” said Ahsoka. “You don’t get to say that after what you did to Satine, to Mara, to Luke. You might not have a grievance with us but we have one with you.”

“My deepest apologies, Lady Tano,” said Maul, smiling up at her from the floor. “Vengeance is a messy business.”

“Anakin, please,” Obi-Wan said. “Let us debate Maul’s fate somewhere else. Luke is badly injured and needs to be taken to a medical facility. Do not do something rash. We have time.”

Anakin looked at Luke, who was shivering, though he remained conscious and even opened his mouth to say, “I’m fine,” again. He was not fine, though. He was far from fine. Anakin turned his back on Maul and went to Luke.

“Can you stand?” he asked, though he knew his son would be stubborn enough to say “yes” whatever his condition. He hoisted Luke up by the shoulders and wrapped an arm around his back, holding him steady. He was so small, Anakin marveled, even now as a young man almost fully grown. He had his mother’s build.

Obi-Wan got to his feet, a look of relief on his face.


“My lightsaber,” Luke objected, reaching out towards the far corner of the room.

*Oh for kriff’s sake,* Anakin thought. But he reached out in the same direction and probed for the lightsaber. It came rattling out from a pile of bones and Anakin caught it midair, handing it back to Luke, who clutched it like a child might clutch a stuffed animal.

Then he turned and shuffled with Luke towards the doorway, leaving Obi-Wan and Ahsoka to drag Maul out between them.
Love in the Time of Rebellion

It was the time when they loved each other best, without hurry or excess, when both were most conscious of and grateful for their incredible victories over adversity. Life would still present them with other mortal trails, of course, but that no longer mattered: they were on the other shore.

Mara was sick of rejuvenation tanks, casts, medical droids, and even Barriss’s hovering hands. She was sick of being flat on her back or suspended in bacta. Sick of hurting all over, of being unable to do so much as sneeze without feeling like her ribs were cracking all over again.

She ran one hand along the short length of her hair. Barriss had trimmed it for her, fixing the jagged slice the lightsaber had made so that it was evenly shorn. It now looked like something that had been done on purpose, but she still didn’t like it. The ends brushed at her shoulders, tickling her neck, reminding her of what she had lost. She had loved her long hair. She was vain about it, she knew. But it was hers to be vain about, to grow long or cut short if she wanted to… and then it wasn’t.

*It’s just hair,* she told herself. *It’ll grow back.* Just like her bones had grown back together.

Her right arm was still cradled in a sling, but that was an improvement from the cast she’d been encased in earlier. She could take it out and move it around. She was almost “all better.”

“We’ll be there soon,” said Barriss. Mara nodded.

She had spent the last few weeks at the rebel base on Atollon, with Barriss and Rex. Soon after arrival they had received word that Luke had been saved and taken to be with his mother on the Dantooine base. Mara had yet to see him again. She hadn’t even seen Ahsoka, who was also still on Dantooine.

But now she was finally healed enough, in Barriss’s estimation, for them to both travel there to meet up with the others.

Communication between bases was limited, due both to the distance across the galaxy and the need to remain under the Empire’s radar. So Mara didn’t really know what to expect when they finally made it to Dantooine. All Ahsoka had said was that they had captured Maul and that Luke was alright.

It should have been a relief to hear, and it was, but it still left Mara uneasy. The statement that Luke was alright, that everyone was fine, felt wrong. It felt false. But Mara kept her thoughts to herself. She didn’t know what to say to Barriss about it, didn’t know what there was to say, so she only nodded quietly when she heard the news.

After that she’d overheard Barriss talking to Rex, had heard the words, “...she’s depressed...” and wondered if it was supposed to be her. *I’m not depressed,* she thought. *I’m injured.* She’d been lying in bed swathed in a cast, feeling positively soaked through with bacta.

She kept reliving that night, over and over, in dreams and in waking. The snow. Maul’s yellow eyes. The cold. The hurt. The fear.
She had a lot of down time to just lay there and think about it. So maybe she was depressed. What did it matter. It was hard to feel much anything besides pain, in her current state. Did they expect that to put her in a good mood?

She kept thinking about what the Emperor would have done if she had failed him the way she had failed Luke. She couldn’t stop. Why did she even care? She didn’t. But… He would probably just kill her rather than nurse her back to health. That was obvious. He despised incompetence.

Even now, in the ship, she could almost hear him asking her, “Why do they waste their time on you when you’ve proven yourself unworthy? Why do they tolerate such weakness in their midst?”

“Are you looking forward to seeing Luke?” Barriss asked, casually, interrupting the dark spiral of her thoughts.

Mara was glad for the interruption, but didn’t show it. She shrugged one shoulder and said, “If Ahsoka will even let me see him. I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s banned me for life.”

Not that she could, she added silently in her thoughts.

Barriss made a soft clicking noise. “You know she’s only looking out for you. And after what happened at the cantina…”

“I know, I proved how reckless and unwise I am,” Mara muttered. She’d had to tell Barriss all about her habit of frequenting nightclubs and she was dreading another discussion about it with Ahsoka. Barriss had said that she should have told them about her desire to be free, to have her own ship and go wherever she wanted, and that had made Mara laugh bitterly. From the very first moment she had met Barriss and Ahsoka it had been their job to deny her what she wanted.

What she wanted was also wrong for her, according to everyone else. Especially Ahsoka. If she wanted to go back to the Emperor, that was wrong. If she wanted to be with Luke, that was wrong too.

Now, Barriss sighed. “You know, Ahsoka was pretty reckless when she was your age.”

Mara rolled her eyes. She knew about all of Ahsoka’s exploits during the Clone Wars. The difference between her and Ahsoka is that whenever Ahsoka was reckless it was something to celebrate. Her guardians at the time admired her for it. Skywalker still puffed up with pride just at the sight of his former Padawan, to this very day. Not so with Mara.

“She’s still not right about Luke,” Mara said, stubbornly. “He’s not like other boys. Besides, Ahsoka doesn’t even know anything about that. She’s always had you.”

Barriss snorted. “She’s knows more about boys than you think.”

“Oh?” Mara’s interest was piqued by this hint. “Really? Like what?”

“We’re coming out of hyperspace soon,” said Barriss. “Strap yourself in.”

“That’s not fair.”

“You should ask Ahsoka about it.”

Mara went silently to her seat and prepared for their entry into the Dantooine system. She pushed
away thoughts of failure and punishment, of a guardian who didn’t have any hold over her anymore, whose opinions didn’t matter to her anymore... She thought instead of seeing Luke and Ahsoka again.

When they were docked outside the base, Mara slipped off the sling and gently moved her arm around, testing how it felt, testing the strength that remained in her muscles, and running through a series of therapeutic stretches. Barriss raised an eyebrow, but said nothing about it. Mara smoothed down the sleeve of her shirt, and the vest she wore over it, pressing out the wrinkles that being in the sling had caused. She didn’t want to look disheveled, or like an invalid, when she saw Luke again. She squared her shoulders and followed Barriss out of the ship.

They had their own greeting party, consisting of Ahsoka, Luke, Obi-Wan Kenobi, and Anakin Skywalker. Luke’s little astromech droid brought up the rear.

Ahsoka was emotional at the sight of her, coming forward first to meet her with a gentle hug. She patted her face and stroked her hair, marveling at how well she had recovered, how healthy she looked. Mara looked down at the ground. She couldn’t help but feel uncomfortable at the way Ahsoka fussed over her. Barriss, sensing this, made a light-hearted quip about how she had the best doctor, and Ahsoka smiled, blinking back tears as she moved to embrace Barriss.

Mara had been unable to meet Luke’s eyes, only looking at him sidelong and furtively. But now he was standing before her, his knee-high black boots and brown pants at the edge of her vision as she continued to stare at the ground. Finally, Mara looked up and tried to steady her emotions.

He smiled. “It’s good to see you, Mara.”

She reached up to touch the ends of her hair self-consciously. Her throat felt dry, and she swallowed, trying to remember what kinds of things you were supposed to say when seeing a person again, after having kissed and quarreled and then nearly been killed. But her mind went treacherously blank. So she just stared into his face, lost there. There were scars on his face that she didn’t remember being there before. They were faint, but they must have been very bad originally, if bacta treatments hadn’t made them go away completely after several weeks.

“We’ll see you in the mess hall later, for dinner,” said Ahsoka, and Mara glanced away from Luke, remembering that the others were still there. Ahsoka patted Luke on the shoulder, gave Mara a warm smile and then turned, her arm around Barriss’s waist, to follow Skywalker and Kenobi.

Mara blushed. She realized that she hadn’t even said anything by way of greeting to Luke’s father, which seemed rude, considering she owed him her life, now. But he didn’t seem bothered. None of them did; it was as if they had all agreed beforehand to leave Luke and Mara to their own devices. All of them except the astromech, who remained faithfully by Luke’s side, its photoreceptor gleaming in Mara’s direction.

“Go on, Artoo, we’ll be fine,” said Luke, shooing the droid away. It booed at him. “Go on, go to Father,” Luke insisted, and Artoo made a raspberry noise and turned to wheel quickly after the others until it caught up to Skywalker. Mara was sure that it looked back at her impudently, though; if a droid could do such a thing.

“Do you want to take a walk?” Luke held out one hand to her.

“Sure.” She took his hand, and it felt different, somehow. For a moment she stared down at it, wondering what was off about his grip. The hand was covered in a black glove, unlike the other.

“Oh,” he said, then let go of her hand and started to take off his glove. “Do you want to see it? It’s
“pretty awesome.”

“What is?” she asked, confused.

He paused. “Didn’t they tell you?”

“Tell me…?”

He tugged off the glove to reveal a silver metallic hand. “Fully articulated BioTech Industries Repli-Limb prosthetic, but with several aftermarket modifications, of course. It’s taking some getting used to, but my father’s helped me tweak it and I think eventually I’ll forget it’s not my own. It has a self-contained power source which utilizes the natural electromagnetic pulses of…”

His words blurred together in her ears, a string of cheerful technobabble that couldn’t penetrate the shock she felt at realizing that Luke had lost his hand. His entire hand. And hands—human ones, anyway—didn’t grow back.

She reached out to take hold of his wrist, looking at where flesh fused with metal, and said flatly, “Did Maul do this to you?”

Luke went quiet at her interruption, then answered, “Not exactly.” He drew his hand back and pulled the glove over it again. “Come on,” he said, “I’ll tell you all about it.”

They walked along the edge of the base. Dantooine was a temperate, grassy place, with sparse forests of bilba trees standing watch over rolling hills of lavender and yellow grasses. She had been to this location several times; traveling with Ahsoka had taken her around to pretty much all of the Alliance’s bases, and Dantooine was one of the more hospitable planets.

As they walked, Luke told her all about Maul, and the ancient Trikarle ruins, and the dragon that lived within. Mara listened intently, though part of her mind was focused on the way even the gentle swaying motion of walking made her side hurt a little. She hated that she felt so fragile still. She hated that she felt fragile at all.

She was horrified to hear about Luke’s ordeal in the temple. But, at the same time, she realized that (despite the self-deprecating way he told the story) he had pretty much single-handedly defeated both Maul and the dragon before the adults had even shown up.

Mara didn’t know how to feel about this. Of course she was glad that he had survived. It wasn’t as if she’d wanted him to go down into those ruins and never come back out again. Of course not.

But a little voice in the back of her mind whispered, *This is why the Emperor wanted a Skywalker; why he wasn’t content with you as an apprentice. You’ll never be as strong. This is why he sent you to Osallao; to find him someone more worthy. You thought he was wrong to dismiss you then but you know differently now. You’re not that special. You’re a discard. A failure.*

She pushed those thoughts away.

“Seems like I shouldn’t have gone to all the trouble trying to save you,” she said, and though she had thought it would come out teasing, lighthearted even, the words that dropped from her lips sounded bitter and petty to her ears. “I mean, sounds like you had everything sorted.”

They stood on the crest of a hill, beneath a smattering of spiky leaved bilba trees, and looked out across the colorful fields beyond. A river cut through the landscape below. Mara took a few steps down towards the riverbank, and sat in the grass. She felt tired after walking for a while, and though she didn’t want to admit it out loud to Luke, she needed a breather.
“You’re joking,” stated Luke, his tone serious, “but you know, I do wish you hadn’t fought Maul like that. He almost killed you.”

“So? He almost killed you. Do you really think I would just wave goodbye and wish you luck in a situation like that?”

There was a flock of small golden birds roosting in the bilba tree nearby, and Mara looked up to them, past Luke, and briefly closed her eyes, calling to them silently in the Force. Ever since she had witnessed the way Luke had bonded with the panthira in the caves on La’as Vinto she had wanted to be able to do that, to reach out to animals and have them answer. She’d been practicing whenever she got the chance.

Luke sat down beside her, shaking his head. “No. Not really. But I wouldn’t blame you if you had. I mean… you didn’t have to protect me. You didn’t have to risk your life for me.”

She scoffed, looking away, feeling weighted under the earnestness of his gaze. “I just wanted a crack at Darth Maul,” she said, wondering even as she said it why she felt the need. She reached out a hand and one of the birds ventured down from the tree in a flutter of yellow and orange wings to land on her fingers. Its tiny talons pricked a little as it adjusted its footing.

“I see.” Luke sighed, and ruffled a hand through his hair. She wasn’t looking at him, but she could feel his movements besides her, the shifting of his weight and then when he rested his hand on the ground, close to hers. “I’m sorry. I guess I just assumed… well. Sorry.”

Mara marveled at how easily he had accepted the lie. He seemed embarrassed, now, that he had thought she cared about his safety, and that filled her with a flush of frustration. What was the matter with her? She had spent all her recovery time wanting to see him and now she was making a mess of it. The bird scampered away from her hand but came back to sit on her shoulder.

She turned back to him and said, “What are you apologizing for? I’m the one who should be sorry. I got you into all that trouble in the first place.” The bird began to nibble at her hair, combing it with its beak. It tickled her scalp slightly.

He frowned. “No, you didn’t. It was my idea to go out. And it’s not as if either of us could have known that Maul was on the planet and stalking us.”

“But the way we fought,” she said, exasperated now that he wouldn’t even let her take responsibility for any of it. The bird fluffed its wings and then flew off, bothered by her aggravation.

“You don’t have to apologize for that,” Luke insisted, glancing up at the bird as it flew past him back to its tree. “It doesn’t matter. I don’t even remember what we were arguing about.”

Mara raised an incredulous eyebrow at him, but he shrugged back, stubbornly. She couldn’t believe that he had really forgotten. He must just not want to rekindle that particular discussion. But she remembered, very clearly, how their pleasant evening together had soured, even before Maul had made his move. She remained convinced that by leaving Luke’s side, out of frustration and spite, she had created an opening for his drink to be tampered with. And then he had left the bar by himself. No. She wouldn’t forgive herself for being so careless and then losing the fight with Maul, on top of that.

As if sensing her thoughts, Luke said, “I still wish you hadn’t fought Maul by yourself. Not on my account. He said something, you know, that made me think that he had killed you. And,” he took a deep breath, “that was the worst. I’ve never… I’ve never been that upset before. I can’t even describe it. Just the thought of you being hurt, or worse… Mara…” He reached up and touched her
hair, gently, tentatively. He tucked it behind her ear. Then he rested his hand on her shoulder and leaned in. “I care about you a lot.”

Mara said nothing, only shifted her shoulder away, and he removed the offending hand, pulling back. Her heart was beating too fast, too loud in her ears. She didn’t want him to say such things, she thought. She couldn’t stand the earnest words, that sounded too close to a declaration of love, without actually saying it. She remained silent, staring straight ahead at the water lapping against the riverbank. What did he mean by it? He’d acted as if he cared before, several times, in fact, but every time when she had responded to what she thought was his encouragement, he had drawn back. Changed his mind. Thought better of it. *We can never be friends. There can never be anything between us. I really don’t think that we should.* The rejections echoed in her mind.

And didn’t she deserve to be rejected? Maul had been a test that she had failed, while Luke had passed. Now here he sat, telling her he wished she hadn’t fought, that he wished she had just turned tail and ran because he didn’t believe in her. And why should he? Why should anyone, at this point?

Luke still sat beside her, but had managed to ease away so that she could not feel the warmth of his closeness, as she had moments before. But she could feel his mind, in the force, curiously reaching out, trying to suss out her feelings. To get a read on her. This was nothing new. It was just something he did, had always done, even when they were children, and she had always been leery of it. “Stop trying to read my mind,” she said now, jerking her eyes from the river, flashing him a look that said *back off.*

“I’m sorry,” he said, returning her look with wide, innocent eyes. “Mara… Are you alright?”

“I’m great,” she replied, acerbically. “I’m all healed up.” She reached out her once broken arm and turned it to and fro, demonstrating the range of motion. “See? All better. Like new.”

“I didn’t mean your arm,” he said, with measured patience. “I want to know how you’re feeling.”

“Why? Because you ‘care about me so much’?” she retorted. “So what? What are you going to do about it?”

He frowned, then shook his head. “You don’t make things easy, do you?” he said, flopping backwards onto the ground and sighing heavily. He put his hands behind his head and stared up at the sky. “Just forget about it.”

“Look, I appreciate your concern, but I’ll fight anyone I want to, even if it gets me smashed up in a medbay for a month,” she said, proudly, and he closed his eyes. She looked down at him, remembering when he was lying on his back in the snow on Mirial, unconscious. “I’ll go break Maul out of prison just to fight him again,” she declared.

“Good luck with that,” said Luke, without opening his eyes. “They took him to Sunspot Prison.” Sunspot was the highest security prison the Alliance had. Mara had heard of it, but never been there. “Doesn’t matter,” she muttered.

Luke sat up abruptly, Blades of grass fell from his hair. “Why are we even talking about this?” he asked, frustration evident in his voice. “You know that’s not what I meant, don’t you?” He reached out and took both of her hands in his. One hand was his, was flesh and bone, the other mechanical, sheathed in a glove… but it was his, too. She looked down at their hands. “Mara,” he said her name again, and she looked up. He kept doing that, and every time it made her angry, because it made her heart leap and she knew that she wanted to hear him say it more, to whisper it to her, and she felt foolish. So foolish.
“I’m not some fragile broken thing,” she said resolutely, looking him in the eye.

He returned her gaze, unflinching. “I never said you were.”

“I just want to make sure that you know. I lost to Maul but I’m not a failure.”

“No, you’re not.”

“I’ll prove it to you next time.”

“You don’t have to prove anything to me.” He seemed sad.

“I just need you to know.”

“I know.”

Still holding her hands, he drew her in closer and kissed her, softly, just a gentle brush of the lips before he pulled back again.

“Was that thanks for my attempt to save you?” she asked, cheekily. She almost thought she could hear the birds chirp in approval, but that was just silliness.

“No. I just... I wanted to. I like to kiss you.” He blushed as he said it.

“Oh, you do?” She raised her eyebrows in mock surprise. “It’s a fun pastime, is it? A hobby you might want to pick up?”

“Yes,” he said, half challenging, half sarcastic. He refused to acknowledge her teasing, but she was sure that he must like it. He had to, otherwise he wouldn’t still be here.

Mara leaned forward until their faces were close, lips almost touching. She whispered, “Well, keep at it, then.”

He did keep at it, for a good long while, which pleased Mara. She didn’t want to talk. This was so much nicer.

He put his arms around her waist and pulled her down to the ground. The grass tickled her skin but she didn’t mind that, not when there were better sensations to focus on. And then she felt the brush of his mind again, the curious reaching towards her through the Force, and she pushed him away.

“I’m sorry,” said Luke, propping himself up on one elbow and look at her.

“I don’t like people in my head,” she told him, turning her face away. “People” was an ambiguous way to put it, since the only person she could ever remembering being able to invade her thoughts and read her feelings was the Emperor, a long time ago, back when he was training her, teaching her how to use the Force. One day, he’d said, when you have proven yourself and are ready to be my Hand, I will be able to communicate with you across the galaxy, to speak to you mind to mind.

That had never happened, of course. Because she’d never proven herself “worthy.” It was for the best, though. He was in her head enough as it was.

“I’m not doing it on purpose,” said Luke.

She turned back to him, studying his face for a moment. He was earnest, guileless, but she said, “I think you are. You want to know what I’m thinking.”
“Yes, but, not without your permission. I just, I wonder what you’re thinking, and then you react…”

“That’s because I can feel you being all curious,” she said, pressing a finger to his forehead. “You could just ask.”

“But would you tell me the truth? Or would you just make fun of me?”

“Depends on the question,” she said.

“There, that’s it,” he complained. “That’s what I’m talking about.”

She sighed, the grass itching at the back of her neck, and said, “What do you want to know, Luke?”

“Just, how you feel about me, I guess,” he said, hesitantly, picking at the grass. “If you feel the same way about me as I feel about you.”

“I don’t know how to answer that. I don’t know how you feel about me.”

“I thought that was obvious.”

“It’s not.”

“I’ve told you,” he insisted. “I care about you.” He let a handful of torn grass sprinkle back down to the ground.

Mara sighed. “Is that all you’ve got?”

He frowned deeply. “I don’t know what—”

“I think you do.”

He leaned in close and said, “I love you, Mara.”

She smiled. “Was that so hard?”

He didn’t answer, just stared at her intently. He seemed to not even be breathing.

Mara’s smiled faded. She had to be honest with him. After pestering him to say the exact words she wanted to hear, she owed him that much. “I don’t know if I’m capable of love,” she told him. “But if I am, I think I love you.”

He let out a relieved breath, but still frowned. He touched her arm. “Why wouldn’t you be capable of love?”

“I don’t know.”

That was a lie. Of course she knew. She had not been raised to be a loving person, a caring person, a compassionate person. And that was all a long time ago, and both Ahsoka and Barriss had dedicated their lives to undoing the Emperor’s teachings, but still… Mara often wondered if it was too late for her, if she would always have these doubts, because she had been too old by the time someone had taken her away.

Maybe she was deluding herself to think that she was anything but what the Emperor had made her. Maybe she would reach inside to find the feelings that everyone was supposed to feel and she would find nothing but darkness. Maybe she would fail Luke when it really mattered.
After all, she wasn’t like him. He’d been raised by his loving parents, who taught him what he was supposed to do. All she had was a memory of a broken toy, and now, a dream of a lullaby.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly.

Mara reached up and pulled him back down to her, kissing him to make the doubts go away.

They lay there for a while, side by side, the warm late afternoon shining down on them as they kissed, and touched, and Mara reached out to him in the Force. She felt his surprise. It was a daunting thing, to open up her mind, to not immediately shut him out when she felt the brush of his thoughts answering hers. She had always been secretive. She always would be. But she didn’t want to be secretive with Luke. What she wanted, now, was to know what he was thinking and feeling as he kissed her.

There were no words in the Force, no distinctive thoughts like speaking directly to each other, just images, feelings, impressions. She had to reinterpret what she felt into her own words, but she thought that what she found in Luke’s mind was the reassurance that, as far as he was concerned, there was nothing wrong with her. Nothing at all.

She didn’t know how her own thoughts reached him, if they came through as she meant them, as she felt them. *I love you. I want you.* His arms tightened around her and his kisses went from tender and gentle to more urgent. He shifted so that, instead of lying side by side facing each other, he rolled her onto her back, pressing her into the soft earth of the riverbank. The added pressure of his body on hers made Mara’s newly healed ribs ache, and despite not making any sound or protest, Luke seemed to sense her pain and suddenly pulled away. He sat up, running a hand through his hair, and looked sheepish.

That broke their connection, and Mara shivered a little in the cooling breeze off the river. She sat up. Didn’t know what to say. The bird came winging its way back down to her, followed by several of its kin, and for a few moments she pretended to be absorbed in them. One sat on her hand and cocked its head to the side, while the others perch on her head and shoulders. She could feel Luke’s gaze on her as she stroked the smooth feathers with one finger.

“They like you,” he said finally.

“I should have brought bread crumbs,” she murmured, smiling.

“Maybe later.”

“I suppose,” she said, tentatively, “that you’re leaving soon. Now that you have the new hand and all.”

He seemed surprised, and shook his head. “No,” he said. “I’m not.”

“Oh?” she lowered her hand, and the bird crawled up to her shoulder again to join its friends. She reached across herself to hold her elbow.

“You know all that stuff I said about joining up with my Father? Yeah… that all went straight into the trash compactor once my mother found out what happened.” He laughed self-deprecatingly. “I guess I figured that was a no go… but… it’s not just that.” His face turned serious, and he looked out across the water, squinting into the setting sun. “Anyway, I’m going to be staying with my mother for a while.”

“A while?”
“Indefinitely.”

Mara raised both eyebrows. There was something that Luke wasn’t telling her, and she reached out, curiously, towards him in a silent question. His mind, however, was closed to her. She felt a gentle, but firm, push back in response. Out loud, he told her, “My mother was very upset about… everything. She was very upset with my father, and with Ben. Not just about what happened with Maul. I mean, she hit the ceiling over that, make no mistake. But as we were explaining what happened, I may have accidentally mentioned, off-hand, that Ben’s been taking me to cantinas this whole time and that’s he’s been letting me drink since I was thirteen. I mean, it’s not like I do it all the time? But just the fact that I do at all…”

Mara almost laughed. It seemed like such an absurd thing for Luke’s mother to come down on him for. She wondered what Ambassador Amidala thought of her, now, considering what she must have heard about her frequenting the cantinas and dancing in them, to boot. She realized that Amidala had not been present when she’d landed, earlier, and she asked, “Is that why she wasn’t part of the welcoming party?”

He made an evasive humming noise which segued into a “No.” He chose his words overly carefully as he said, “She’s hasn’t been feeling well lately.”

She didn’t push him, since he so clearly didn’t want to talk about it. Was Ambassador Amidala seriously ill? That would indeed cause a stir amongst the Alliance if it got out. It would cause a stir among the Empire’s forces, too, since she was such a thorn in the Emperor’s side. The Face of the Rebellion. The Child Queen of Naboo turned anti-Empire extremist. She imagined that Palpatine would do a shuffle of joy if he got wind of the fact that Amidala was “not feeling well lately.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I hope she feels better.”

“Me too.”

“What are you going to do? About your training?” Mara asked.

“I’ll keep up with it. My father will be around,” said Luke. “And Ben, too. I mean, they’re not banished or anything. I’m just staying here, with Mother, instead of traveling around with Ben. I’m going to learn to fly all of the Rebel spaceships, that’s for sure,” he added, brightening considerably. “The X-wings, the B-wings… whatever I can get my hands on.”

_I wish your hands were on me_, she thought, but said, “Perhaps we’ll see more of each other, then. Ahsoka usually travels with your mother whenever she has to go anywhere.” She said it hopefully, though she knew that if Amidala wasn’t feel well then she probably wasn’t going on missions to other star systems. And Ahsoka wasn’t one to hang around a base for any extended period of time. Mara was usually with Ahsoka, or with Barriss on Mirial.

“What about your plan to strike out on your own?” Luke asked. He didn’t look at her, instead of inspected the dark leather of his glove.

“Do you think,” Mara said drily, “that Ahsoka or Barriss are going to agree to that now? You’re not the only one whose plans for independence got dunked in the trash compactor by Maul.”

She didn’t mention that before she had spoken of running away, not asking for permission. She didn’t know how to say it, but now that seemed… wrong. Cruel to them, somehow. She wondered if she could convince them to let her stay on Dantooine, though. She didn’t know how she would spin it, especially if Amidala were ill and not in a state to keep an eye on her. She feared that her intentions for staying at the Rebel base where Luke just happened to now be living would be too
A small smile played across Luke’s lips, and he was about to respond, but was interrupted by a low, long horn sound from the base. The birds lifted away from them as one, fleeing back to the trees.

“Dinnertime in the mess hall,” he announced, and got to his feet. He helped Mara up, frowning a little as he noticed how she was cradling her left arm in her other hand. Then, his eyes traveled up her sleeve and he blushed. “Um,” he said. “Your shirt is all full of grass stains.”

Mara looked down at the once white cloth of her shirt. It was smeared with green and yellow, a telltale sign that she had been rolling around on the ground. “Oh well,” she said. “I’ll just stop by the ship and grab a change of clothes before we go to dinner.” She thought longingly of the sling she had left there, as well.

Luke followed her up into the ship, but lingered outside as she went into her bunk to change. Mara peeled off her vest and tossed the grass stained shirt to the floor, thinking about him on the other side of the door. She wondered what he would do if she opened the door, grabbed him by the collar, and pulled him inside with her. It was a tempting thought. But the dull pain in her arm and the stitch in her side from walking to the river and back warned her against any such shenanigans. Besides, they were expected to appear in the mess hall soon and there would probably be search parties sent out if they didn’t show. She sighed a little as she shrugged into a clean shirt. She slipped the sling over her head and winced as she nestled her arm into its supportive canvas.

She waved the door open and stepped out. Luke, who was leaning against the wall, straightened up immediately and was about to speak. But he fell silent when he caught sight of her arm in the sling. She just raised an eyebrow, waiting for him to say something.

“Are you alright?”

She almost said something flippant or sarcastic, but he reached out to touch her face gently. She closed her eyes and bit her lip, shaking her head a little bit. “I’m so tired,” she said, “of hurting all the time.”

“It’ll get better. Just give it time.”

She nodded, then opened her eyes, and looked again at the faint scarring on his face that the bacta hadn’t been able to heal completely. The marks from where the dragon had clawed him before it took his hand. She kissed his face, lightly, along the ghost lines of the dragon’s claws.

“It know it will,” she said, drawing back, taking his hand.

Everything changed with time. She knew that well, by now. One day she would be all better, even the lingering pain from her injuries a distant memory. And the doubts that the Emperor’s teachings had placed in her heart would also be gone. She looked forward to that day.
“I have to leave for a while.”

Luke looked up from the open wires of his mechanical hand and wrist. His Father had been quietly focused on fixing a short that had interrupted a lightsaber sparring session, and the sudden announcement surprised Luke. He hadn’t thought Father would be going anywhere anytime soon. Not with Mother the way she was.

“Why?”

He got a twinge of feeling in his hand for a moment and then the nerve receptors went dead again.

“I received a transmission from Sunspot. My presence is requested.”

Luke raised an eyebrow and tried to wiggle the fingers of the mechanical hand. They moved, but he still had no feeling, so it was a curious and mesmerizing sight; the hand was part of him yet not. His ghost hand, he liked to think of it.

“Don’t tell me Maul escaped or something.”

“No. But, apparently, they’ve been trying to interrogate him and he’s being difficult. Keeps hinting that he had valuable information but then won’t share anything when they give him a chance to talk.”

“Sounds like he just wants attention,” scoffed Luke, remembering back to his encounter with the arrogant Sith. “He probably doesn’t know anything. It’s not like he was with the Empire, is it? I thought the Emperor kicked him to the curb a long time ago.”

“He did,” Father said absently, squinting over the wires in Luke’s arm. “But he could still have useful knowledge. He’s been off the grid for a while and we’d like to know what he’s been up to. And, you have to give him some credit, he successfully tracked us to Mirial while we were following false leads. No, he knows something...”

“So why do they want you to go there? Do they want you to interrogate him?” Luke asked, wondering if the Alliance was really going to ask his father, a reformed dark side user, to torture or mind probe a prisoner.

“Not exactly.” Father picked up an electropin and lightly zapped Luke’s palm and fingers with it, furrowing his brow in frustration when Luke didn’t feel a thing. “I’m told that he’s asking for me. He claims he won’t talk to anyone but me.”

“Not Ben?”
“No. I thought they had the message wrong at first, but they insisted. He doesn’t want to talk to Obi-Wan. Just me.”

This made Luke feel very uneasy. “I don’t suppose you’ll let me come with you.”

Father sighed. “I need you here,” he said, the fact that he thought Luke shouldn’t even bother to ask written in his grimace. “I need you to take care of your mother.”

Luke frowned. “Just how long do you plan on being gone?”

“No long.”

“What about Ahsoka and Obi-Wan, then? They’re here...”

Father set down his tools and looked at Luke for a moment. His gaze was steady, but weary. “Please don’t argue with me,” he said at last. “You know that your mother needs you, not Obi-Wan or Ahsoka. You’re her son.”

“She needs you.”

“And I’ll be back. I said it wouldn’t take long. In the meantime, I need you to stay here and look after your Mother,” he reiterated.

Luke’s unease grew, and it made him frustrated with his father. “If it’s that important, you shouldn’t be leaving. Maul can shove his demands up his—”

“Luke, stop. I’m not just going to Sunspot. I’m going...” he breathed a heavy and reluctant sigh and paused. Luke stayed very quiet. The sheer amount of sighing his father had begun to do meant something important was about to be said. “I’m going to go see Leia.”

“Really? Do you mean that?”


“Then I really want to come with you.”

With yet another heavy, put upon sigh, Father rocked back in his seat. “No.”

“I haven’t seen my own sister in four years,” said Luke. “And even then it was for one day... we’ve been separated for six years, Father. Six long years. And you won’t even let me visit? It’s not fair.”

“I know.”

“Then why?”

“It’s not a good time.”

“You’ve been saying that this entire time. It’s never going to be a good time, not while the Emperor is still around.” Luke shifted in his chair, agitated at the thought of just sitting around here, waving goodbye as Father went to see Leia, wherever she was hidden. He thought briefly of Mara’s dreams of getting her own ship and flying wherever she wanted, whenever. Her offer for him to run away with her. But that dream faded away when he remembered that he didn’t know where Leia lived. They had kept that a secret from him, “for his own good.”

“Luke, I understand your frustration. Do you think I honestly want our family to be broken apart like this? I don’t.”
“Sometimes I think that you do.”

Father stood up, abruptly, and paced away from him. They were aboard the *Twilight II*, in the area that served as Father’s workroom, and Luke thought for a moment that if he just refused to leave the ship Father would have to take him with him. No sooner had he contemplated this than Father grabbed a spare part off his work table and tossed it into the corner, where it landed with a clatter and a bang.

Father faced the wall and said, “I don’t want it to be this way.”

“You’re the one making it this way,” Luke countered, stubbornly, refusing to be fazed by the throwing of tools.

“I’m going to fix it,” Father said, turning back to him. “I’ve made a decision. I wasn’t going to tell you, I admit, but… When I come back here I’m going to bring Leia with me.”

Luke looked at him incredulously. “You are?”

“Yes.”

“Why now?” Luke asked, suspicious. His heart leapt at the thought, but this seemed like the very definition of “too good to be true.”

“Because I think you’re right. We shouldn’t be apart like this. We all need to be together. We need to be a family before it’s too late… before this destroys us.”

Luke couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He wondered if he’d dozed off and was experiencing some kind of hyper-real dream in which his father said all the right, reasonable things.

“What made you change your mind?”

Father shook his head and returned to take a seat across from Luke. “It’s not a change of mind. I’ve always thought this.”

“I don’t understand. You’ve always been telling me that we have to be apart because it’s too dangerous to be together. That this is necessary. The only way.”

“Luke.” Father put a hand on his shoulder. “Son.” He took a deep breath. “You’re almost seventeen now. You’re old enough to understand things that… perhaps… you might not have before.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Father gave his shoulder a squeeze and let go. “I felt that it was important to present a united front, to both you and your sister. So I’ve always said that your mother and I agreed on things, that we agreed that this was the best arrangement. But…”

“But?”

“I never wanted this. Any of this. I wanted us to stay together. But your mother insisted, and I made the choice to honor her wishes and split you and Leia up, even though I felt that it was wrong.”

Luke was dumbfounded. “Why are you telling me this? Just because I’m old enough? You’re telling me that you’ve kept us apart all this time even though you knew it was the wrong thing to do? Just because you were afraid to go against Mother’s wishes?”

Father shook his head. “It’s not like that.”
“Then what is it like?”

Father was silent. He picked up his tools and went to work again. This time, when he pricked the spots on Luke’s hand, Luke jumped and clenched it into a fist automatically. Father nodded in satisfaction, and closed the access panel on the prosthetic.

“The last time I refused to listen to what your mother was saying, very bad things happened. Lives were destroyed,” Father said cryptically. Luke knew he must be talking about the destruction of the Jedi Order. “I wanted to trust her judgement. It’s always been better than mine.”

To Luke, that sounded about the same as admitting that he was just afraid to go against Mother’s wishes, but he let it slide.

Luke drew his arm back and said, “Did Leia know about this? Did you tell her that it was what Mother wanted, not you?”

“No.”

“Don’t you think it would have made things easier? I mean, she wouldn’t have been so mad at you all the time.” Luke could still remember Leia’s angry proclamations that everything was Father’s fault and he knew that her refusal to speak to or cooperate with Father had been because of this. He’d thought about this every time he had seen Father in the past three years… how Leia should have been with him, but wasn’t.

“Perhaps not, but she would only have channeled all her anger at your mother, instead, and I couldn’t let that happen. Your mother is only doing what she thinks is best. She has your best interests in mind.”

“Does she?” Luke said, and his father’s sharp look was a warning. If there was one thing Father did not abide, ever, it was speaking back to Mother or speaking ill of her.

“Yes,” he said. “Everything she’s doing here with the Alliance is to make the galaxy a better place for you and your sister. You have to believe that.”


“Does she know that you’re planning on bringing Leia here?”

“No, and you have to promise me that you won’t tell her.”

Luke stifled a groan. Lying to his mother was not something he wanted to do. He wasn’t even sure that he could. He feared that if she took him aside and demanded, sternly, to know what Father was up to, he would spill everything. “I think it would be better to tell her.”

“No. She doesn’t need that kind of stress.” Father paused, then added, “You understand what’s going on, don’t you, Luke? With the nightmares she’s been having.”

“Not really,” Luke said, cagily. He had a guess, but he didn’t like to think about it.

All he knew for sure was that Mother was suffering from insomnia so bad that it had made her ill, and she complained of having too many terrible nightmares to be able to sleep. She had trouble keeping any food down and seemed to always be in the refresher being sick. She could only sleep a few minutes at a stretch, and only in the daytime.

He knew that the nightmares had something to do with Leia, but what exactly they were about
beyond that was not something his mother had shared with him. He assumed it was about Leia
dying, or being hurt somehow.

There was another thing, something about his mother that was different now. He could sense it in
the Force, but he didn’t want it to be true. Every time he got an inkling about it he pushed it aside.
*Trust in your feelings,* Ben was always saying, but he didn’t like his own feelings right now.

His father looked very tired as he said, “Your mother is pregnant Luke. She’s going to have another
baby.”

He was silent for a long stretch, and then all he could say was, “I thought so.”

Father nodded. Then, after a moment, he added, with a hopeful sort of half smile, “You’re going to
have a new sister.”

*I don’t want a new sister,* Luke thought. *I want my old sister back.*

Out loud he asked, “Is this why you’re going to get Leia?”

Father nodded. “That, and after everything that happened with Maul… well… I need to be able to
look after her myself, not trust in strangers to keep her safe. But your mother is having nightmares
that are… I don’t know how else to say it… warping her perceptions.”

“How?”

“She’s afraid that Leia will be angry over the new child. That she’ll feel like she’s being replaced.”

“She will, though,” said Luke. “I don’t need dreams to tell me that.”

“Yes, but your mother thinks she’ll do more than just be upset. She has nightmares where Leia does
things… do you see where I’m going with this? Your mother is afraid.”

“Of Leia?”

Father looked away. “Of a phantom version of Leia.”

“You don’t think there’s anything to it, do you?” Ben had spoken of Jedi having prophetic dreams,
but his mother was no Jedi, so Luke didn’t want to think it could be premonitions of the future.

“No. But I need to bring the real Leia here and banish those dreams. Once we’re all together, we
won’t have these problems anymore. Leia will love having a little sister, I’m sure of it. She won’t feel
replaced or angry and bitter if we’re all together as a family.”

Luke hoped that would be true. He regarded his father for a moment, then decided to go ahead and
ask, “Do you still have nightmares?”

Father looked surprised. But Luke had known, all throughout his earlier childhood, about his
father’s night terrors. It was one of those things he and Leia were supposed to be oblivious to, and so
they pretended not to notice. But every night his father would be up and about, exuding anxiety and
fear. Sometimes he would wake them with his screams. Luke could almost pick up the lingering
memories; images of pain and suffering. In the daytime he acted as if nothing was wrong, however,
so Luke had accepted it as something that just was a part of his father’s life, a given. During the
daytime it had never affected him the way it was affecting Mother now. At least, not that Luke had
been able to tell. But then, he’d been a child. A child who knew more than he was supposed to but
had still been in the dark about a great many things.
“Do you dream about Leia?” he prompted, when Father didn’t answer his question.

“I dream,” said Father, “of many things. I’ve learned to live with it. Your mother isn’t like me, though. She’s not accustomed to this.”

“Why is this happening now?”

“I don’t know. It may be the pregnancy. The stress. We’ve all been apart for too long; we’re becoming strangers to each other.”

“I dream about Leia sometimes. But they’re not nightmares.” In his dreams she was in a beautiful place, and there were friends there, people who made her feel loved and safe. She was still lonely at times but she was herself. He felt reassured by those dreams, as if the Force sent them to him to ease the worry and so that he did not forget about her.

“That’s good,” said Father. “You should tell your mother that. It will make her feel better.”

“But I’m not to tell her that you are bringing Leia here.”

"Not a word."

Luke wondered just what Mother thought Leia might do, and he didn’t like to think of the possibilities. It was bad enough that his mother was having nightmares that cast Leia as some kind of villain. He refused to let his imagination run with it. “What am I supposed to do while you’re gone?” he asked.

“Just make sure your mother gets some sleep. Don’t let her overwork herself. But most of all you just need to be there for her, alright? It will ease her mind to have you nearby, to know that you’re safe. She doesn’t want you to leave her side.”

Luke already knew this. Mother had made it very clear. Luke wasn’t supposed to go anywhere that took him far from the base, be it flying off-planet or leaving to go on scouting or supply missions with on Dantooine. Slipping away to go for a jog around the outskirts of the base was about as far as he got to venture, these days. And it was frustrating. Yes, he’d fallen prey to Maul, yes, he’d lost his hand. But he thought he’d fared pretty well against a dragon and a Sith lord to still be treated like a helpless child, now.

“Luke,” said Father, sensing the direction of his thoughts, “I’m very proud of you. You’ve become a very powerful and skilled fighter. I know that you can take care of yourself. I’m asking you to take care of your mother, though. And for the time being the best way you can do that is to give her peace of mind.”


“You’re a good son,” Father kept going. “A far better son than I deserve. What’s more, you’re a far better person than I am, Luke. I know you won’t disappoint me.”

“C’mon,” Luke said, awkwardly. The praise made him feel a little choked up. He tried to laugh. “If you keep talking like this I’m gonna worry that you’re not coming back.”

“I just want you to understand that I’m not leaving you behind because I doubt you,” Father said, quite seriously.

“Thank you.”
“Good.” Father clapped him on the back. “I’m glad we had this talk.” He got up and started putting his tools away.

“When are you leaving?”

“First thing in the morning,” said Father. “When I’m cleared for takeoff.”

Luke supposed he should be glad that Father was giving him that much advanced warning, but it still felt too soon. He looked down at his newly repaired hand, flexing it and watching the metal gleam in the light. He could have had synth skin put over the metal, but his father had never done that. So he didn’t either.

“I have something for Leia,” he said, suddenly. The thought came over him that she must have it, as if the stone itself pulsed in his pocket. He reached for the pale, opalescent kyber crystal as Father turned to look back at him.

“Do you carry that around with you all the time?” Father asked, curiously.

“Yes.”

Like his lightsaber, he always kept it in a hidden pocket. Except that on the rebel base these past few weeks he hadn’t needed to hide his saber, carrying it clipped to his belt instead of secreted away. But the crystal was something he always carried close to his body, a precious thing. It made him feel better.

“Son, you know that Leia doesn’t want to have anything to do with lightsabers or the Force,” Father said reluctantly. “She hasn’t been doing any training since we left Osallao.”

“I still think she should have it,” Luke said. “I found it in the cave and I knew it was meant to be hers.”

“I’m just letting you know, she’ll probably refuse.”

Luke held the crystal out insistently and said, “Well just tell her it’s a stone that reminds me of her. Or something. You don’t have to say it’s a kyber crystal.” If she hadn’t been doing any training for six years, she probably wouldn’t know the difference. Kyber crystals were very unassuming to the untrained eye, or so Ben had told him.

Father reached out for the crystal, but then hesitated, hand hovering, and said, “You could just give it to her yourself. When we get back.”

Luke shook his head. He had a very strong feeling about this. “Just take it. Who knows, maybe you’ll need a peace offering.”

Father smiled. “Good thought,” he said, and took the crystal.

“Is Luke here?”

Mara stood on the Twilight II’s gangplank, feeling awkward. She could tell that Luke wasn’t aboard his father’s ship, but she’d thought that’s where he was, and before she had been able to leave, his father had walked out. When she caught her hovering uncertainly just outside, she didn’t know what else to say.

“No,” he told her. “You just missed him, though. I think he went back to the barracks.”
“Oh. Okay. Not that I was looking for him, though. I mean, I just happened by and saw that there was someone aboard the ship, and I thought I would say hello.” Mara winced at her own deluge of words. Skywalker looked at her strangely, as if trying to figure out what was wrong with her.

“It’s just me,” he said.

“Alright. Well, goodbye, then.” She backed away, waving, and hated herself. She turned to make a run for it.

“Mara, wait a moment.”

Reluctantly, she turned back. “Yes?”

“It’s fine with me that you want to see Luke. You know that, right?”

She didn’t answer him, just stared skeptically.

Yes, he had saved her on Mirial, but she had thought that was out of obligation, or because he didn’t want Ahsoka to be sad on her account. Certainly not that he was fond of her, himself, or wanted to see her hanging around Luke.

She had a very clear memory in her head, one of him saying, in no uncertain terms, “never speak to my son again,” as if he would kill her if she did. It was years ago but it was always in the back of her mind, if not the very forefront. His disapproval of her on La’as Vinto was also quite clear. And then there had been his obvious anger when she and Luke went out on Mirial… to fall into the hands of Darth Maul. Not that she really thought that he would kill her for being involved with Luke, since he’d already had his chance to simply leave her to die. But still, nothing about any of his previous reactions said “oh I’m completely fine with everything,” to her.

“You don’t need to be afraid of me,” he said in the face of her silence. “I know you won’t betray Luke. You’ve proven yourself to me, so there’s no need to worry. Is there?”

She lifted her chin. “I’ve never been afraid of you. And I wasn’t trying to prove anything to you.”

“I know you weren’t. But, you have always been afraid of me.” He actually smiled a little as he said it, as if he found that amusing.

“I’m not afraid of anyone.”

He sighed. “I’m not trying to mock you,” he said, the smile vanishing. “There’s just no point in lying and pretending to be indifferent when I am fully aware of your fear. I can always sense others’ fear, no matter how good they are at hiding it. Call it a talent, honed over years of instilling fear in everyone I met.”

She rolled her eyes and turned away, choosing to ignore that boast. If it was a boast. His voice was flat, a bored monotone as if his intimidation skills were a tiresome subject even for him. She wondered what he was even talking about. Years of instilling fear in whom? The customers who came to his junk shop on that hind-end-of-nowhere planet he’d called home? Or was he talking about Imperial forces, now?

She put that thought aside, for the time being.

“Fine, you’re right. You do scare me,” she admitted, angry at herself for it. “But don’t congratulate yourself, it’s nothing you’ve managed to do. Credit the Emperor for always talking about you like you were the baddest thing around, when I was little.” She gazed out across the docking yard, but
then spun around to give him a defiant look, to prove just how unscary he was in reality, compared
to the Emperor’s version of him. “You think that the Emperor coddled me, that he singled me out
and went easy on me. But you’re wrong. I had good reasons to fear; he gave me reasons to fear, but
he taught me that I must never show my emotions.”

“Did he? That doesn’t sound like him. He always told me to use my emotions; that my passions
gave me strength.”

“I don’t mean that he told me in so many words not to show them,” said Mara. “He taught by
example. Fear was a dangerous thing to feel in his presence.”

“If you showed him your fear he would use it against you,” Skywalker said, with a knowing tone,
and she wondered what kind of fear he had felt that the Emperor had used against him.

She nodded slowly. “When I was very young, I remember there being other children. They all went
away eventually, all except for Faisellu. I knew they’d all died. I viewed them as failures. It was
better to have contempt for them than to fear for myself. Those who were afraid, died. I didn’t want
to die. I refused to be afraid because fear was for the weak ones, the dead ones.”

“I know,” he said, and that made her irrationally angry for a moment.

“No, you don’t,” she countered, and he raised both eyebrows in mild surprise.

What did he know? He hadn’t been raised by the Emperor. And he was part of it, part of the
Emperor’s lessons in fear and death. He had no right to pretend to understand. He probably didn’t
even have any idea that the Emperor had used him as an object lesson for her, for Faisellu, for all the
rest of the children who were gone now.

She turned her back to him again, facing out towards the base, watching the beings going about their
rebellious business.

“I remember being young, very young, and he introduced us to you,” she said. “Not you, of course,
but a hologram of you. He sat us all down together and told us that Lord Vader was away but that he
—that you—loved to kill children and if we were disobedient or disappointing, he would give us to
you.”

“That was a lie.”

“Of course it was. But at the time I had no idea that it was a lie. I didn’t know that you had run away
and didn’t want anything to do with him. I believed in Darth Vader; why wouldn’t I? I believed
everything the Emperor said. We all did. You were a bogeyman who we never saw in person but
who we feared would come back one day to devour us all. He showed us what you would do to us;
he played the security holos from the Jedi Temple. He projected the images on a large scale, so it felt
like we were there with you, with the Jedi younglings as you killed them. He wanted us to be able to
picture our own deaths.”

She heard Skywalker swear in Huttese under his breath, and she went on:

“When the other children were taken away and never came back, we thought that you killed them.
That he had taken them to you. After a while there was no one left but me and Faisellu. Faisellu was
taken away but she came back and she wasn’t the same. I never asked her what happened. And then
they came for me and I underwent my trials.”

She turned back around to face him. “So you were wrong, you know.”
“About what?”

“You told me that I would never have survived what happened to Faisellu. That she was stronger than I could ever be.” Another thing he had said to her a very long time ago, now, but that lived in her memory as crystal clear as the day he had said it.

“What exactly did he do to you?”

“I thought you knew everything about me, isn’t that what you’ve said?” she asked, archly. “You knew about my parents, you knew what kind of a life Faisellu and I lived with the Emperor, you know how he treated me and how he treated her. You know what I think and how I feel. You know everything.”

“I don’t know everything, and besides, what I might have known once could have changed.”

“You say the strangest things sometimes.” She sighed and shook her head, then closed her eyes. The memories were far away and fuzzy, half-buried by time and locked away in the part of her mind where she put things that were unpleasant to look upon.

Instead of thinking about her trials, she remembered the falling-star globe her mother had given her, she remembered taking it apart to see how it worked, and being unable to put it back together again. She remembered the viscous liquid and bits of shiny metal that had covered her hands.

“I was the falling-star globe,” she said out loud, not caring whether or not that made any sense to Skywalker. If he could be weirdly cryptic all the time, then so could she. “He tested me. They tested me, I should say. There was a man, a doctor, and droids, and I don’t remember much else, really. I was very young, I think I must have been four or five, six at the most. It was a few years before he sent me to Osallao.”

She opened her eyes. “All I remember is that I was a success. I lived, I didn’t lose my mind or my connection to the Force. The Emperor told me that I was an extraordinary little girl and that I would grow to be his treasured apprentice, that if I kept on proving myself worthy I would serve as his Hand. He was kind to me, in his own way, after that. He was very pleased with me.”

She looked at Skywalker. His face was unreadable, guarded, as it often was. He was so unlike Luke, who wore his feelings on his sleeve and his thoughts shining from his eyes.

“It was all I ever wanted for a long time,” she told him. “To be at the top of the chain, to be like you, to be without fear. The things he did to us… they didn’t make me hate him. It just made me want to prove myself to him. It taught me to despise the younglings I saw dying, because they couldn’t protect themselves, they couldn’t protect each other. I despised the children dying around me. They were failures. They lived in fear and they died afraid.”

He shook his head. “I was never without fear until I had lost everything. Then I might as well have been dead. You really don’t want to ever be like that, Mara. I know you don’t. I know what it’s like to think that you want to embrace the darkness,” he said. “I know what it’s like to live to please the Emperor and make yourself into the monster he wants you to be. But when you succeed—if you succeed—it’s worse than you could possibly imagine.”

“So you didn’t enjoy yourself? He always said you loved it. Killing all the children, I mean. I guess that was a lie, too. I guess it’s all lies, isn’t it? Everything he ever told us.”

“I’m sorry that you had to see that. I’m sorry that even after I left him he still found a way to use me to hurt others,” Skywalker said. “It’s my fault. Everything you had to go through. All the children
“That’s not true,” she said, frowning at his eagerness to scapegoat himself. “It’s not all about you. Even if the Emperor was a little obsessed with you, not everything he does comes back to you.”

Even as she said this she wasn’t entirely sure she believed it. The Emperor had been incredibly focused on Vader. She’d hated that about Palpatine, even when she had practically worshipped the ground he walked upon. She couldn’t remember the exact moment she’d come to understand that the infamous Lord Vader wasn’t actually just away all the time, but that he had escaped and that the Emperor was living under the delusion that he would return faithfully to his side. But by the time he explained that Vader had turned traitor, she had already known. She had already come to understand, little by little, that her Master’s favorite weapon was not really his anymore.

“I know it doesn’t,” Skywalker said, “But the fact remains that I wasn’t around to stop him. That’s why it’s my fault. I already knew what he was going to do and I just… left him to it.”

Mara stared at him, caught in the memories of when she was a child. She’d hated Vader. Hated him for being the spectre of fear and death and hated him for not being real, after all. For just being a man who had a wife and children and worked as a mechanic even after what she had seen him do. By the time she went to Osallao to carry out her mission she wasn’t sure which was stronger, her fear of him or hatred of him.

It had been years but the feelings came back now, as they often did when she remembered that her current life was controlled by Vader just as her old one had been lived in his shadow.

She hated that Ahsoka and Barriss had only raised her because he had demanded it of them. She hated that Ahsoka loved him so much, loved him like he was her father, or something, even though he wasn’t. He wasn’t even the same species.

She hated that she would probably never see Faisellu again and she would never be able to apologize for being so petty and cruel when they were children. She’d never get to explain that she had been afraid of weakness but she knew now that this selfish cruelty had only made her weaker, not stronger. She should have been using her strengths to protect Fai all along, she should have protected all the children who couldn’t protect themselves, she shouldn’t have let them all die and let Faisellu get hurt and she shouldn’t have been cruel and she knew that nothing she said about it mattered now but she remembered that Fai had been loyal to her, respected her, looked up to her when she didn’t deserve any of it. She wanted to tell her that it was not for nothing... but maybe it was, because she’d let Vader split them up and maybe Fai was dead now and would Mara ever even know?

She hated that he had saved her life when she failed against Maul. That it had been him, not Ahsoka, or Barriss, or even Obi-Wan Kenobi, who had picked her up off the ground and taken her home. Because now she was in his debt.

Most of all, she hated that despite everything else, she wanted so badly for Vader to like her, to approve of her, because he was Luke’s father. She hated that he was Luke’s father.

Skywalker was quiet for a long moment. She wondered if his oh-so-amazing senses that she was angry.

Finally, he said, “I shouldn’t have run away. I shouldn’t have thought that I could just hide from the Emperor and ignore everything that was still happening. If I had gone back to Coruscant and faced him, when I had the chance, instead of fleeing to Osallao and letting him solidify his hold over the galaxy, I could have stopped everything that’s happened since then. I wasn’t able go back and
change what happened before Mustafar, but I could have stopped what came after."

“Could you have? Really?” she asked, skeptical.

“I don’t know, but I should have tried. I thought that turning my back on him and not helping him was enough. But it wasn’t. I thought that I could protect my family and that would be enough. But I haven’t even managed to protect them and it’s not enough.”

“Why are you telling me all of this?”

He smiled again. “Probably,” he said, “the same reason why you’ve told me what you have. Not everyone knows what we do.”

“And what is it that we know?”

“What it’s like to be the Emperor’s favorite.”

She nodded, then looked at the duracrete beneath her feet. Had she ever been the Emperor’s favorite? Really? Or had it always been Vader?

“Anyway,” Skywalker said, after a few moments of uncomfortable silence, “weren’t you looking for Luke? I’ve got important things to do. So go ahead,” he made a shooing motion with both hands, “run along. I’m sure he’s looking for you, too.”

She fumed at the dismissive and patronizing way he phrased it, but Skywalker had already turned his back on her, climbing up into his ship. She watched him go, briefly, before turning to run along and find Luke.

It was about a week after Father had left that Luke was troubled by a bad dream that woke him with a start. Unlike his father and, more recently, his mother, Luke didn’t usually suffer from nightmares. He couldn’t quite remember the dream, or what had been so bad about it, but he woke up feeling a deep sorrow. A loss. An angry ache. It must have been a truly terrible dream… he was glad he couldn’t remember the details.

He checked his chrono and saw that it was the middle of the night, but he got up to use the refresher and get a drink of water, anyway. This would be a good time to check on Mother, too.

Mother lived in the officers’ wing of the rebel barracks. Her allotted space was not very large at all, and in fact Luke would have had more room if he’d bunked aboard the Duchess, with Ben. But she had a closet that had been cleared out to make room for a cot for Luke, and while it wasn’t strictly regulation, no one was going to tell Ambassador Amidala no. Certainly not Luke.

He exited his closet and found the lights on, and mother seated at her desk, shoulders hunched as she poured over a data pad. Her work area was covered with haphazardly strewn sheets of flimsiplast.

“Mother,” Luke said, rubbing his eyes and squinting in the harsh glare of the bunk light, “What’s all this?”

She wasn’t supposed to be working. She was on sick leave from her duties.

Mother lifted her head and turned around. She wore a pair of small reading glasses, and she removed them to look at him. “Did I wake you?” she asked.
“No.” He walked over to stand by the desk. “What are you working on?

“Oh, these are just some reports I got from Mon Mothma. I’m organizing them by sector and—”

“Isn’t that just clerical work? Why are you doing that?” he asked.

She fluttered a hand dismissively. “I need to keep busy,” she said. “I asked Mon if she had any spare work that needed doing, that I could do in my private quarters. Luckily for me, we’re completely swamped with reports like these.”

“But—”

“It’s important work,” Mother insisted. “All work for the Alliance is important. No job too small. We should all be willing to do our part, that’s what I’ve always said.”

“I’m sure it’s important. But you should be trying to get some sleep,” said Luke. He thought about having stern words with Mon Mothma. He wasn’t quite sure he was up to the task—she was almost as mythical as Mother was among the scattered rebel cells in the galaxy, and he had only spoken to her once since his arrival. He had felt rather awed by her, at the time. But she wasn’t supposed to be giving Mother work. Mother was on sick leave. Mothma must be made to understand. He was sure that this was exactly the sort of thing Father expected him to take care of.

“I can’t sleep,” Mother said. She put her glasses back on. “Perhaps later. This is restful. I find this soothing.”

“Mother…” He placed a hand on her shoulder, trying to think up a way to make her go to bed. This was incredibly hard. He had been struggling all week to make her listen to him. “When is the last time you slept?”

She tapped the screen of her datapad and seemed not to hear him.

“When is the last time you ate something? Can I get you some water?”

“She’d be lovely, dear.”

At least that was something. He suspected she was just trying to get rid of him for the few moments it took to get her some water, but he did so anyway, filling up a cup in the refresher sink. He rehearsed his next plan of attack as he did so.

She smiled up at him when he handed her the water. He looked at the dark circles around her eyes and said, “Are you hungry?”

“I’m fine,” she said, setting the water down on her desk without even taking a sip. “You should go back to bed, Luke. Don’t let me keep you up.”

He crouched down next to her chair. “Mother,” he said, trying to sound stern, “you need to take better care of yourself.”

“Don’t worry about me, Luke.”

He rocked back on his heels and sighed, then shrugged. What did Father expect from him? Miracles? Mother was as stubborn as a gundark.

“Fine, but I hope you’re not still sitting here when I get up in the morning,” he said, standing up.

She looked up at him, a smile playing at the edges of her mouth, though her eyes were tired and
ringed by dark circles. “I promise,” she said.

Luke went back to his cot, but he couldn’t sleep. He tossed and turned for a while, his mind going back to the foggy edges of partially remembered dreams. It skirted the nightmare that had woke him. He remembered a pain in his heart. He remembered electric shocks. He remembered feeling very, very alone.

He checked his chrono again after a while, and decided that enough time had passed. It was close enough to morning to just get up.

Luke always got up just before dawn to take a jog around the base. He’d managed to map out a circuit that took him around the perimeter of the base and also included a few flights of steps and some ledges where he practiced his Force leaps. When the sky began to blush pink at the edges of the world he would head out to the hill overlooking the river, near the bilba grove, and there he would watch the sunrise with Mara. It was a ritual that was only a couple of weeks old, but he had quickly grown to cherish it. The base was quiet in the pre-dawn and the Dantooine sunrise was a beautiful thing to behold. But most of all, it was the time spent alone with Mara outside of the base that he loved.

Mother was still at her desk, but that didn’t surprise him. He hadn’t really expected her to keep that promise, after all. But she was sleeping, her head cradled in her arms atop the desk, a pile of flimsiplast readouts cast askew underneath her. He didn’t want to disturb her precious few moments of rest, so he didn’t try to get her up to move her to her bed. Instead he just put a finger to his lips when Artoo made a questioning beep, and slipped out the door.

He did his morning circuit twice over before the sky began to lighten, then he ran a few laps up and down the docking yard for good measure, before his usual time to head out to the river came. When he got to their spot he sat and waited for Mara. The birds she liked so much were already chirping up in their trees. They always flocked to her, and she had begun to sneak food out to them in her pockets, though she really shouldn’t because supplies were tight on the Alliance base. The birds seemed to like crumbled up ration sticks the best.

Mara was late that morning. He kept looking for her, but then decided that this was as good a time as any to meditate and work on being patient. Ben always chided him for being impatient, restless, and not enjoying long meditations.

When Mara did finally appear, he knew something was wrong. He could sense her coming towards him through the Force, currents of anxiety and dread flowing through her. She walked up behind him quietly and just stood there for a few moments.

“You missed it,” he said, opening his eyes. The sun had already risen. The day had begun. The morning breakfast bell would soon sound from the mess hall.

“Luke…” she said, miserably. “I don’t… I don’t know how to tell you this.”

He got up, turned around, put his back to the morning sun, and looked at her. She stood holding her elbow, a habit she still had even though her arm was all healed. “What is it?” he asked, not wanting to know, but thinking he knew anyway.

“A special broadcast is airing on the Imperial holonews,” Mara said, her voice lifeless. The breeze blew a few strands of hair across her face. They clung to her lips as she struggled to get out the words: “Ahsoka got a summons about it from command… I wasn’t supposed to know, but I overheard… it. I think… you probably shouldn’t watch it. But… it’s about your father.”
“What are they saying?”

She just looked at him sadly, then reached out to touch his arm. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

Luke felt lightheaded. He walked past her slowly, then broke out into a run. *Mother,* he thought. If they summoned Ahsoka they probably pinged Mother’s comm as well. All he could think about in that moment was his mother. It was the only thought that made him move, gave him something to think and feel that wasn’t utter helplessness, confusion… anger.

When he got back to base it was bustling. Everyone was up and about and whispering amongst themselves. … *Skywalker… I heard… dead… killed by…*

He keyed in the code to enter the bunkroom and found his mother still asleep, though at some point she had left her desk and fallen into bed. She was still fully dressed and lying on top of the blanket, but at least she had gone to bed.

Her comm was blinking, and Luke picked it up. There was an urgent message to convene with the Alliance leaders in the briefing room, regarding a “development.” Luke stood there, holding the comm, looking at the scroll of text. It was a rote message, one sent to everyone above a certain rank. He marveled at it. At the insensitivity of it. It swallowed up all his other thoughts, blurred them out. *Don’t they know,* he thought, *how cruel it would have been?* How cruel for her to walk into the briefing room all unknowing and see the news play out like it was someone else’s husband.

Someone else’s father.

He realized suddenly that he had accidentally crushed the comm unit in his mechanical hand. It sputtered and fizzled in his fist. The grip was off, he thought. The hand needed to be recalibrated. Once Father was back, he would have to fix it for Luke. He was good at fixing things and he would have the hand working right again in short order.

Luke realized a moment later how wrong he was.

Padmé was dreaming the dream again.

The one in the garden.

Anakin wasn’t there, not at all, not even in the beginning. She looked for him, but he was already gone.

The flowers were there, blood red stems rooted in ashen mud. It was the only way she knew he had ever been.

Leia’s castles stood tall, casting long shadows across the ground. Their builder was nowhere to be found.

She looked down and her arms were empty.

“*Mother,* said Luke, with a hand on her arm. “Don’t you think you should rest?”

Padmé awoke, opening her eyes to see Luke sitting on the floor next to her bed. His head rested on the edge of the mattress, and he had reached out a hand to hold hers. She thought, for a moment, that he was sleeping, until he turned his head and looked at her. There were tears on his face.

“Luke? What’s wrong?”
He just squeezed her hand.  

She already knew what he was going to say. 

Obi-Wan stood alone. 

He reached out into the Force, again, searching for a hint of a sense of Anakin. 

But there was nothing. 

He reached out to Yoda, but there was no comfort there. Only platitudes about acceptance. He knew them all by heart, already. 

He listened for Qui-Gon’s voice. There was nothing but silence. 

Finally, he felt a hand on his shoulder, and he opened his eyes. 

It was Ahsoka. She stood beside him quietly for a few moments, each of them alone in their thoughts but together in their sorrow. Rejoice. Mourn them do not, miss them do not, Obi-Wan thought, wondering how he could keep on trying to do it again and again and again. 

Ahsoka said, “I keep asking myself, why? Why did he leave us out of it? Why did he go there alone?” 

Obi-Wan had been asking himself those same questions. He didn’t have any answers. 

“We should have been there. We should have all been together,” said Ahsoka. 

Obi-Wan had no response. 

The only one who could give any explanation was gone and had left no messages behind. 

Luke found his mother surrounded by piles of her own hair. She stood in the middle of her quarters, holding a vibroshears in one hand, and looked at him. Half of her head was already bald. She had been facing her statue of Shiraya, not into a mirror. 

“What are you doing?” 

“It’s tradition,” she said over the soft hum of the shears. 

“Tradition? Where? What?” Luke asked, frustrated. He was supposed to be taking care of her, but he didn’t know how. 

“I’ve neglected to teach you about Naboo,” Mother said. “I haven’t taught you anything. My mother would be upset.” 

Luke stepped forward and tried to take the shears from her, but she jerked it away. “No,” she said, life coming back into her voice. “I have to do it myself. It’s part of the tradition.” 

“What tradition?” 

“To shave ones’ head when in mourning,” she said, formally, as if giving a lecture on Naboo culture. “It’s where the term ‘bald widow’ comes from, to mean someone very sad. I suppose that’s not a saying you’ve heard, though, is it? I never really liked it. Seemed insensitive. ‘He’s crying like
a bald widow over losing a bet.’ Like that. You wouldn’t know the saying because I don’t use it and I’m the only person from Naboo that you know. My mother would be upset with me, for that. I should have brought you back to Naboo. It’s what I’d planned. I was going to set up a room for you by the garden.”

“Mother, please, it’s alright,” he said, interjecting the first moment he could. “Forget about that, for now. Sit down, rest—”

“Stop telling me to rest,” she said, and lifted the shears back to her head. They made a snicking noise and long tresses of brown hair fell to the floor. Some of it clung to her on the way down, resting on her shoulder, her hip. “I don’t need to rest. I need to stay busy.”

“Please, if you won’t do it for yourself at least do it for me,” Luke pleaded, resorting to begging, to manipulation, “I promised Father I would take care of you and you’re running yourself into the ground.”

“He should never have made you promise such a thing.” She lowered her arms, turning off the shears. “I’m your mother. I take care of you.”

“You can’t take care of anyone if you’re dead,” he blurted.

She blinked, once, twice, then said, “I’m not going to die and I don’t want to hear anything like that again.”


She set the shears down and stepped towards him. “Come here,” she said, holding out her arms. She hugged him, and she was shorter than him, now. She was tiny, a tiny thing, his mother. “Don’t be angry. I’m sorry.”

“I need you to take care of yourself,” he said, hugging her and feeling the sharpness of her shoulder blades. She was losing weight when she should be gaining it.

“I will,” she assured him, stroking his hair. She drew away and smiled at him, wiped the tears from his face, and asked, “I see you know about the baby. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I suppose I knew you would figure it out sooner or later… can’t hide anything from those Jedi senses.”

He didn’t bother to correct her. Even though he hadn’t been sure until Father told him outright, he had suspected, so she was right enough.

She patted his cheek and told him, “You worry about your mother too much. I’m tougher than I look, my sweet son. Trust me.”

“I’ll trust you when I see you getting some rest and eating regularly,” he said. “That’s all I’m asking you to do.”

“All right,” she said, but she had agreed before and look at her now… gaunt, hollow-eyed, and half bald, with knicks from the vibroshears on her scalp.

He needed to get a doctor on his side. Not a med droid, but a being who could be professionally firm with her and take no excuses or rationalizations. This was difficult because Mother didn’t want the news of her pregnancy getting out and didn’t want to divulge anything to anyone who didn’t have confidentiality hardwired into their programing. Barriss, he thought, was the best candidate. She had medical training in addition to Force healing skills and he knew that whenever she was on base
she lent her services to the medcenter. Luke added speaking with her to his mental to-do list. Right after gathering up all the datawork Mothma had sent to Mother and taking it back to the Rebellion leader as a not-so-subtle hint that she should find someone else to do odd jobs for her.

Maybe they shouldn’t even be on this base anymore.

All he’d wanted to do for so long was be a part of the action, to be stationed on an Alliance base and take part in missions, instead of being far away from his family and their cause, with Ben. Now here he was and he still felt useless. Perhaps more useless than ever, because his one job was to take care of his mother, and he couldn’t even do that.

None of the Jedi training he had received with Ben was useful. He couldn’t mind trick her into cooperating and all combat skills were basically garbage unless he was going to resort to trying to physically force her to eat and go to bed. *What in blazes has my life come to?* he thought. He was actually contemplating the notion of force feeding his own mother.

“Luke,” she said, concern shining from her eyes, “how are you feeling? About… your father. We haven’t really talked about it.”

Luke didn’t know how to answer that question. How did he feel about his father’s death? Sad seemed too small a word for it. Angry seemed wrong. Betrayed. That seemed right.

He felt betrayed.

He wondered if everything Father had said about going to bring Leia back had been a lie. Just a smokescreen to conceal the truth that he was planning a suicide mission.

But he didn’t tell Mother that. Instead he changed the subject, asking, “We need to talk about Leia. She’s all alone dealing with this news… that is, if she even knows. It depends on where you sent her.”

Mother’s eyes clouded and she looked away. She turned and went to sit down. “She’s not alone,” she said, as he came to sit next to her. “She has good caretakers.”

“How is she?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“You must. You can’t keep me in the dark like a child anymore. You have to trust me.”

“Luke, if I tell you, I know you’re going to want to run off and find her.”

“I just want to know. I promise you that I’m going to stay with you.”

“But—”

“Please, tell me.”

She sighed and put a hand to her forehead. Then, “Alderaan. We sent her to live with the Organas on Alderaan.”

“Alderaan,” he echoed in disbelief. He had to take a moment to process this. It was far from what he had expected, though in retrospect, it fit with the visions and dreams he had experienced of her. “That’s in the Inner Core; the heart of the Empire,” he finally said. “I thought you sent her somewhere *safe.*”
“It’s the safest place for her,” Mother said staunchly. “The Organas are good people, very old and dear friends of mine. And sometimes the best place to hide is in plain sight. She’s safer there than on some lawless backwater planet where she might get sold into slavery or Caraya knows what else.”

Like the lawless backwater planets Luke had been travelling between for the past six years? He shook his head. “I suppose, but, if she is discovered that will put the whole Rebel Alliance in jeopardy as well.”

He knew that for years Bail Organa had managed to walk the thin tightrope between being one of the founding members of the Alliance and a member of the Imperial Senate. He had since retired and appointed his daughter Astreia as his replacement in the Senate. They were both heavily involved in the Alliance right under the Empire’s nose and now that Luke knew they were harboring Leia as well, he marveled at the fragile deceptions that held everything together.

“When will you be going to see her?” he asked. The thought of Leia dealing with their father’s death without them made him sick, even if she did have kind caretakers.

“Eventually,” she said, and he didn’t like the sound of that.

“Before or after the baby is born?” he asked, cutting to the point.

She hung her head. “I don’t know, Luke.”

“I was thinking that perhaps you should join Leia for the time being,” he ventured. “Take a break from the Alliance. When is the last time you had a vacation?”

“Three years ago,” she said. “The summer I spent with your father and Leia on the beach. That seems like a lifetime ago.” She looked haunted by the memory.

“Maybe you should go to Alderaan until the baby comes.”

“No.” She shook her head. “Leia is one thing, but I couldn’t stay hidden on Alderaan for long. I’m too recognizable. I’ve been the face of the Alliance’s recruitment propaganda for years.”

He had to concede that that was true.

It was frustrating.

His father had left him in a maze filled with dead ends and no map to guide him.
Sister

I have lost my children
I have lost my love
I just sit in silence
Let the pictures soak
Out of televisions [x]

Padmé’s youngest child was born at sunrise.

She was born far too early.

She spent the first months of her life outside the womb in an incubation chamber in the Dantooine medcenter. They hadn’t had the proper equipment on hand but Ahsoka and Obi-Wan had smuggled in a state of the art nursery unit stolen from an Imperial hospital.


There was Caraya, goddess of spring and fertility, whose symbol was the Full Moon.

Lashaya, the goddess of summertime, whose symbol was the Rising Sun.

Shiraya, goddess of autumn and wisdom, whose symbol was the Crescent Moon.

And finally; Maraya, the goddess of winter and death, whose symbol was the New Moon; nothingness, a blank sky.

Padmé had been born under the autumn moon and all her life had been a follower of Shiraya, though she followed more out of respect for Naboo tradition than a belief in old religions. She was a progressive, a politician, a woman of the galaxy. But she was also a Naberrie of Naboo and she still had her treasured Shiraya statues with her.

They were her second set. Her first set had been abandoned in her Coruscant apartment when she left for Mustafar and never came back. Anakin had presented her with a second set as a gift when they lived on Osallao, to commemorate moving into their second home there. She could remember the day he had given them to her; how proud he’d been of himself for finding them, telling her how he’d had to go all the way to Shalla City to find a shop that had them. She remembered his smile, his kisses, as he picked her up, spun her around, and put her feet back down on the steps leading up to the front door. She remembered the empty rooms of their new house and how the twins had run up and down the stairs shouting to each other about how big it was. How beautiful.

All of her children had been born under the sign of Lashaya. She had never given Leia statues of her goddess, though. Her mother would have been upset that she let the tradition slide. Perhaps one day she would fix that.

She sang old Naboo lullabies to Lashmina, even through the transparisteel walls of the chamber. These were dark and strange songs, about poisonings and sorrow, but that was Naboo for you. Her
people loved a good song about poison, or rhymes about the political machinations of the noble houses of generations gone by. Assassination plots and stolen children.

When Lashmina was finally able to leave the incubation chamber, she was a fretful, colicky baby who cried in the night; great choking sobs and screams that kept everyone nearby awake.

A hidden military base was no place for a baby, but no one dared to tell her family that she should be sent away. Her mother was viciously protective of her, allowing only a select few people to hold the child. For a long while Padmé could not bear to let the baby leave her sight. She slept only when the baby slept.

Padmé did not dream anymore, though she often woke thinking that, somehow, Anakin was lying beside her. But he wasn’t. He wasn’t there. He had gone away without even saying goodbye. “I’ll return soon, my love,” is what he’d said, kissing her forehead, lying to her.

She wondered what Lashmina dreamt, as she stood looking down at her child. Her small eyes moved rapidly beneath closed lids while she lay in her small crib in the corner of Padmé’s quarters. What do you see?

Luke rarely called his new sister by her full name. He had many little nicknames for her, like Mina, or Mini, or Shmi-shmi. She laughed with delight when he floated her toys for her, making them dance or fly or act out little puppet shows seemingly on their own. She especially loved when, on occasion, he lifted her up in the air and flew her around the room like a spaceship. But that made Padmé’s heart stop and she told Luke not to do it.

Lashmina cried heartily if neither Padmé nor Luke were present, with the exception of Mara. She liked Mara very much. It was, Padmé thought, because the girl could sing all the Naboo lullabies just the way Lashmina liked and lull her into a deep sleep. Mara knew the songs already. Padmé didn’t even have to teach her the words. It was uncanny.

Ahsoka said that the lullabies of Shili would help the poor child sleep better. Nothing like a good little ditty about hunting an akul to give a child sweet dreams, she said. Not like those dreary, spooky Naboo songs. But Lashmina seemed to prove her wrong. Nothing could make the youngest Skywalker sleep through the night.

When Lashmina was only a few months old, they had to pack up and move from the base on Dantooine. They received reports that the base on Atollon had been attacked. Destroyed. Though some had managed to escape, many lives were lost, along with supplies, equipment, weapons, artillery, and spaceships. It was a hard blow that Padmé knew would set them back by years.

She wept for them, as she had been weeping all her life, it seemed. Alone in her room where no one else could see.

The leaders of the Alliance knew that the Dantooine base would soon be targeted as well. If the Empire successfully interrogated prisoners or decrypted data files, they would be able to find it.

It had been a mad scramble to clear the base, to find a new place for everyone to flee to, but finally they had settled on a small forest moon that orbited the gas giant of Yavin. It was one of four moons that clung to the planet, and so it was called, simply, Yavin IV.

They established their new base inside of a great pyramid, an ancient temple left behind by the Massassi warriors, long ago. The Massassi were extinct but their temple had stood for 5,000 years and now it was the refuge of the Alliance. The survivors of the raid on Atollon joined the group from Dantooine and they built their barracks and mess halls and briefing rooms and hangar bays inside the
many layers of the Great Temple. There they hoped they could stay secret and safe under the thick green canopy of the jungle moon.

Luke looked at their new home and said, “As long as there’s no dragon,” and chuckled. Lashmina, perched on his shoulders, laughed because her brother was laughing. She loved to sit on Luke’s back, her tiny fists balled up in his hair like it was the reigns of a faithful steed.

After they were settled on Yavin IV, Padmé went to visit Leia. Leaving Lashmina behind was one of the hardest things she had ever done. But she could not, would not risk taking the baby with her. She still remembered the dreams she’d had when she was pregnant, like a warning whisper in her ear to be careful of Leia. Her daughter.

Still, she looked into Leia’s eyes and almost told her the truth.

_I’ll tell her if she agrees to come back with me_, Padmé thought.

But Leia hadn’t wanted to come back. “No,” she said. “I don’t think that I do. I think that I would rather stay here.”

She looked at her mother like a stranger.

Padmé could not tell her secrets to a stranger.

She touched her face and stroked her hair, the tresses slipping through her fingers as Leia turned her head away. Padmé told her to stay safe. Maybe one day they could put this all behind them.

“Goodbye,” Leia said politely as Padmé left. “When you see Luke, tell him that I am quite happy here. The Organas are my family now and I am doing very well. He’ll be glad to hear that, I’m sure.”

Padmé didn’t know if those words were meant to hurt or to reassure.

But that’s what she told Luke when she returned and she saw the disappointment in his eyes. He had hoped, he had expected, Leia to return with her. To join them on Yavin IV.

She wondered how everything had become so wrong. How things that had once seemed so clear were all fog and shadows in an endless maze of dead ends. How all her son had in life was disappointment after disappointment. How he still managed to hope, despite it all. Maybe that’s why Lashmina seemed to love her brother most.

Lashmina grew to be a quiet toddler. She had dark golden curls and blue eyes that always seemed to be looking at things that weren’t there. (Unless Luke was around, then of course, she only had eyes for him.) But she rarely spoke. It worried Padmé that her speech development was far behind what Luke and Leia’s had been. By the time she was two all she said was “Woo” (which meant Luke) “Ma” (which meant everyone else) and “dada,” which she said when she stared into nothingness and chased after shadows.

Padmé wondered if this delayed development was due to the difficult pregnancy, the premature birth, or if it was just because Lashmina didn’t have other toddlers her age to play and babble with. Most people were expected to leave their children at home when they went off to join the Rebel Alliance.

She had tried to do that. See how well it turned out, she thought bitterly. And again, she thought of how disappointed her mother would be in her if she could see what a mess she’d made of everything.

Frankly, she would give anything just to see her mother again, even if it was for her to tell her that
she had done everything wrong. And Padmé had no doubt that Jobal would. Her mother had always spoken her mind. Sola, too. They’d been supportive of her, of course, but they never quite understood Padmé’s drive for a larger life, or her passion for public service. Not when it put her in danger or prevented her from having a normal personal life… or their definition of normal, anyway.

She’d been a queen and a senator and they had still asked her when she was going to settle down and raise a family. That had bothered her so much when she was young. Jobal had asked her that even when she was already secretly married and Padmé had said that she just hadn’t found The One yet. She thought it was funny at the time. Oh what a laugh she’d have when she finally revealed the truth to her family, after the war, when she could bring Anakin back around home again and say “Remember him? That Jedi bodyguard you loved to tease me about? Isn’t he handsome? What a catch. Are you satisfied now?”

But the war had never ended, and that time had never come.

“Mara Jade. I’m surprised to find you here.”

Mara looked up at the young woman who stood before her, hand on hip. The other hand held a blaster lazily at her side. Mara frowned. There was something familiar about her.

“Fai?” she said, only half believing her eyes. Her senses told her that this couldn’t be Faisellu, though. She did not recognize her in the Force though the girl looked like a grown up version of her.

Her eyes were different, too. They regarded Mara coolly, a half smile on her face as she nodded.

Mara stood up. She had been sitting off to the side of the battle simulations range, cleaning her blaster, when the shadow of this seeming-stranger had fallen across her. She put her blaster in its holster against her leg and stared back into those eyes, which she remembered as dark pools full of the whispered memories of death and loss, eyes which had always given her the chills when nothing else did. There was nothing of that now.

What should she do? Hug her? Clap her on the back? Shake her hand?

“I can’t believe it,” she said, her hands dangling at her sides. “Is it really you? How long have you been here?”

“Since yesterday,” said Faisellu. “I came in with a group of new recruits on the transport from Ord Mantell. Had no idea I’d find you here, though.”

“Why not?” Mara asked, still feeling off kilter. She’d thought about reuniting with Faisellu for years, had thought of all sorts of thing to say, but she couldn’t think of any of them now.

Faisellu shrugged, then turned away. She walked over to one of the shooting stations and busied herself selecting a targeting scenario. “Never thought you’d convert to the rebel cause.” She looked back over her shoulder. “Unless you’re a spy? A double agent? No, don’t tell me, I don’t want to know.”

Mara walked up to stand beside her, watching as the battle simulation brought up a mock scenario. Holographic stormtroopers began to charge towards Faisellu and she brought up her blaster, firing away in rapid succession.
“It’s not like that,” Mara said.

“I just can’t imagine you siding against the Emperor. You were always so loyal.”

“A lot has changed.”

“Sure,” replied Faisellu, unblinking as she felled wave after wave of stormtroopers. Mara was impressed and for a moment just watched them fall, marveling at what a sure shot Fai had become.

“It has,” she said. “Everything’s different. Anyway, I haven’t seen you in nearly ten years. What have you been doing? Where have you been?”

“I’ve been with my mother,” said Faisellu. “Of course.”

“Of course,” Mara echoed, as the simulation ended, bodies strewn across the mock battlefield fading and disappearing. “Is she here?”

“No. She didn’t agree with me running off to join the rebellion,” Fai told her. She moved to the side and motioned towards the shooting station, raising her eyebrows to indicate Mara could have a turn.

Mara shook her hand and waved her hand. She’d already run through a few simulations that morning, and had been about to leave when Faisellu appeared.

“No?” Faisellu said. “Sure you don’t want to beat my score? You really have changed if you don’t want to show me up. Or are you worried you won’t do as well?”

Mara rolled her eyes, but couldn’t help a smile. The years had made Fai over into a completely different person, she marveled. Well, that was a good thing. The girl she’d known had been timid and subservient, a person with no concept of self-worth. Maybe having a mother after all had given her a new perspective on life.

“Alright,” said Mara. “If you insist.”

She pulled up the same simulation Faisellu had just run, and unhooked her blaster from its holster. “So,” she said, “why did you run off to join the Rebellion?”

“Same reason everyone does,” answered Faisellu. “I hate the Emperor.”

“I’m not sure that’s why everyone does it,” The simulation came on and Mara lifted her blaster. She pulled the trigger and watched the holographic bodies fly. She aimed her shots at a troop transport in the background and turned one corner of her mouth up in satisfaction as it exploded, her kill counter in the corner skyrocketing.

“That’s not why you’ve done it, is it?” Faisellu asked.

“I didn’t run off,” said Mara. “I’ve always been here.”

“Are you still with the Skywalkers? The ones who are still alive, anyway…”

“In a way,” said Mara, breezily shooting round after blaster round into the simulator. She’d been mowing through simulators for years and could, she felt, do it in her sleep. Just using the Force to guide her. “I have a Jedi Master,” she said. “Two of them, really, though one doesn’t do much fighting these days. But they’ve been training me.”

“Jedi Masters,” Faisellu said, and there was disdain evident in her voice.
Mara turned to her as the simulation ended. “Your mother was a Jedi,” she pointed out.

Faisellu gazed at the report screen. “Impressive,” she said. “Guess I shouldn’t be surprised. You’re still better at me than everything.”

“I spend a lot of time down here,” said Mara, dismissively. “I have these things memorized.”

“No need to downplay it. I haven’t developed any delusions that I could best you at anything,” said Faisellu. “And yes, my mother was a Jedi. She never gave up on trying to get me to reconnect with the Force, if you’re wondering that. I can see that you are.”

“I wasn’t.”

“Sure.” Faisellu abandoned the shooting station, walking away from Mara. She wondered if she was meant to follow. She did anyway.

“I was going to head to the mess hall for some lunch,” she said.

“Alright,” Faisellu said, shrugging. “If you want.”

“I, um… Luke will probably be there, just so you know.”

“Who?” Faisellu said airily, but Mara didn’t buy her ignorance for an instant.


“I don’t spend a lot of time thinking about the Skywalker twins,” said Faisellu, an answer to a question Mara hadn’t asked. “But yes, I remember them both. They were our mission.” She gave Mara a sidelong glance. “Are they still your mission?”

“No,” said Mara. “I don’t have a mission anymore. I mean, I go with Ahsoka on missions, but I told you, it’s not like that anymore. I’m not in the Emperor’s service.”

“Just seems odd, that’s all,” Faisellu observed as they navigated through crowded corridors on their way to the mess hall. “Ten whole years have passed and you haven’t changed a bit, really. I find you shadowing Luke Skywalker, still.”

Mara was sure now that Faisellu was being purposefully antagonistic, despite the casual way she spoke. She barely even looked at Mara, instead tiling her head up and away.

“I’m not shadowing him,” she retorted. “We’re friends.”

“Right. Make friends with the Skywalkers: that was your mission. Seems like you’re still at it to me. You were always a bit more obsessed with Luke than with his sister. So forgive me if I have to laugh a bit at the idea that you’re just conveniently hanging around him, still.”

Mara pressed her lips together and didn’t say a word. That’s not what it was like. Not at all. And yet, Faisellu’s words found their mark and they stung. “You’ve gotten mean,” she said. “Good for you. Nice change from being a pathetic doormat who couldn’t wait to die for me.”

Faisellu stopped walking and laughed. “I was wondering when the old Mara would come out,” she said.

“I don’t want to fight with you,” Mara said, taking a step back. She inhaled a slow, calming breath. “I’m sorry. I was hoping we could have a nice talk. Catch up.”
Faisellu shrugged. “I thought that’s what we were doing.” She resumed walking and Mara followed, feeling a long dormant but familiar annoyance at that fact.

This meeting was not going at all like she’d thought it would.

She wasn’t sure what she pictured. Faisellu being just the same as she had been as a child, perhaps. Spooky and quiet, but deferential to her. Loyal to a fault. Mara felt a little foolish to have expected nothing to change.

They entered the mess hall and queued up in a line to receive carefully portioned ladled of different colored slop. A mound of green, a mound of white, and a thin slab of nerf meat was on the menu that day. Mara glanced around for Luke, looking to the table where they usually sat together, but he wasn’t there. She wondered what was keeping him, but thought that perhaps it was for the best. Faisellu was in a punchy mood and seemed especially bitter when it came to the subject of Luke. That didn’t seem altogether fair, considering Luke had never been anything but kind to Faisellu, as far as Mara could remember.

As they ate, Mara made a few more valiant attempts at conversation. She talked about Ahsoka and Barriss, about the evacuation of Dantooine after Atollon had fallen, and other things. She skirted around talking about Luke, though it was hard because he had become such a central part of her life the past two years. She tried to ask more about Faisellu’s mother, but that was a subject that Fai didn’t seem interested in dwelling on.

Faisellu ate quickly, inhaling the pureed vegetables and munching through the nerf meat like she thought they would get up off the plate and run away from her. Mara poked at her own food, observing.

“I hoped we’d see each other again,” she ventured at last. Faisellu was different but that didn’t change the fact that Mara had things she must say. “I’ve wanted to apologize to you.”

Faisellu raised her eyebrows as she gulped down a bottle of blue milk. “For what?”

“Well, I’ve thought about it a lot, and I was pretty awful to you when we were kids.” Mara felt that those words were inadequate, but she felt too uncomfortable now to broach the subject of what they had both gone through at the Emperor’s hand. Of how it had changed Faisellu, stripped her of her connection to the Force. How the Emperor had labeled her worthless.

She had a feeling Faisellu didn’t want to get that personal. Not now. That was fine. It had been a lifetime ago, after all.

“I’ve had a lot of time to think about it, too,” said Faisellu. “A lot of time to think about how you and the Emperor made me feel worthless. So worthless I wasn’t even upset by it, because I didn’t have any right to be upset, because I might as well be dead.”

Mara rocked back into her seat. Okay. So maybe Faisellu did want to get that personal.

“I’m sorry,” she repeated. “I’ve regretted that. I want to make it up to you. We were sisters, of a sort. I was hoping that—”

“Sisters?” Faisellu echoed, then shook her head. “We were never sisters. That was just a ruse.”

“Was it? I mean, yes, I know. But...” Mara trailed off. Force, she thought, I’m like a simpering sentimental fool. It had seemed so clear to her, before. She and Faisellu were the last of their group of Force sensitive children that the Emperor had gathered up. The last two standing, the last ones alive, united by their orphaned status. Children of the Emperor. Sisters if not by blood then through
adversity.

Maybe she’d made that all up, she thought. Maybe she was delusional, rewriting her own history to make it less meaningless, less cold and lonely.

She gripped the plastic fork in her hand and stared down at the food on her plate. It had grown unappetizing and lukewarm, grease congealing at room temperature.

“I appreciate the apology,” said Faisellu, her voice softening. “I certainly didn’t expect one.” She sighed, pushing her empty dishes away. “Truth is I spent a lot of time thinking I had to find my way back to you. So that we could complete our mission. So you could go back to the Emperor, triumphant, somehow. But I got over that.”

“What happened?”

“I realized I was a person. And that my life didn’t have to revolve around you.”

“That’s good. That’s good, Fai. I’m glad.”

Faisellu laughed, shaking her head a little and looking away, out over the rest of the tables. At the Alliance recruits, new and old, scarfing down their midday meals. “Yeah, it was a good thing. So imagine my surprise when I set out to join the Rebellion, the one organization I was sure Mara Jade would have no business with, and here you are. Here you are, still the same, still hanging around Luke Kriffing Skywalker. It’s like I’ve gone back in time.”

“Luke has nothing to do with this,” Mara said, throwing her fork down, skewering the glob of white. Mashed turnips, by the smell of it. “This isn’t about him.”

“I’m just saying, it’s surreal. I spent years trying to get over everything that happened. I thought I’d finally put it behind me.”

“By joining the rebellion, because you hate the Emperor?”

“Yes. And don’t give me that look. He deserves to die. Do you know how much work it took to get to a point where I can say that? Out loud?”

“I’m not disagreeing. I just don’t know why I’m not supposed to be here, too.”

“Because you don’t hate the Emperor. He lifted you up while he was striking the rest of us down.”

“He killed my parents and brainwashed me,” Mara said, incredulously. “And he only ‘lifted me up’ because I happened to be especially resilient. I have every reason to hate him.”

“But do you?” Faisellu looked skeptical.

Mara opened her mouth to respond, but at that moment her comm unit went off. She grabbed it off her belt and looked down at the sender’s code. It was Luke. She glanced up at Faisellu. This was not a good time for Luke to be interjecting. He was probably just calling to tell her why he wasn’t at lunch, which she would have appreciated normally, but…

“Are you going to answer that?”

“No,” Mara said, clicking quickly to ignore. “It’s not important.”

“It’s Luke, isn’t it.”
“So what if it is.”

“You could have answered.”

“He’ll understand. I’m talking to you right now.”

“I’m honored,” Fai said, her voice thickly sarcastic. “Also, are you going to eat that or not?” She motioned towards Mara’s plate.

Mara waved her hand irritably. “No, you can have it if you want.”

Faisellu grabbed her plate without hesitation. Mara noticed that she was very thin, and wondered what kind of troubles she had been having. She wondered where she and her mother had been hiding out, what they’d been doing with themselves, but she had already tried to ask such questions and been rebuffed. It was clearly none of her business.

Mara’s comm beeped again, this time a notification that she had a message. She hit mute and shoved the comlink in her pocket.

“That’s fine,” said Faisellu. “You don’t have to excuse yourself to me. It’s none of my business, anyway. We’re not sisters, remember. We don’t owe each other anything, not even this little heart to heart.”

Mara sighed. “I get it,” she said.

“If you want a sister so bad, you should look somewhere else,” Faisellu drove home her point, relentlessly. “I don’t mean to be nasty about this, but honestly, all we have in common is a past I’d like to forget.”

“I said that I get it. But you know, now that you’re here, you’ll probably keep running into me.”

“It’s possible. It’s a pretty big base, though.”

Mara nodded. She worked to quiet the disappointment she felt. She had done all that she could do. She’d apologized. She had wanted to say more, but it all seemed pointless now. She had no sister, just like she had no parents. It was time to let that farce die.


“Sure,” said Mara, having no intention of doing any such thing. She watched as Faisellu walked away, then pulled her comlink from her pocket.

Luke had left a couple terse text messages. The first read, “Can you watch Lashmina something’s come up,” and the second just said, “Nevermind.”

Mara had a bad feeling about those messages.

She wondered if he was irritated that she hadn’t answered, but it wasn’t like to Luke to be so impatient. He must have just been in a hurry and couldn’t say more. Still. There was something about it, something dreadful, that tugged at her senses… She could feel a change rolling towards her through the Force like a wave of foreboding.
She stood up and went to find him. Even though she knew it wasn’t likely that he’d still be in his quarters, maybe whoever was watching Lashmina was there and could tell Mara where he’d went.

She was halfway there when she came across a group of beings all huddled together in the middle of the walkway, their heads bent over a pocket holoprojector held in someone’s hand. Mara drew closer, asked, “What’s going on?”

A twi’lek near to her said, “Special holonews broadcast from Coruscant. It’s on all frequencies.”

Mara had an unsettling sense of deja vu. The last time she’d seen a special broadcast from the Empire it had been very bad news, very bad news indeed. Not again, she thought, creeping closer to look over a stocky sullustan’s shoulder to see what they were all watching.

She recognized the Emperor standing on the dais immediately, but couldn’t quite place the young woman who stood beside him at first glance. She wore heavy makeup. The Emperor was going on about the glory of the Empire, meaningless political speak to rally the masses below, and Mara barely heard the words. She was looking at the girl.

It was Leia.

Mara watched the entire broadcast with mounting horror. Leia stood at the Emperor’s side, proclaiming her loyalty to him, as he made absurd declarations about appointing her his heir, of all things.

Mara felt dizzy. She leaned against the surprised twi’lek, but then backed away, making apologies. This was all some horrible joke. This wasn’t real. It couldn’t be.

For a moment she thought, Faisellu did this somehow. Because she’s mad at me. She made up some fake video as a hoax. This isn’t real, it’s not happening.

But it was.

Luke stood beside his mother and watched the holo projection emanating from the command desk. Everyone gathered around the briefing station was silent and still. Ahsoka Tano, Mon Mothma, General Dodonna, Commander Sato, Admiral Ackbar, and Obi-Wan Kenobi. Ben, as Luke still thought of him and referred to him, though when he was beside the other leaders like this, he was Obi-Wan… the last of the Jedi Masters.

Lashmina played quietly in a portable playpen in the corner. It was a somewhat absurd sight, a toddler in her plastic webbing with a collection of toys in the middle of a war room. But usually Luke or Ahsoka took care of her when Mother was busy with such matters. He’d tried to call Mara but she hadn’t answered, nor had she responded to the messages he’d left.

That wasn’t like her. But he couldn’t dwell on that now.

They watched the recording of Palpatine waving to the cheering crowd gathered outside the Imperial Palace. He stood high atop a balcony overlooking the masses below.

“Citizens of the Empire across the galaxy,” said Palpatine, raising his hands, “today is a momentous
day! As you all know, for the past 20 years we have enjoyed peace and prosperity in the aftermath of the devastating Clone War, which was waged by the Jedi and the Separatists in an attempt to seize control of the galaxy.

"Thankfully, those threats have passed, but in their place new threats have emerged. Many of you have heard of the so called Alliance to Restore the Republic, an organization of hate and chaos which seeks to destroy the law and order of the galaxy. Do not let their innocuous name fool you. They have no love for the esteemed Republic that gave birth to our glorious Empire. This mask of ‘freedom’ is revealed for the farce that it is, as these rebels spread war and destruction across the more vulnerable areas of the Outer Rim.

"Fear not! We are working diligently to preserve the peace and safety you all hold so dear.

"But today is not simply about reassurances that our stormtroopers—that your fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, sons and daughters who march proudly in the white of the Imperial army—are doing their part to serve you. No.

"My friends, my citizens, I grow old. Do not worry, for I will be with you for years to come. But I am looking towards the future, to the inevitable day when the care of this glorious Empire must be transferred to younger hands.

"Today, I have gathered you together to meet the person I have selected to take my place when the time comes. This is a formal announcement, an introduction, to my heir. The Heir to the Empire. I will let her speak to you now, to introduce herself to you in her own words.”

Palpatine lowered his hands to the deafening cheers of the crowds gathered below. Leia stepped forward, her chin thrust out, and gazed down in silence while the applause subsided.

Luke held his breath, feeling horror and dread wash over him. She was small next to the Emperor, but her aura was that of a giant. The look she gave the people of Coruscant was regal, the gaze of a queen upon her subjects. Not a queen, though. An Empress.

She wore a white dress that was partially covered by a flowing black velvet cloak. Her hair was done up in elaborate braids and adorned with a silver headpiece. Her skin was painted deathly white. Her eyes were rimmed in dark makeup with sharp edges like knives and her mouth was blood red. Her upper lip was painted in and the bottom was bisected by a thick line. Overall, her face was curiously reminiscent of the queens of Naboo.

Finally, she spoke. She spoke in her best recitation voice, the one she used for poetry and school reports, the one that was stored in Artoo’s memory files. The one that Luke had listened to for years when he felt alone.

In that voice, she said:

“My name is Leia Skywalker. Some may know me as Filia Organa, a ward of the House of Organa.

“I am here today to renounce the actions of my former families.

“My father, Anakin Skywalker, was a murderer, a traitor, and a terrorist. He has been dead for two years now and I do not weep for his loss.

“My mother, Padmé Amidala, is also a traitor, a faithless opportunist who, like my father, was once cherished by our Emperor. Emperor Palpatine took both of my parents under his wing when they were young; mentoring them, encouraging them, and aiding them in their careers. They paid him back with deceit and treason.
“My father met his deserving end, but my mother still lives, spreading lies and sedition across the
galaxy.

“I renounce her. I renounce all that she stands for. I renounce the name that she gave me.

“My keepers, the Organas, are guilty of aiding and abetting the enemy. They have used the wealth
and influence of Alderaan to support the vile Rebellion that threatens to tear our galaxy apart.

“The Emperor, in his infinite wisdom, has removed Queen Breha from her office as the sovereign
ruler of Alderaan. The monarchy of Alderaan is forthwith disbanded. Dissolved. Astreia Organa,
Princess of Alderaan and representative to the Imperial Senate, along with her sister Winter, have
been detained. They are no longer Princesses of Alderaan. They have been stripped of their titles.

“In place of the royal ruling house, the Emperor has appointed Grand Admiral Thrawn to oversee
the reformation of Alderaan. A new representative to the senate has been appointed in Astreia
Organa’s stead.

“Alderaan has long been the soul of the Empire, while Coruscant beats at its heart. I have great love
for Alderaan. I share the Emperor’s sadness that the leaders of this great Imperial planet have chosen
to betray him. The corruption of Alderaan runs deep, it runs to the planet’s very core. It is for that
reason that the Emperor, in his wisdom, has stationed a state of the art battle station in orbit around
Alderaan. For the time being, all travel in and out of Alderaan has been halted. This is necessary
while we work to root out the rot of rebellion which plagues this once peaceful society. It is our hope
that one day we may restore Alderaan as an honored and cherished member of the Empire.

“I stand before you now, by the side of Emperor Palpatine, as his heir. I have shunned the name of
my treacherous parents, I reject the false ideals of the House of Organa, and so it is now that I take
the name Vestre Palpatine.

“With my faithful service to my new father, I hope to repay him for years of betrayal by my parents,
who could have stood by his side as I do now had they remained faithful. Our Emperor is a merciful
and forgiving man. His love for my parents was paid back with venom and heartache, yet he has
raised me up before you now, proving his steadfast nature. I can only hope to be worthy of the honor
he has bestowed upon me.”

“Long Live the Emperor.”

The crowds erupted in a frenzy of cheers, and the recording went dead.

Mother stood with her face in her hands. Ben stroked his beard thoughtfully, his eyes guarded.
Ahsoka’s lekku twitched angrily and her hands were balled into fists.

Luke put an arm around Mother’s shoulders. He waited for someone to speak.

Finally, Mon Mothma dared to break the tense silence. “The blockade around Alderaan and the
detention of many of our rebel operatives there is, needless to say, a grave development. It has put us
in great danger. If anyone reveals the location of the secret base, we could see another Atollon, only
this time on a grander scale.”

“Do you think that we need to relocate?” asked General Dodonna.

“Where? Where would we go? We have already been chased around the galaxy, driven from our
other bases,” objected Commander Sato bitterly. He had been in charge of Phoenix Squadron, which
had been stationed, and decimated, on Atollon.
“We will send out scouts to find possibilities for a new location,” said Ackbar. “But in the meantime we must stay here and place our hopes in the ability of our Alderaanian comrades to withstand interrogation.”

Luke shook his head. He saw what they were all doing. They were completely ignoring the huge bantha in the room that was Leia’s role in all of this.

“What will be done to save Leia?” he asked, calmly.

They all stared at him, except for Ben, who put a hand to his forehead and looked down.

“It is a good thing,” said Mothma slowly, “that your sister was not made privy to classified information regarding the Alliance. It is my understanding that she will not be able to compromise us.”

“Yes, but,” Luke said stubbornly, “what are we going to do to rescue her?”

“Young Skywalker,” replied Ackbar, “I think that what we have seen today indicates that your sister has no wish to be saved.”

“We can’t leave her with the Emperor,” Ahsoka objected. “That’s the daughter of two of the Alliance’s most famous members. Padmé is known all across the galaxy. Anakin died as a highly publicized hero. This is obviously an effort on Palpatine’s part to demoralize the Rebellion by stealing our children and setting them against us. All that talk about treachery and faithlessness… it’s clear Palpatine wrote all of that himself. Or one of his slimy little sycophants. Someone. But not Leia. Why would Leia say any of that? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“I do agree that her recitation lacked a certain amount of… conviction,” mused Dodonna. “But I must defer this to those here who actually knew Leia Skywalker.” He glanced pointedly at Padmé.

“I feared this,” Mother murmured. “This is what my dreams were warning me about all along.”

“What?” Luke blurted, barely believing his ears. “You can’t be serious. Do you actually think Leia is doing this willingly?”

“No,” said Mother, then hesitated and said, “yes. Maybe. I don’t know. I just don’t know.”

“I don’t believe this. What about you?” He turned to Ben.

Ben sighed heavily. “It has been many years since I last saw your sister. I hate to say it, but she was filled with a great deal of anger… towards her father in particular. She felt betrayed by the separation of your family. I worried for her, then. I was told that she had improved greatly under the care of the Organas, but…” he shrugged, “I cannot say for myself.”

Luke scoffed. “Even if Leia were angry, which she had a right to be, she would never join the Emperor. This is ridiculous.”

“Luke,” said Mother softly. “You haven’t seen your sister in years. She may not be the person your remember.”

“And whose fault is that?” he snapped, and immediately regretted it, because of the look of sadness and guilt in his mother’s eyes. “I’m sorry,” he said, “It’s just… I can’t believe you’re all ready to give up on her.”

“We’re not giving up on her,” said Ahsoka. “I for one agree with Luke. The girl I saw on that holo
recording was not the proud new acolyte of the Emperor but a child forced to parrot some vile, self sabotaging azul-dung someone else wrote for her. I don’t even need to know Leia personally to see that.”

Ben raised an eyebrow. Mothma and the others exchanged glances.

“Well,” said Mothma finally, “the fact remains that Leia is on Coruscant, at the heart of the Empire, and willingly there or not, she does not possess information that could be used against us. I am sorry, Luke, for what has happened to your family. Your father was…” she winced at the mention of Anakin, whom she had never liked, “…one of our bravest and most effective fighters, whose loss we still feel to this day. And Padmé,” she nodded to mother, “you are not only one of my oldest allies, but a dear friend of mine. I am not unsympathetic.”

“But you’re not going to do anything to help us,” said Luke flatly.

“Finding a new base in case this one becomes compromised is our top priority,” said Mothma. “Along with the extraction of alliance members from Alderaan.”

Mother lifted her head and squared her shoulders. “Regardless of her motivations, or desires, I do not want to let my daughter remain in the clutches of that monster. But I understand that we cannot spare the personnel to mount a rescue. We must focus our attention on the evacuation of our people from Alderaan.”

Luke turned and stormed out of the briefing room without another word. Lashmina called after him, “Woo!” but he could not spare a smile for her right now.

He couldn’t believe it. He just couldn’t believe it. Leia was in the hands of Palpatine and they just stood there talking about Alderaan and debating over whether Leia wanted to be where she was or not.

He expected that from the others, but not from Ben, and certainly not from Mother.

Mara came swooping up behind him as he walked in no particular direction, lost to his angry musings. “Have you seen it?” she said.

“Yes,” he said, not pausing. “I’ve just come from a private screening with the Alliance’s finest.”

She fell in step beside him. “Well?”

“And no one cares,” he said. “No one is going to do anything about it.”

“What are you going to do?” she asked.

“I’m going to save my sister,” he declared. “No one else is going to do it. So I guess it’s up to me now.”

“How are you going to do it?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know,” he admitted. He hadn’t exactly had time to form a plan. He stopped, suddenly, and looked at Mara. Her questions had come one after the other, short and to the point. She stared back at him steadily, and he asked, “I take it you’ve seen it too. What do you think?”

“Well,” she said, folding her hands in front of her, “getting to Coruscant will be very difficult. The security in that system is bound to be extremely tight. Still, I like our chances better than Alderaan
right now. Sounds like they’re most concerned with keeping that place locked down. The shift of troops might mean there’s an opening somewhere. And then once we’re on Coruscant, we need to somehow get into the Imperial Palace. Luckily, I grew up there, and if they haven’t made any drastic changes, I may have a few ideas.”

“I meant, what do you think about Leia? Do you think she’s gone over to the Emperor’s side for real?”

“Oh.” Mara paused, furrowing her brow. “Does it matter?”

“No,” said Luke. “She’s my sister. I would go save her either way. But for the record, I don’t think she’s there of her own free will. The Emperor is a mass murderer and a liar and Leia knows it. She would never side with him.”

Mara shrugged one shoulder and grabbed her elbow. “The Emperor can be very persuasive.”

Luke took her hand. “I know you once believed in him, but that’s different. He raised you, he was the only thing you knew until you got free of him. Leia knows better. He represents everything she hates; injustice, deception, murder. I can’t see her willingly siding with him. I just can’t.”

Mara squeezed his hand. “But it doesn’t matter. Either way. I knew when I saw it that you would be going after her.”

Luke laughed, a mirthless sound, and said, “Until this happened I was thinking about officially enrolling in the Alliance.” He started to walk again, Mara beside him, her hand still in his. “You know, because Mother seemed to be doing better, and Lashmina was getting older. I had this whole speech planned out about how I was a drain on the Alliance resources and needed to do my part.”

“You’ve been doing your part,” Mara disagreed. “You have been part of the on-base duties this whole time.”

“Yeah, sanitation and kitchen duty, what a contribution. I trained to be a Jedi. I should be out there fighting the Empire.”

Mara rolled her eyes. He could feel her annoyance with him. They had had this conversation before. “You made the decision to take care of your mother and your sister,” she said. “And I know if you could go back in time two years you’d make the same decision again.”

“No,” he said. “I’d go to Alderaan and get Leia, make sure she was with us so this couldn’t happen.”

“Okay, if you could go back in time you would take care of both your sisters,” Mara said, laughing at him. “Don’t try to fool me, golden boy. I know you. You were never going to fly away to go on adventures while your family needed you. You’ll always be the one taking care of them.”

“Do I detect contempt?”

“No,” she said, tilting her head to the side. “I’m just stating the obvious. You like to talk about being a ‘Jedi’ and fighting for the greater good, but you’ll always put your family first. Even if that means staying on base doing your part for the rebellion by doing maintenance work. And don’t pretend you’re not useful because you’ve had to do a few cleaning shifts. You spend more time on mechanical duty than anything else.”

That was true. He’d spent most of the past two years working on repairing damaged ships, weapons, and droids. He was very good with all things mechanical. He’d learned from the best, after all.
But whenever he heard about Ahsoka and Mara being on a mission—a real mission off base, which required them to get in a fight, lightsabers drawn and snarling—he couldn’t help but feel like he’d wasted all his potential to sit at home and babysit.

He let out a long sigh as he thought about his youngest sister, now. If he went after Leia he’d be leaving Lashmina behind, and… well, he worried about her. She was so quiet.

“Luke,” said Mara, sensing his thoughts, “you can’t take care of everyone.”

“I know.” She was right, of course. There had to come a time when he left Mother to take care of Lashmina herself. He’d been planning on joining active duty soon, after all. This development with Leia was a change of plans, but he had already been preparing to tell Mother that he had to leave her side, soon.

“So when do we start?” Mara asked.

“You don’t have to do this with me, you know,” said Luke. “Leia’s not your sister. It’s not your fight.”

“Um, excuse me, Jedi Skywalker,” she said derisively, “but of course this is my fight.”

“I mean, it’s not. I appreciate your help, of course. But—”

“Are you being serious?” she said, and the joking went out of her tone. “Do you know what I saw when I watched that recording? I saw myself. I saw what I might have been if things had turned out differently.”

“Mara, you know that I love you, and that I trust you. But when you say something like that, it just sounds like you’re jealous that it’s Leia who has been declared the Emperor’s heir, instead of you.”

She pulled her hand from his grip, looking deeply hurt. “What I saw was terrible. I don’t want to be that person anymore. I thought you knew that.” She brushed him to the side and walked ahead of him haughtily.

“I’m sorry.” He caught up to her and pulled her around to face him. “It’s been a bad day. I didn’t mean to act suspicious. I’m sorry. You’re the only person who’s on my side. Well, you and Ahsoka. But I shouldn’t push you away.”

Mara smiled and shook her head, but then she slipped her arms around his shoulders and gave him a lingering hug. “I don’t know how anyone is supposed to stay mad at you,” she murmured into his neck. She pulled away and said, “I’m going to help you. If for nothing else, because it’s you. It’s your sister that’s in danger. And you’re my friend, so that makes it my fight.”

“Friend?” he said, pulling her in again and kissing her. “I thought I was a lot more than that.”

Someone across the way whistled and another person shouted “Get a room!” followed by mocking laughter, but he didn’t pay any attention. Living on base had made him used to other people always being around, of never having any real privacy. On base everyone knew your business, and you knew everyone else’s. It was well known around Yavin IV that Luke and Mara were an item, and there were more than a few people who believed the rumor that Lashmina was actually their lovechild. Luke didn’t care. Let them talk.

Mara kissed him back with a smile and amended, “My special sex friend.”

He blushed. “You’re terrible.”
“...Whom I love deeply and would die for. You didn’t let me finish.”

“Don’t go dying for me just yet,” he said. “You can’t die, ever, Mara. I thought you knew this.”

“Right, well then, I guess I meant to say that you are my special sex friend whom I love deeply and whose grave I will stand weeping over when I inevitably outlive you due to my immortality.”

She laughed, and he laughed with her. It was all he could do. Death had become a constant in his life. Luke had made too many friends on base who had left for a mission and never come back. Oftentimes he felt like his life was nothing more than a macabre comedy and he was the only one not laughing. But Mara found ways to make him laugh at it, somehow.

Only Mara, he thought, could have him laughing now, so soon after viewing that horrible holobroadcast. She had pulled him out of his anger over the Alliance High Command and their dismissal of Leia. Because somehow, as absurd as it was, she made him feel like maybe it was actually possible to save his sister. Maybe they could actually get into the Imperial Palace and rescue Leia. Maybe he wasn’t just making declarations he had no way of following through on.

Maybe all was not lost. Maybe everything would be alright.

They began to walk again, and Mara spoke of sneaking around the Imperial Palace as a child, of exploring its corridors and spying on Imperials “for fun.” He looked sidelong at her as she spoke, thinking about how much she had come to mean to him. She was one of the best things about his life. He hadn’t told her this yet, but he planned on marrying her. Or, well, asking her to marry him. When they were old enough. He was 18 now, going on 19, and she was still just 17. He figured that 20 was a good time to get married. That’s how old his father had been. Or 19, maybe, he couldn’t quite remember.

But that was his plan, anyway. Once he was 20, and she was 18, he was going to do the whole big get down on one knee and recite poetry deal. Maybe have Artoo nearby playing a recording of one of those kithra sonatas that she liked. The works. If you couldn’t pull out all the stops when proposing to the love of your life, when could you? He thought he had a 50/50 chance of her either falling into his arms and saying “I thought you’d never ask” or laughing him out of the base and asking him how he hadn’t realized that all her declarations of love had, clearly, been jokes.

He let his imagination run for a moment, and wondered if Mara would like the Emperor’s head on a platter as an engagement gift. He thought she might. Though she might have some lingering remnants of filial affection for Palpatine that would make such a gesture a bad move. He laughed at himself, at the absurdity of the image, but then thought, *You wouldn’t be able to kill the Emperor anyway. If Father couldn’t do it, why do you think you’ll be any different?*

That thought sobered him up quickly.

No one could kill the Emperor. His father had tried. His father had died.

Still, part of him kept fantasizing about rescuing Leia, killing the Emperor, and putting an end to the Imperial regime once and for all. And then he would propose to Mara, and she would tease him for a few moments, as was her wont, but then she would say yes. He had a picture in his mind of them all happy and together. In this picture Leia even picked up Lashmina, spun her around, and laughed.

In this picture, Father was there, smiling at them all.

Luke knew such a thing wasn’t possible. He didn’t know why he couldn’t let it go.

He would still dream of his father, sometimes. Anakin would be standing there, trying to speak to
him, but couldn’t get out the words, and Luke would awake every time with the same melancholy feeling that if only he’d been able to sleep a little longer, he’d know what his father was trying to tell him.

What was worse, sometimes his mind would play tricks on him while he was awake and he could swear that he saw his father. A glimpse here and there, out of the corner of his eye as he went about his work on base. Sometime he felt a twinge at the back of his neck and thought that if he turned around, Father would be standing there. But when he turned around there was nothing.

Mara was the only person he confided in about these sightings, because he didn’t want to hurt Mother or make her sad, and he didn’t want Ben chiding him for not letting go of the past. Mara was the only person he confided in, in general, these days.

He missed his father. He was still angry at his father for leaving. For getting himself killed. Luke wasn’t sure that he would ever learn how to let it go, even though he knew he should. He wanted, he needed to focus on the people who were still alive. His mother. Lashmina. Mara. Leia. Ben, Ahsoka, and Barriss. These were the people who comprised his family. They were not all related but they were all united. These were all the people that Anakin had left behind, when he had gone off to die alone, at the Emperor’s hand.

Luke wasn’t going to make that mistake. But he was going to save his sister. He saw this with crystal clear clarity that made him suddenly calm. He still didn’t know how he was going to pull it off, even with Mara’s help. But he knew that he would. He had to.

He had failed his sister by not fighting his way to her for long enough.
Interlude - Luminous Beings Are We

Son you're still young but your mind has grown old it seems
I've been to the moon and the stars and the go inbetweens [x]

Anakin was finally free.
Untethered.
He didn’t feel the pain anymore.
There was no time, no place, and no need in the Force.
There was no emotion. There was only peace.
He had no eyes to see, but he saw all the same. He saw himself, suspended in a tank, asleep but not unconscious.

Beyond that he saw the cold vacuum of space outside the Death Star, which was itself curiously a nexus of bustling life contained in quadanium steel. The Living Force was there, in every being that went about their perfunctory business. And yet... and yet. Darkness whispered from its core, from the massive, corrupted kyber crystal at its heart, which pulsed with the power to destroy worlds.

He saw Alderaan, floating like a jewel in the darkness, its swirls of blue and white and green radiating with life.
Farther out the planet, its neighbors, and their bright sun grew small and indistinguishable from one another. One system in a glimmering web of stars.

Between the star systems the galaxy was vast and cold and empty. And yet... and yet. Despite the incredible distance between planets and systems, the Force knit all of them together. It reached out past endless gulfs of nothingness to touch the minds and exhale through the breaths and beat in the hearts of every living thing. It was everywhere. It spread into the deepest, darkest corners, feeding on and feeding into the energy of life. Physically, this life, these beings, clung to the small rocks that circled their stars in tight spirals, but in the Force they were endless, limitless, omnipotent. The Force traveled through hyperspace, dipped out into the edges of the great beyond, and burned in the heart of the supermassive black hole that held all the celestial bodies together at the center of everything.

Looking down and around and inside and out of the galaxy was like seeing everything and nothing all at once. The troubles of the living felt strange and small. Life began, life ended, but then it began again, never ending, not truly. It was a dance. Some knew the steps better than others, but all of them danced to a single song, all the same.
He could not remain always so peaceful, so distant, so unconcerned. He had a family. They pulled him back.

He saw his children. He saw his wife. He saw Obi-Wan, and Ahsoka.

He saw his mother.

There was no time in the Force, after all.

He saw her as a young girl, her face turned to the sky, her already knobbed and calloused hands still for a only a few moments as she looked up, her heart beating steady, her mind free.

He saw Luke running down a steep, slanting street in the heights of Breelden. He was laughing as his footsteps slapped against the aged cobblestones. Leia ran behind him, thrusting her elbows out behind her in a rhythmic swinging motion, her face a mask of scrunched up determination.

He saw Obi-Wan with the close cropped hair and long thin braid of a padawan. There was a sparkle in his eye and a spring in his step as he jogged lightly down the steps of the Jedi Temple, his robe billowing out behind him. A group of other padawans about his own age were beside him. He turned to make a jest to the girl nearest his side—his friend, Siri—and she laughed, a clear musical sound. She punched his arm playfully and off they all went, the streets of Coruscant and the entire galaxy open to them.

He saw Padmé as a young girl, dancing in the meadows near Varykino, holding onto her sister Sola’s hands as they spun round and round in circles, singing a little song, flowers falling from their hair. Their parents sat on a blanket with a picnic laid out before them and watched the girls, smiling affectionately.

He saw Ahsoka running hard and fast through the vast grasslands of Shili, her head down, lightsabers drawn, towards a great umber akul which pawed at the ground and bared its teeth furiously at her as she came. She was a tiny slip of a snippy little thing and when she had slain the giant beast she smiled to herself and said, “Now I am a youngling no more,” even though there was no one but the Force there to hear her.

He saw Lashmina, cradled in Luke’s arms, her head resting on his shoulder as he patted her on the back and walked up and down, up and down the length of a deserted corridor in the quiet of the night. Her eyes fluttered closed as she fought sleep. She reached out one hand past her brother’s shoulder and said, “dada, dada, dada.”

He saw Mara, a child of no more than five, playing with a group of other children, of all different species. She stood at the center, clearly the leader, and told the others what game they were going to play. A game of tag. She would be It, she explained in a confident voice, and she would chase the others and the first one she caught would It after her. He was not the only one watching her: a dark shadow loomed above all the children, looking down at them as they played. But still Mara laughed, unconcerned, as she tapped another child lightly on the shoulder and cried, “Too slow! Got you! You’re It!”

He saw Padmé, hiding her face shyly with the draping fall of a velvet hood as she walked hand in hand with a curly-haired boy down the hallways of Theed University. The boy bid her goodbye with a formal, chivalrous kiss on the hand, but as he turned away she drew him back and quickly kissed him on the mouth. Then she ran away, swiftly, hands lifted to her face, a giddy smile on her lips and
light shining in her eyes as her cloak rippled behind her.

He saw Leia walking arm in arm with the Queen of Alderaan. They paused on a vast veranda and gazed up towards the mountains, up towards the sky. Towards the curve of the moon that wasn’t. “Don’t worry,” said Leia. “Everything will be alright.”

He saw his mother standing alone in the evening, outside the austere dome of the Lars’ family homestead, her face to the twin suns as they set one after the other. She wrapped her arms around herself in a lonely hug as she closed her eyes, the red light bathing her in a rich glow, before she turned away.

He saw Ahsoka walking warily through the underbelly of Coruscant, her face young, her eyes old. She pulled a cloak over her montrals and kept her head low, glancing over her shoulder with every step.

He saw Luke running circles round and round and round the base on Dantooine in the pre-dawn light. Luke ran until he was exhausted, slick with sweat, and he bent over double, hands on his knees, and he cried because there was no one there to see him except for the Force.

He saw Mara sitting on the floor with Lashmina in her lap, singing a low, eerie lullaby. She ran her fingers through his daughter’s soft golden curls and leaned down to kiss the baby’s head as she slept.

He saw Leia kneeling in the sand, building castles as the ocean tide lapped at her feet. She looked up the beach towards the small cottage on the rocks about and blinked salt from her eyes.

He saw Obi-Wan walking into the jungle on Yavin IV, a small smile on his lips, an enduring light behind his eyes as he inspected the greenery around him. “Hello there,” he said softly to a small, skittering creature that flitted through the undergrowth.

He saw Padmé, on her knees, holding a pillow to her face and screaming, screaming, screaming until she became calm, so very calm. She stood up. She hugged the pillow to her chest but then let it slip away from her, down to the floor where it lay abandoned at her feet. She lifted her hands to run her fingers through her hair, holding it out and looked at it curiously, as if she had just seen it now for the first time.

He saw Ahsoka lounging in the grass on a balmy day on Mirial, watching clouds float by. Barriss lay beside her, resting her head on Ahsoka’s stomach, their hands intertwined. “I wasn’t even born here,” said Barriss, “but it feels like home.” Ahsoka smiled and closed her eyes.

He saw Mara standing on a hill overlooking a river, the lavender grasses of Dantooine blowing softly in the breeze at her feet. She was stretching in the morning sun, balanced on one leg, the other extended behind her. Her arms reached up and out towards the sun. Luke lay on the ground nearby, his arms folded behind his head, watching her with a lovesick smile.

He saw Obi-Wan, young but tired, brush his fingers ever so gently, hesitantly, across the back of Duchess Satine’s hand. She looked at him in surprise as he whispered, “It will be alright. We will get through this I promise. You have my word; I will always protect you.”

He saw Luke, cleaning Artoo, polishing up his dome, talking to him about how he was trying to stay positive, but he was starting to worry. “What if I fail?” he asked. Artoo beeped out a response. “You won’t fail. Not as long as you take me with you.”

He saw Leia sitting cross-legged on the floor of her chambers, the dismantled components of a lightsaber floating in the space before her. Her eyes were wide open but she stared straight ahead into
nothingness rather than at the pieces of metal before her. The Dark Side crowded in around her, and he reached out his hand to sweep it away, though he had no hand to reach. The Darkness recoiled, creeping back, rolling away like fog.

“Father,” said Leia. “Save your strength.”

She brought the pieces of the saber together in one elegant motion, and pulled the hilt into the palm of her hand. She lit the blade and it shimmered a bright, opalescent white.

“Father,” she said again, and this time her voice did not come from the girl sitting on the floor. It came from the girl standing before the tank, her hand on the transparisteel wall with its faint spiderweb of cracks blossoming from the inside out. Her breath fogged against it as she whispered again. “Save your strength.”

“Come child,” said Palpatine, beckoning to her. “You have had your allotted time. We have work to do.”

Leia backed away from the tank, her fingers lingering for as long as she could reach it with arm outstretched. Threepio stood a little ways off and turned to follow her as she left the room. He spared one glanced backwards towards the tank, murmuring “Oh dear, oh dear,” as he went.

Anakin saw many things, spiraling endlessly through the Force.

When Leia did not stand by his tank and whisper his name there was nothing to hold him there. Except, sometimes, the pain.

Except, sometimes, the gimlet eyed men of science who poked and prodded remotely while humming to themselves in curiosity.

He had killed one, choking the life out of him slowly and watching him fall to the ground. Another came later and found his colleague on the floor. He’d puzzled over the sight, kneeling to feel for a pulse, until he felt the tightening of his own throat. As he scrabbled at his collar, clicking and choking for air, he staggered over to the control box. Desperate, gasping, he flipped the switch to release a shockwave of electricity through the wires that fed into Anakin’s body through the substance inside the tank.

And Anakin had drifted away again.

“It’s easy to lose yourself in the Force,” said Qui-Gon. “But you have to ask yourself, are you ready to let it take you?”

“It is peaceful here,” Anakin told him. Qui-Gon was everywhere and nowhere, as Anakin was everywhere and nowhere when he was with him. “It’s restful. I imagine there is nothing but rest once I die.”

“There is no death,” said Qui-Gon. “Only the Force. But there is peace in joining with the Force. When you become one with it you will lose your conscious self. All your worries, all your cares, will disappear. When you cease to struggle you cease to be.”
“When will you be ready to let it take you?”

“Ah Anakin, always asking me questions.”

“You always give me answers.”

“When I have answers to give.”

“Every time I feel myself slipping away they call me back,” Anakin said. “I cannot let go my attachments. Not even to die.”

“They will not let go of you.”

“It would be better for them if they did.”

“Perhaps.”

“Leia thinks that she can save me. She thinks that she can play the Emperor; beat Sidious at his own game. She’d can’t. She’ll only lose herself to him and I cannot stop it. I can only watch.”

“Perhaps you should look away.”

“I cannot.”

“Then you are not ready to be one with the Force.”

“Is that why you’re still here? Because you can’t look away, either? Why? You have no family to keep you here.”


When Maul died, when the gold of his eyes faded to pale yellow, that last thing he said, was, “Mother.”

Anakin wasn’t surprised. He would have said the same thing.

“Why go with him, did you?” asked Yoda, stirring a pot of stew, twitching his ears. “Trust him, you should have not.”

“I didn’t trust him. I just knew that his hate was true and his intel was good.”

“Learned you nothing in all these years?”

“He didn’t betray me. It’s not as if he let Sidious kill him on purpose. We failed.”

There hadn’t even been a fight. Sidious had laughed at them, laughed at the thought that he would deign to fight them, to allow them to even try. He laughed as they walked into his trap and laughed as he said, “I knew you would come back. Sixteen years I have waited for this day. Did you think I would not be prepared?” Laughing, always laughing.

“Trusting in hate, not in friendship, not in compassion, not in the Light,” said Yoda, and Anakin was sure that if he had a body Yoda would be jabbing it with his gimer stick. Instead the old Jedi
Master clanked his spoon against the soup pot.

“I couldn’t ask for Obi-Wan or Ahsoka’s help. Not to work with Maul. Not after what he did to the people they love.”

“The reason you did not trust them, that is not,” Yoda insisted.

“I didn’t want Obi-Wan getting in my way. He wouldn’t have approved of my methods.”

“Lie to me, do not.”

“I was afraid they would get hurt. Or killed.”

“Always your fear, that was. Always fearing to be left behind. So eager to leave them first.”

“I had to try to kill him when I had the chance,” said Anakin.

“Foolish. Foolish youngling, you are,” said Yoda.

“At least I tried to do something. You don’t do anything but sit here. Why don’t you help anyone? They need you.”

“Not with the Rebellion, my destiny lies,” Yoda said, seasoning his stew and tasting it, cocking his head to the side. “Wait here I must.”

“What is your destiny, then? What do you see?”

“Know you already what it is.”

“Don’t hurt her. Master Yoda. Please. I’m begging you.”

“A killer of children, I am not.”

Anakin was silent, but he did not leave. Rain beat down against the clay roof of Yoda’s home, the fire crackled in the hearth, but Anakin felt neither the warmth nor the damp. It was all the same energy flowing in the Force. In a way, he was the rain, the fire, the air that surrounded the Jedi Master. But still, it took all of Anakin’s strength just to speak to him, to coalesce into something like himself for eyes to see.

“Why here, are you?” Yoda asked.

“You’re the only living being who can hear me,” Anakin told him. “Who can see me.” Then, he amended, “You, and my youngest daughter. But she’s just a baby. She doesn’t say much.”

“Just a baby,” Yoda echoed, clucking in disapproval. He went over to sit down, cradling a bowl in his hands. “Truly wonderful, the effortless connection a child has to the Force. Know more, see more, than we credit them for.”

“I feel as if I could make the others see me, if only I tried a little harder,” Anakin told him. Many times he thought he almost could, that Luke turned to looked at him, that Padmé awoke to see him, that Obi-Wan’s sigh or Ahsoka’s rolling eyes were in response to something he said. But they looked right through him. They were deaf to him. Leia felt him but if she understood what he said, she ignored him, because he was always saying “Don’t do it, please don’t do it, stop, let it go, let me go, don’t…” and she did it anyway. Every time.

“Father,” Leia whispered, from far away. “Save your strength.”
“Told you, have I, about when a child was I? When found me, the Jedi did?” Yoda asked, conversationally, but he got no answer. He saw Skywalker fading away, and then he was gone, and Yoda was alone again. Alone, except for a snake that slithered across his table. “Never learns, that one,” he sighed to his reptile friend.

“Maybe you’re just not a very good teacher,” came the faint, yet irritable, thought from Skywalker’s mind to his. Despite himself, Yoda laughed.
Leia had never seen a place more desolate and hopeless than the blistering rock that was Tatooine. No wonder her father had never spoken of this place. It looked like a whole lot of nothing being baked to a nasty little crisp.

She gazed out the viewport at the vastness of the Northern Dune Sea and curled her lip. “Well, Threepio,” she said, “how does it feel to be home at last?”

“Goodness,” said Threepio. “I have not laid eyes on this dreadful place in years and if I may be frank, Mistress Vestre, I had hoped to never have a reason to come here again.”

Leia’s sneer deepened at his use of her new name. She glanced across the shuttle to where her Imperial escort, a small company of Stormtroopers led by Lieutenant Piett, were preparing to disembark. They were, in theory, there for her protection, but she was sure that Piett at least was there to monitor her movements. He had struck her, thus far, as an ambitious ladder climber who saw his assignment as a chance to curry favor with the Emperor. There were few officers in the Imperial military who wanted to get anywhere near her, not after the rumors about what had become of Grand Moff Tarkin began to circulate.

He didn’t have much to worry about. Leia knew all too well that any missteps would incur the Emperor’s wrath. He had told her as much. If she made any attempt to run away, or if she allowed herself to be rescued by the Rebel Alliance, the consequences would be dire. The Organa sisters, her father, and all of Alderaan would perish. Furthermore, if she failed in her mission to negotiate with Jabba the Hutt, one of the Organa sisters would die. “I will let you decide which one,” Palpatine had said, smiling, “if that time comes.”

She walked over to Piett, her strides as long and commanding as she could make them, and the Lieutenant stiffened, clicking his heels together at attention. “Milday,” he said, “we are ready whenever you are.”

“I hope you realize that your presence is only making my job harder,” she told him. “The Hutt is not going to welcome all these troops into his palace.” There were only twenty stormtroopers on the planet’s surface with them, but to Leia that still seemed like a large number of stormtroopers to take on a diplomatic mission.

“Even the Hutt must realize that the Crown Princess of the Empire cannot go about unescorted,” said Piett, in his crisp, formal Coruscanti accent. “Particularly not into the den of a notorious gangster.”

“He wouldn’t dream of hurting me,” scoffed Leia. “Unless he’s suicidal. As you said, I’m the Crown Princess… anything happens to me and the Emperor will send the rest of the fleet here to blow every last trace of Jabba off the face of this planet.”

“That may well be,” said Piett, “but I have my orders.”
“And I have mine. If your presence jeopardizes my ability to negotiate with the Hutt, I will make sure that you leave. I’ll kill you and every trooper under your command if you disobey my orders,” she threatened.

Piett swallowed, pressing his lips into a thin line, but he nodded curtly.

“Well,” she said, “you and two of your stormtroopers may accompany us. Come along, Threepio.”

She exited the shuttle, a Lambda class ship which had descended to the planet’s surface from the star destroyer orbiting Tatooine above. Threepio walked by her side, Piett and two stormtroopers following them, marching smartly at attention.

The oppressive heat of the Northern Dune Sea tried its best to flatten them to the hard, sandpacked earth. She wondered how any living being survived in this place, but she pressed ahead.

Leia and her entourage made their way up a long, smooth rock roadway towards the citadel beyond. What had once been a monastery built thousands of years ago by the B’omarr monks was now a repudiated center of crime and debauchery.

Leia was disgusted by the reputation of the Hutts, and always had been. Even as a schoolchild on Osallao, what she had learned of them offended her sense of morality and justice. Growing up in the Organa court of Alderaan had not improved her opinion any further, and when the Emperor informed her (with a certain amount of relish) that her father had once been enslaved by the Hutts, she hated them all the more. It was not this particular Hutt who had been her father’s master… but they were all one in the same as far as Leia was concerned.

She had already known, from Threepio, that her father had been a slave in his early childhood, but even her talkative droid didn’t have much to say on the details, especially ones that predated his existence. When he was first built, Father and his mother had been owned by a toydarian located in Mos Espa. Leia wondered, idly, if that toydarian was alive and still lived here on Tatooine, and if Threepio would identify him for her… but no, she didn’t have time to visit Mos Espa.

“Oh dear,” said Threepio, lifting his arms to shield his eyes from the suns. “I can feel my finish being scored by this detestable sand already.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Leia told him. “You know I’ll get you polished back up as soon as we return to Coruscant.”

The Emperor was, thus far, treating her generously. Leia wasn’t sure if he was trying to win her affection and loyalty, despite all logic, or simply wanted to maintain the appearance of deferential treatment. But he had told her that she may have anything she wished, so long as her training progressed in a satisfactory manner. She always received a special reward when she was able to demonstrate improvement, whether it was in her combat skills, Force usage, or political aptitude.

There were few things Leia wanted. She wanted him to let Astreia and Winter go, but that was absolutely out of the question. She had tried. She knew that he would not free Father, or loosen his grip on Alderaan, but she had thought that perhaps she could talk him into freeing the Organa sisters. But he had only laughed her off, saying that they were indispensable to him as prisoners.

“I need them to ensure your utmost obedience, my dear,” he had said. “A fact you are well aware of, I think.”

She was well aware. She knew that the Emperor was hesitant to blow up Alderaan, especially not while his forces were working to capture and interrogate rebels trapped on the planet by the
blockade. And the Organa sisters themselves were being subjected to interrogation and torture to get them to reveal whatever they might know. The thought made Leia sick.

The Emperor told her: “They will remain alive so long as you remain my cooperative apprentice. Do not think that you can stand by my side for the holocameras but rebel against me in private. No. I have plans for you which extend beyond figurehead status, my dear. We must begin with training, since you are so woefully behind.”

*Woefully behind your brother,* seemed to be the unspoken implication, and that made Leia’s skin crawl. She could not tell if there was an assumption on the Emperor’s part that she would one day have to fight her brother, or if he was threatening to replace her and pursue Luke should she not be able to make up for the lost years and bring herself up to whatever the Emperor assumed was Luke’s level. Either way, it was bad.

For the time being, whenever her progress pleased the Emperor, he granted her a reward.

First she had asked for Threepio, saying, “I want my droid,” and he had surprised her by allowing her to return to the surface of Alderaan to retrieve Threepio. She had said her final farewell to the Organas, who were horrified to see her traveling willingly and unshackled with the Imperial troops. She hoped they would understand that she had no choice… that she was doing it for them. To save them.

Threepio had often spoken wistfully over the years of his once brilliant and shiny golden finish, which Leia had never seen. The protocol droid had been painted a pale, silvery blue all Leia’s life. Whenever she asked him to tell her about what life was like before she was born, he had been hesitant—in the same way her parents were—to divulge any information. That was, until they left Osallao. Then, seeing as how all secrets were on the the table, he had been only too happy to regale her with tales of the past. He told her all about how he had been built from scratch by her father and belonged to her grandmother up until Shmi Skywalker’s death, when he had been taken away from Tatooine by Anakin again, and then entered into Padmé’s service after her parents’ wedding.

“Your mother refused to speak of ‘owning’ me, as she said she didn’t believe in owning droids with sophisticated AI any more than she believed in owning other organics,” he said, speaking of Padmé fondly. “Instead, she invited me to be a part of her family, which was of course a rather redundant request. I have always been a part of the Skywalker family; your father is my maker, after all. But I gladly accepted her formal invitation and to commemorate the occasion she replaced my old coverings with the most beautiful gold plating you ever saw on a protocol droid. I do miss it, though of course I understood the necessity for discretion, at the time.”

The next time Palpatine offered to grant Leia a reward, she had simply asked to be allowed to remove the blue paint from Threepio’s casing. The Emperor had frowned, saying, “You are most attached to that droid,” but had sent Threepio to be refurbished anyway. He came back gleaming like one of the suns of Tatooine and beaming with joy.

Leia imagined that destroying Threepio was now added to the list of possible punishments the Emperor would unleash on her for disobedience or failure.

Luckily, she had not failed yet. She routinely destroyed all training bots in combat training sessions and her ability to use the Force in a focused manner grew.

This mission to Tatooine was her first “political test,” according to the Emperor. As his public heir in addition to his secret Sith apprentice, she must act as his ambassador. This was intentionally ironic, since her mother served as the Rebellion’s Ambassador. When Leia appeared publicly she wore the traditional Naboo facepaint. It was the Emperor’s idea. If Padmé was the face of the Alliance, he
would use her daughter and her iconry as the face of the Empire.

And so it was that she found herself marching up to Jabba the Hutt’s remote desert retreat, tasked with negotiating an armament supply deal between the Hutts and the Empire. “This will be incredibly simple, my dear,” Palpatine had assured her. “The Hutts are an intelligent bunch of nefarious crooks. They realize that the Empire tolerates their existence and they want to keep it that way. This deal is all but guaranteed. You need only prove yourself capable of working out the minor details.”

Leia hoped that his confidence was more than just hubris or an overestimation of her negotiating skills. After all, while the Organas had supplied her with an excellent education, and she had always had an interest in public speaking and politics, she’d spent the last few years in hiding, doing absolutely nothing of importance. So to say that she was untested was, definitely, an understatement.

If I fail, she reminded herself, I have to choose between Winter or Astreia for execution. It was a particularly sick little addition to the threat of killing them, but it didn’t surprise her one bit. This was the same man who kept her father pickling in a tank and had enjoyed watching her kill Tarkin, who had been one of his highest ranking and most loyal officers. This was the same man who kept the dismembered corpse of Darth Maul hanging up on display in the training arena, so that Leia could look up and see it and remember what happened to apprentices of Darth Sidious who turned against him.

He was capable of anything. Even his surface kindness put her on edge. Every word of praise felt like a trick and every reward felt like a sweet drink tinged with poison.

Leia waited as the large, heavy entrance door to Jabba’s palace rose slowly. She was welcomed by a pale pink twi’lek male who introduced himself as Bib Fortuna. He was flanked by two gamorrean guards carrying axes, which Leia thought were rather antiquated weapons that wouldn’t be of much use against blasters or lightsabers or… anything really. But she knew she shouldn’t underestimate anyone around here; Jabba the Hutt didn’t rule over Tatooine by hiring henchmen who didn’t know what they were doing.

Tatooine was technically under Imperial control, with its capital city, Bestine, boasting a small Imperial garrison on the mountains overlooking the city. Leia had first stopped at Bestine when she arrived on Tatooine. She had been met by the fawning Governor, Victor Visalis, who gave her a tour of the city. There wasn’t much to see. Despite his claims that Bestine was “the safest settlement in all of Tatooine” and “a gem of Imperial politics” it still looked like a depressing, sand blighted place to Leia. It was no Breelden or Aldera, at any rate. And the very fact that Visalis thought that Bestine being safe from Jabba’s thugs was a noteworthy aspect, proved that the rest of the planet was not under firm rule.

It didn’t really matter. If Palpatine cared about Tatooine he’d make it more of a priority. If he cared about the Hutt’s crime empire operating within his own Empire, he’d do something about it, and certainly wouldn’t be sending anyone to negotiate with Jabba. The very fact that the Empire needed help from the Hutts indicated that the Rebel Alliance was doing something right, which gave Leia some satisfaction. She wished there was some way to undermine this deal without putting Winter and Asteria in danger. But there wasn’t.

Bib Fortuna insisted that the stormtroopers must remain outside, which did not surprise Leia at all. It made Piett very unhappy, but he did as he was told when Leia jerked her head and said they would have to wait outside the door.

“Your weapons, please,” said Fortuna in a thick twi’lek accent.
Piett grimaced as if he smelled rotting cheese, but handed over his blaster. Fortuna looked at Leia expectantly, but she just raised her eyebrows and said, “I have no blaster. I am here to negotiate with Jabba, not fight him.”

Fortuna bowed slightly, offering apologies for insulting the dignity of the most esteemed Crown Princess of the Empire, before motioning for them to follow him.

“I do not like this,” Piett murmured to her as they walked down the long corridor towards a sweeping staircase. “All of my troops banished and us weaponless? Milday, rethink—”

“I can’t just leave without completing my objective, and he won’t let me come before him armed and flanked by soldiers,” Leia said, waving her hand to silence Piett. “You worry too much. As I said, he’s not going to ruin the comfortable relationship he has with the Empire just to assassinate me.”

_Besides, she thought, I’m not unarmed._

Fortuna led them into a large throne room filled with beings of varied species. Jabba himself was hard to miss, where he sprawled on a raised dais, smoking a hookah. There was a band playing loud, uptempo music, and scantily clad women danced before Jabba on a grate. Fortuna seemed unwilling to interrupt the song and dance routine, and they stood at the foot of the staircase leading into the room and watched the show. Leia felt that this must be some form of power play, indicating to her that Jabba (or Fortuna, at least) did not feel her arrival merited interrupting the revelries.

She considered making a grand entrance by elbowing her way past the Hutt’s majordomo and sweeping aside the dancers to place herself before Jabba, but ultimately decided to take the opportunity to case the room instead. She looked around, past the flashiness of the performers, inspecting the beings who were gathered at the edges, or tucked away in corners. She did a double take when she thought she saw an osallan, but it was just a wookiee. Not that it would have mattered if it was actually an osallan, but she couldn’t help but be reminded of home, either way.

She caught the eye of a human male seated next to the wookiee. He gave her a slight nod, and she looked away, bothered to be caught staring.

The song ended and the dancers fell back. Fortuna finally approached Jabba, whispering in his ear. Leia strode out into the room, tilting her head expectantly. Threepio was close by her side, ready to interpret, and Piett hung back, exuding nervous irritation. She supposed that he was cataloguing the ways he would be tortured and killed should he allow anything untoward to happen to her on his watch. It almost amused her, except that she was also nervous and irritated, though for very different reasons.

Jabba spoke to her in his ponderous native language, Huttese, and Threepio interpreted, “Princess Vestre, welcome. I have been expecting you. You are very beautiful in person; the holographs do not do you justice. Please join me up here while my dancers perform a special routine in your honor.”

“Thank you, Mighty Jabba,” said Leia. “But I must decline.” She knew that the Hutt liked his ego stroked and had decided to play it as polite and deferential as possible… but she didn’t feel like sitting through another cringe worthy musical number. Especially not up on the dais next to the Hutt. The smell was bad enough at a distance already. “My business on behalf of the Emperor must be given priority; as you know, our exalted leader eagerly awaits the results of our meeting.”

“I must insist,” Threepio translated. “I am honored that the Emperor has sent his newly appointed Heir to grace us with your presence. I have prepared this show especially for you.”
“It would be a grave insult for you to refuse the Exalted Jabba’s hospitality,” Fortuna added.

Leia gave a sideways glance to Piett, then nodded. “Very well,” she said. She stepped up onto the platform and stood on the very edge, as far away from the Hutt as she could manage. Piett moved as if to climb up with her, but Fortuna held up a hand and told him that he could remain where he was. He did not look happy about that.

A yuzzum shouted out a countdown and the band broke out into a jazzy rendition of the Imperial anthem, “Glory of the Empire.” The dancers, a trio of woman made up of a twi’lek, a rodian, and a theelan, performed a dance that seemed to be mocking the marching formation of stormtroopers, though it might have been an attempt to pay homage. Leia wasn’t quite sure. The whole thing seemed very tacky to her.

She fought the urge to fiddle by keeping her arms folded in front of her. Despite her attempt to stay focused, however, she found her eyes wandering away from the dancers to sweep the room. Most beings were watching the dancers but the man next to the wookiee was looking at her, and when she caught his eye the second time he winked at her. This made Leia irrationally angry and she glared at him before turning her attention back to the show in her honor. *One does not wink at the Princess of the Empire,* she thought grumpily, despite hating the Empire and hating being the Princess of said Empire. Somehow that made the disrespect even worse.

The song finally finished to applause, and Leia uncrossed her arms long enough to clap politely. It did not seem to fool Jabba, however. Threepio interpreted, “Are you unhappy with the dancers? The band? Are you displeased with my performers?”

“Not at all,” said Leia. “It was delightful.”

“Would you like them to do it again?”

“That won’t be necessary.”

“In that case, it is clear to me that you did hate it. I will have them punished for failing to amuse you.”

Leia wanted to tear her own hair out. She had come here to negotiate an arms supply deal with the Hutt, not argue with him about their differing tastes in music. “Please, don’t do that,” she said hastily. “They were perfect and I am very honored by them. I simply want to attend to the business at hand. The Emperor would be most displeased with me for wasting valuable time.”

But Jabba didn’t even seem to hear her, and had already shouted orders for the entire band and the dancers to be seized. The gamorreans moved in on them and they scattered. It didn’t do them any good, though. There was chaos as the guards swung their axes and herded the musicians towards Jabba. Threepio fretted, Piett edged closer and reached for his comlink, and Leia continued to protest that she was not at all unsatisfied with the music or the dancing and no punishment was necessary.

“Oh dear,” said Threepio, “he’s saying that he agrees with you, the performance was very boring, and he wants some real entertainment. I don’t think he cares about your objections, Princess.”

*I really don’t have time for this,* Leia thought. She needed to report back to the Emperor soon.

“Oh my, now he’s making them choose which one of them is going in ‘the pit,’ whatever that means,” said Threepio.

Leia put a hand to her temple and shook her head. She told herself that she shouldn’t care about the lives of anyone affiliated with the vile Hutts, but she was not happy with the fact that Jabba was
going to, presumably, kill one of them and use her as an excuse when she explicitly stated that she didn’t want anything of the sort to happen. Also, the fear and distress they were feeling radiated off them like a stench in the Force and it was not a metaphorical smell that she enjoyed.

“Stop this at once!” she shouted, lifting her hand. “I demand that you let them all go so we may get on with our business.”

“He says that you may be the Princess but you do not give him orders,” said Threepio.

Leia grimaced and reached out towards Jabba, thinking of nothing besides her anger at him and her desire to get his attention. She clenched her fingers into a fist and watched as the Hutt began to choke, his tongue sticking out and wiggling grotesquely while he made blubbering noises. “I insist,” she said, holding out her other hand to Force push the gamorrean guards off their feet. They went flying across the room, careening into each other and the beings gathered on one side of the room. The annoying winking man jumped up from his seat to avoid them, and the wookiee roared angrily as he dodged a flying axe.

Leia released Jabba from her invisible grip, and said, “I grow tired of being delayed. Shall we get down to business, now?”

Just then there was the sound of blaster fire from the corridor, and Leia groaned, realizing that Piett had comm’ed the stormtroopers and they had managed to get inside the palace. Jabba seemed to ascertain the same thing, and began to scream in enraged Huttese. Leia jumped down off the platform as several beings pulled out blasters and aimed them at her.

She pulled out both of her lightsabers and ignited the blades, quickly deflecting the blaster fire and sending some of it back to strike down those who had fired upon her.

One saber was red, the other white.

One had been given to her by Palpatine. It was her father’s lightsaber with the kyber crystal removed—replaced with one the Emperor thought was “more fitting.”

The other she had constructed herself using the stone Luke had given her, which she had realized—soon after dismantling and inspecting Father’s lightsaber—was a kyber crystal.

“We have to get out of here, we have to— arrrghhhh!” Piett was cut off by a blaster bolt striking him between shoulders.

“Oh no!” cried Threepio.

The stormtroopers came rushing into the throne room and Leia knew that her negotiations with the Hutt had ended in disaster. The troops rushed to surround her and Threepio, to protect her and usher her out of the combat zone. She allowed them to escort her away, cursing herself. Palpatine was going to consider this a terrible failure.

She didn’t have time to think about those consequences right now, though. Every bounty hunter, guard, and smuggler in Jabba’s employ was coming at her and her troops. She had failed her first test as a political emissary, she sure as hell wasn’t going to fail her first real fight and end up dead.

Fighting against training droids in the controlled environments of the Death Star and the Imperial Palace was one thing. Fighting a bunch of angry gangsters was quite another. Luckily she had the stormtroopers. *My heroes,* she thought sardonically as they ran towards the entrance.

The spilled out into the glaring hot sunlight and rushed towards the shuttle.
Before they could get to it, however, a cannon blast from the palace exploded into the air and Leia watched in horror as it arced towards the ship. It hit its target and the shuttle burst into flames, pieces flying everywhere. She dove to the ground as bits of spaceship turned shrapnel fell from the sky.

She scrambled to her feet, seeing that a few of her troopers had fallen and would not be getting up again. The rest were already jumping up and firing back at the gangsters pursuing them from the palace.

Leia wavered. This was about as bad as it could possibly be. Jabba’s palace was several kilometers from the nearest settlement, so there was nowhere to run to now. She could comm the star destroyer waiting for them up above, but that would instantly alert the Emperor to her failure, and she felt a strong need to put that off for as long as possible.

There was no way she was going to run away from Jabba’s palace to tell Palpatine that she had botched the whole thing in spectacular fashion because she got impatient, and didn’t want to see an innocent musician pay for her lack of enthusiasm. The combination of incompetence and compassion would not please him in the least, and would be a sure death sentence for the Organa sisters.

Her friends.

She decided that, for better or worse, Jabba must die. Then, at least, she could control the story of what had happened. She turned back and started to run towards the palace.

Even this plan was thwarted, though, as a spaceship descended from the sky between her and the rush of Jabba’s thugs. The bottom hatch opened as the ship hovered just above the ground, and she saw the wookiee lean out and beckon to her.

“Are you out of your mind?” Leia shouted at him. “Get out of my way!”

But the wookiee just roared at her and kept on beckoning, even as the stormtroopers behind her fired at him.

Suddenly, she wondered if the wookiee—and the man who had been with him—were part of the Rebellion.

Maybe that’s why he had winked at her? Maybe that’s why he’d been staring at her steadily instead of watching the dancers?

* I can’t go running away with the rebels, Leia thought. *I just can’t.*

But she jumped aboard the landing ramp and ran inside the ship anyway.

It was, she thought, a short term solution to her problem… which was the fact that Jabba and his entourage seemed intent on killing her. *Fools,* she thought. *Don’t they realize they’re signing their own death warrants?*

It didn’t matter. If they were stupid enough to kill her she would still be dead, and Palpatine would probably kill Winter and Astreia just because he could, and because he no longer had any use for them.

Once aboard the ship, Leia shut off her sabers and turned to the wookie. “Are you with the Rebellion?” she asked, leaning against the wall to steady herself and catch her breath.

The wookiee made some kind of reply, but she didn’t understand shyriiwook and she didn’t have… oh Force. Oh gods. Great vaping blazes.
Threepio.

How could she have left Threepio behind?

“We have to go back,” she gasped. “My… my droid. My protocol droid. He’s down there!”

The wookiee shook his head and roared emphatically. She didn’t have to understand the words to know he was refusing. Impatiently, Leia pushed herself off the wall and went to find the man, the human, so she could try to convince him to set the ship down.

She stumbled into the cockpit and shouted at the pilot, “Turn back! I need to go back right now; I left my droid behind.”

“Your droid?” he responded with a disbelieving laugh. “Listen, sister, you just pissed a lot of people off back there, I don’t know if you noticed, but trying to kill Jabba the Hutt in the middle of all his goons was not the brightest idea.”

“I wasn’t trying to kill him,” Leia objected.

“Uh, that’s not what it looked like to me and everyone else,” he said. “I’m getting as far away from there as I can before they can recharge that blaster cannon or someone decides to follow us. Then we can set down and have a nice talk.”

“You don’t understand; they’ll destroy him,” she said. “I’m ordering you to turn back!”

He swiveled in his seat to give her a wide-eyed, incredulous look. “I just saved your hide, Your Majesty, I think a little ‘thank you’ and ‘boy that was stupid glad you got me out of that mess’ is in order. Forget about your droid, he’s history. I’m sure the Emperor can buy you a new one.”

“The Emperor— buy me a new— of all the nerve,” Leia sputtered. “Aren’t you with the Alliance?”

“The Alliance?” He laughed a loud, derisive bark. “Nooooo, no, not me, sister.”

“Then why did you…” she gestured vaguely behind herself, towards the general direction of Jabba’s palace.

“Rescue you? Because unlike you and the rest of those mooks I’m not a total idiot,” he said. “You may have tried to kill Jabba but you’re still the Emperor’s whatever-you-are and I for one don’t want to find myself on the Empire’s number one most wanted list for assassination.”

*Blast it.* Now that she realized she was mistaken in thinking he was a Rebel spy sent by her mother to retrieve her, Leia doubly regretted hopping aboard his ship. She had no time for the sinking, disappointed feeling that fizzled through her and made her want to sit down and stare out the viewport. Instead, she said snappishly, “Well that’s wonderful. But I have to go back. I can’t leave until I’ve dealt with Jabba.”

“So you were trying to kill him?”

“No! I was there to negotiate.”

“Well I hate to have to be the one to break it to you, sweetheart, but your negotiations failed.”

The wookiee, who was standing a little ways behind her in the doorway to the cockpit, said something that made the pilot laugh, and he responded, “You can say that again.”

“Say what again?”
“Failure is an understatement for what just happened back there,” he told her. “If you were trying to negotiate in good faith then maybe you shouldn’t have started using your little Jedi tricks to start a fight.”

“They’re not ‘tricks’ and I wasn’t trying to start a fight, I was just trying to stop him from—oh you know what I don’t have to explain myself to you. If you’re not with the Rebellion then you’re one of his gang members, aren’t you? A bounty hunter or smuggler or some other kind of criminal scum.”

“Scum? I’ll have you know I am a skilled pilot who transports perfectly legal shipments—”

“Just shut up and take me back to Jabba’s,” she snapped. “I don’t care who or what you are. I need to go back.”

“Wow you said it Chewie,” he groaned, responding to the wookiee instead of her. “Listen, we’ve already been through this. We go back there and you’ve got an angry Hutt who wants you dead, or worse. You insulted Jabba big time and Imperial Princess or not he’s not the kind to let go of a grudge.”

“So where are we going? You’re not taking me up to the star destroyer,” she said. “Absolutely not.”

“See now that’s where I’d think you’d want to go.”

“Do not take me there. I absolutely cannot and will not report back to the Emperor just to tell him that everything is all shot to hell. Do you understand me? I’ll kill you both before I let you take me up into orbit in this thing.”

“Yikes, lady, calm down,” he said. “Wow. We rescue you and it’s death threats already? You are some kind of… something… that’s all I can say.”

“You saw what I did to Jabba and his guards, I think I can take the two of you,” Leia said, glancing back to give the wookiee a warning glare. He just shrugged and grunted.

“That won’t be necessary. Tell you what, I’ll set us down somewhere nice and secluded and safe from Jabba’s goons, and we’ll talk.”

“We’re talking right now.”

“We’ll talk once I’m not busy flying this ship, alright?”

“Put the ship down right here and we can talk.”

“Hell, sister, you are the most unreasonable—”

“I’m not your sister so stop calling me that.”

He rolled his eyes and deliberately turned away from her, muttering to himself, “Why’d you have to go and play the hero? Chewie’s right—should have just left her there.”

The wookiee, Chewie, shook his head vehemently and chattered something, prompting the man to sigh heavily and say, “He wants me to tell you that I’m a dirty liar and he never said that; in fact, picking you up was his idea.”

Chewie made a pleased noise and nodded.

“Terrible idea, awful idea.”
“If you’re regretting your decision so much you can just drop me off right now.”

“Sure, sure, drop you off in the middle of the Dune Sea? Might as well put a blaster shot between your eyes.”

“I’ll be perfectly alright.”

“I didn’t pick you up out of the goodness of my heart, let’s get one thing straight. I rescued you because I expect to be rewarded by the Empire for doing so. Can’t get a reward if I dump you in the middle of nowhere, can I? Do that and I’ve made enemies with Jabba for no reason. Nuh-uh, no thanks. You’re stuck with me until I can get the thanks I deserve.”

“Oh please, no one is going to give you any money, if that’s what you’re after.”

“And why not? I just rescued the Crown Princess from certain death. I’m not sure what price the Emperor puts on your safety, but I imagine it’s quite a lot.”

“This is beginning to sound like a ransom, not a reward,” said Leia. “I hope you know that’s a sure way to get yourself killed.”

“It’s not a ransom. I’m not holding you back from the Empire. I’ll gladly deliver you to them.”

Leia made a strangled noise of frustration. “We’ll discuss this when you find a safe place to land,” she said, and turned on her heel to push past the wookiee.

She found her way to a common room and threw herself down on the seating area near a dejarik table. The sight of that was almost oddly comforting, as it reminded her of the dejarik table in the lounge area of her father’s ship, the Twilight II. The ship she was in now was also a Corellian freighter, just like her father’s, except a different model. She wasn’t quite sure which. Luke would know… he’d always been into spaceships and speeders and droids and all that mechanical stuff that Father loved.

Droids. She put her head in her hands and squeezed her eyes shut. Threepio. She’d abandoned him. Deserted him. Left him behind. Visions of him being torn limb from limb, riddled with blaster fire, disintegrated, or incinerated and smelted down, filled her mind. I’m so sorry, Father, she thought. I lost him. I didn’t mean to lose him.

She felt a touch on her shoulder, and nearly jumped out of her skin. It was just the wookiee, leaning over her and making gentle, questioning sounds. She relaxed, moving her hand away from her lightsabers. “I’m fine,” she said. “Just angry at myself.” Then she lowered her head to the table and banged her forehead lightly against it before wrapping her arms protectively around her face and closing her eyes again.

It wasn’t long before the pilot set the ship down. He came sauntering in, and she straightened up, wiping wetness from her face and fixing him with an imperious glare. “If you want any sort of reward for ‘saving’ me, you have to help me fix this,” she said.

“Jabba’s not talking to you anymore, trust me. You’re gonna have to let your Imperial buddies take care of it from here.”

“No, it has to be me. You don’t understand. I have to succeed at this. Me.”

“Look, Your Highness, you seem like a very, er, ambitious and driven girl. I’m sure it hurts your pride to fail so badly, but sometimes you just gotta crawl back home with your tail between your legs and ask your papa to clean up your mess for you.” He fell into a chair and surveyed her smugly.
“He’s not my father,” Leia said viciously, slapping the table with an open palm. “And it’s not a matter of pride. Lives are at stake. There are people who depend on my success to stay alive. You’re a criminal so you wouldn’t understand what it’s like to have people depending on you.”

“You’re right, I’m a smart man,” he said, leaning back into his chair, languidly putting his hands behind his head. “I got nothing and nobody to worry about, besides myself and getting paid.”

Chewie said something and he shrugged but didn’t respond.

“Precisely,” Leia said, trying to calm herself and match his unconcerned demeanor. “I don’t expect you to understand what it’s like to have common human decency. You don’t need to. You just need to accept that I have no option besides rectifying this situation all by myself… I don’t need your help, but if you insist upon hanging around me until you get some sort of monetary reward, then you could at least make yourself semi-useful.”

“I’ve already made myself plenty useful.”

“Not to me, you haven’t. In fact all you managed to do was get in my way and force me to abandon my droid and my stormtroopers. I was going back to finish Jabba off.”

“And how does that fix things? You’ll just start a war with the Hutts if you do that,” the man scoffed.

“It sends a violent message, yes, but sometimes you have to put your foot down. It’s like this… I go in there and eliminate Jabba and then broadcast the message that he attempted to assassinate me. The Hutts have a choice; go to war against the Empire or disown Jabba as a fool and an opportunist who went against their clan. The Hutts are smart; they’ll realize it’s in their best interests to put this aside. And it has the added bonus of letting them know that I am serious and not to be trifled with.”

Chewie said something and the man nodded. “Sounds perfect and all, except that you can’t just sashay into Jabba’s palace and kill him and any witnesses who can tell the Hutts you started this all.”

“Doesn’t matter if there are witnesses. Even if the Hutts know that I acted first it’s in their best interests to accept the lie. Jabba’s less important to them than the overall picture.”

“Not so sure about that. What if the Hutts decided to join the Rebellion because of this? That would be a huge blow to the Empire.”

“I cannot imagine my mother treating with the Hutts,” Leia said, waving her hand. “The Alliance is too upstanding to deal with the Hutts and they know this… the Empire is where it’s at for them.”

He laughed, slapping his leg. “Listen to you. Sweetheart there’s no one in this galaxy too upstanding to accept the kind of support the Hutts can offer. Especially not the rebellion, who I hear ain’t doing too well these days. Besides, you sound more like a rebel sympathizer with that talk, than the Crown Princess.”

Leia was about to make a defensive reply when her comm started to blink. Blast it, she thought, looking down. It was the Emperor.

She stood up. “I have to go outside. I need to contact the Emperor and I can’t do it in here.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t want him to see the inside of this ship,” she retorted. “It’ll raise too many questions. Outside.”
The man spread out his hands and sighed. “Alright, but be careful. I set us down in Tusken
country.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Because Jabba’s thugs won’t follow us here,” he said, as if it were obvious. “But these Sand
People are nasty pieces of work and—”

“You don’t have to tell me that. My grandmother was kidnapped and tortured to death by Sand
People.”

His eyebrows shot up in surprise, and she wondered if that had been too personal an admission. It
was one of those things that Threepio hadn’t even wanted to talk about, though she had gotten the
story out of him eventually.

“Anyway,” she said, when only Chewie made any verbal response, “It’ll only be for a few minutes.
He knows something is up. I have to respond or…” she didn’t even want to think about it, much less
say it out loud. “How do I look right now?”

“Uh…” He was clearly thrown off-center by this sudden question.

“Do I look like someone who is in control?”

He laughed. “No. You look like you’ve been through hell. That clown makeup isn’t helping.”

“Clown makeup! I’ll have you know that this is the scar of remembrance, an ancient symbol of—”

“Yeah yeah well right now it’s the smudge of inconvenience. But don’t take my word for it—there’s
a mirror in the refresher if you want to make yourself presentable for our glorious Emperor.”

She glared at him and got up without a word to go find the refresher. When she got there she saw
that what he had said was an understatement. She looked like an absolute wreck, with her hair askew
and her makeup a mutilated horror. Her face was smudged and dirty and tear stained and she felt
mortified at the thought that she had been carrying on a conversation with the smuggler looking like
this. No wonder he spoke to her the way he did, with dismissive amusement and incredulous disdain.

She washed off her face quickly and did her best to smooth down her hair and pound the sand and
dirt out of her clothes, but then decided it would have to do. She took a deep breath and ran through
want she was going to say in her head.

She exited the ship and found herself in a deep ravine. She looked up at the towering canyons above
and was reminded of the Shalla Canyon country back on Osallao. She wondered if Father had ever
looked at those canyons and thought of this place.

The man and the wookiee followed her out of the ship, and she was about to object and insist that
this was a private conversation, but decided she didn’t really care so long as they stayed out of the
way of her broadcast.

She contacted the Emperor and waited for a moment before his image flickered to light.

“Vestre, my dear, what a relief to see that you are alive,” he purred. “I was beginning to worry.
Admiral Ozzel says that he cannot contact anyone who landed on Tatooine and would like to send
more troops down to assist you.”

“That won’t be necessary,” said Leia. “Everything is under control here.”
“Is it? What have you to report on your negotiations with Jabba?”

“These negotiations were a sham,” Leia said. “It was a trap. Jabba thought he could assassinate me. He failed, as you can see.”

“Really,” the Emperor said flatly. “I find that… most surprising.”

“So did I. But it happened. He said he was insulted that you would send a mere child, a girl, to treat with him. He wanted to send my corpse back as a message to convey his displeasure at the perceived disrespect. Very unpleasant person, this Jabba.”

“I’ve been acquainted with Jabba the Hutt for years,” Palpatine said. “He’s an odorous old slug, but he’s rather fond of pretty young humanoid women. Are you quite sure he was unhappy to see you?”

“Well he blew up my Lambda shuttle, killed the officer who was with me, and took out several of my stormtroopers in addition to stealing my droid, so I would say yes.”

“It does not sound like you have things under control. Do you remember what I said would happen if you failed me?”

“I haven’t failed. This may seem like a setback on the surface, but Jabba’s arrogance can be used to our advantage.” She told him her idea to kill Jabba in retribution and use it to send a message to the other Hutts that the Empire was not here to play games. “The fact that I survived his assassination attempt is my success and his failure,” she said.

“Mm, yes,” the Emperor said thoughtfully. “Naturally I cannot allow Jabba to go unpunished for his attack on you. But I do hope you are not lying or leaving out pertinent facts, my dear. I had Jabba’s assurances that these negotiations were a formality and that he was ready and willing to speak with you about this deal.”

“As I said, it was a trap. Perhaps it was his plan all along to lure me here, pretend to be insulted for one reason or another, and kill me. I have reason to suspect that he made some kind of deal with the Rebel Alliance.”

“Oh do you? And what reason is that?”

“A feeling. My intuition. I’ve been working on reaching out into the Force more, like you’ve been teaching me,” she said.

Even through the flickering blue of the hologram and the concealing hood he loved to wear low over his face, she could tell he was suspicious. “It does seem to be the only reason Jabba would turn against the Empire in such a way, but I am surprised the Alliance would want you dead. Captured, back in the custody of your mother, yes, but dead…”

“I’m an embarrassment to my mother,” Leia said coldly.

He smiled. “Well, we can discuss this further once you return home. In the meantime, I shall have to inform Admiral Ozzel that an attack on Jabba the Hutt is required.”

“I would prefer to do it myself,” Leia told him. “You gave this mission to me and I must see it through to the end. It will send the message to the Hutts that I am not to be insulted. And the next Hutt I visit will quake in fear and do whatever I ask.”

He laughed. “You are indeed your father’s child, my dear. A reckless fool. But very well, I will let you try your hand at retribution. Are you sure you do not want a regiment of stormtroopers behind
“I’ll go to Bestine and take the garrison stationed there back with me,” said Leia. “I’ll contact Ozzel myself and have him send a message ahead of me.”

“If your shuttle was destroyed how do you plan on getting to Bestine, my child? Your tenacity is admirable but your lack of foresight is troubling. It appears you are out in the desert alone.”

“I’ve got a ride back to town,” she said, looking over the holoimage at the pilot. “Local trash,” she added, deliberately. “Happy to serve their Emperor with no hope for reward, though. It’s inspiring, really, to meet citizens of the Empire who truly believe.”

He chuckled. “Excellent. I await your next message eagerly, my young apprentice. I am confident that it will be news of your victory. I would hate to hear about your defeat, and I’m sure your friends would too.”

The holoimage flickered off and Leia pocketed her holocomm unit.

“Local trash?” said the smuggler, walking towards her. He sounded downright insulted.

“Well I don’t know your name,” she replied, “so I improvised.”

“It’s Han Solo. Captain Solo to you. And this is Chewbacca, my first mate aboard the Millennium Falcon.”

“She’s Han Solo. Captain Solo to you. And this is Chewbacca, my first mate aboard the Millennium Falcon.”

“Pleased to meet you,” she said, brushing past him. “Now, if you’ll take me to Bestine, we can see about sending you off with some,” she fluttered her hand dismissively, “monetary reward.”

“Sure,” he said, following her up the ramp back into the ship. Chewie spoke and he replied, “Yeah, yeah, I know, I know.” Then he said, to Leia, “You know this plan of yours sounds pretty unnecessary. I know you didn’t want to admit to the Emperor that you screwed up—I wouldn’t either—but he didn’t seem too upset. You could just let—”

“Of course he didn’t seem too upset,” Leia said. “He’s never upset about anything. Failure is just an opportunity to torment people so it makes him downright happy to be disappointed. If I don’t take the lead in this matter he’ll be delighted to punish me when I get back.”

“Sounds like a wonderful life you’ve got there, Princess.”

“It is what it is.”

“You could always not go back.”

She sat back down at the dejarik table and looked at him, shaking her head. “How would you get your reward if I didn’t, hm?”

He paused, rubbing the back of his neck as if hesitating to say whatever it was that he was thinking, which surprised her since he seemed like the type to talk first and think later. “I’m sure the Alliance would also be happy to pay me if I brought you home to your mother,” he said.

“I thought you weren’t with the Alliance.”

“I’m not. Doesn’t mean their money's no good to me.”

She looked down at the white and black squares curving around the circle of the game board and asked, “Is there… is there some kind of reward out? A bounty? For me?”
“No. I mean, I’m no bounty hunter, but not that I’ve heard.”

“Then that’s a bad proposition for you, isn’t it? No guarantee of reward from the Alliance and you’d be making both Jabba and the Empire unhappy.”

He shrugged. “You’re right, forget I mentioned it.” He jerked his head towards Chewie. “It was his idea, anyway. He’s full of bright ideas today. We’ll take you to Bestine.”

He walked towards the cockpit. The wookiee started to follow him, but Leia said, “Chew...bacca, is it?”

He paused, growled an affirmation.

“Thank you.”

He nodded and ducked into the smaller space, leaving her alone.

It would be so easy, wouldn’t it, just to fly away off Tatooine, head out into space? The only problem was that she didn’t know where any of the rebel bases were located. Oh, and the little matter of the Death Star hanging above Alderaan, her father inside it, and her friends imprisoned on Coruscant. What the pilot—Solo—didn’t understand was that she had responsibilities far greater than he could ever imagine. The fate of an entire planet dependent on her every step.

There was no running away from that.
I must be the devil's daughter
What a dark father to dwell in me
I must be the devil's daughter
Such a dark father to dwell in me [x]

The *Falcon* touched down just outside of Bestine, near the garrison that overlooked the city. Leia, still thrumming with energy from the debacle at Jabba’s palace, marched down the gangplank with a determined stride, thoughts and plans and worries all storming through her brain.

Solo hung back, and she turned her head, saying, “Are you coming? I don’t have much time but if you want any sort of reward now is your opportunity to negotiate it.”

“No big fan of Bestine,” said Solo, looking around uneasily. “Too many Imps.”

She stopped and pivoted around, uttering a short, surprised laugh. “Well you did realize that you’d have to deal with Imperials to get paid, didn’t you?”

Chewbacca shrugged and nodded, saying something that she imagined was in agreement with her.

“Right, course I did,” said Solo, “but walking right into the garrison… gives me a bad feeling.”

“Well, stay or go, it doesn’t matter to me,” Leia told him, and continued walking towards the fort. He grumbled something and started after her.

They were met at the gate by Captain Jasha, the Imperial officer in charge. If Admiral Ozzel had done his job and followed her orders, he should already be apprised of the situation, so she approached and said, without formalities, “Captain, are your men ready?”

“Your Highness,” he said with a slight bow, just as he had greeted her earlier when Mayor Visalis was showing her around, “I am glad to see you alive and well. The reports we received from the Hutt’s stronghold—”

“Are they ready, Captain?”

“Um, yes, about that,” he said, indicating with one outstretched arm that she should follow him, “I did receive word from the Admiral that you wished to use my men to storm the citadel… but really I must caution against this endeavor.”

“You haven’t done anything to prepare, have you?”

“Well, I wanted to speak with you first, Your Highness—”

“Why? Were the orders Ozzel relayed unclear?”
“No, but I felt that as the commanding officer stationed on Tatooine it was my duty to offer you some advice on this matter, before any action is taken.”

They were walking side by side into the base, Solo and Chewbacca following behind them, but when they got to the gate one of the stormtroopers guarding it said, “Halt!” and they leveled their blasters at her new companions.

“Hey, we’re with her,” Solo objected, though he put his hands up.

Leia paused and looked back. “Oh, yes, these two assisted in my, uh, departure from the palace,” she said. “They’re hoping for a reward before they go on their way.”

Captain Jasha looked both of them up and down, his mustache twitching with indignation, and Leia could sense the objections coming before he sputtered, “A reward? I think not. These two criminals are clearly part of Jabba’s gang and are simply looking to exploit the situation. The only reward I see fit for them is a pair of shackles!”

Chewbacca roared a warning to stay away, backing up, and Leia noticed Solo’s right arm drifting a little downward, as if he were thinking about going for his blaster.

She rolled her eyes. “Captain Jasha,” she said, tilting her head to the side as she looked up at him, “I know you are not accustomed to taking orders, since you are what passes for Imperial rule on this planet, but I am the highest ranking person you will ever have the pleasure of meeting. These two, ruffians and scoundrels though they may be, are with me. I have decided to authorize a monetary reward as thanks for their actions and you will make sure they are paid and sent safely on their way. Do I make myself clear?”

Jasha shot the pilot and the wookiee a disdainful glare, but said, “Yes, Your Highness. Understood. How much do you wish me to pay them?”

Leia hesitated for a moment. She had not thought about any specific amount. “I don’t know, Captain, how much do you think saving the Crown Princess’s life is worth? What sort of number value do you place on my survival?”

Jasha swallowed nervously, then licked his lips and said, in a high voice, “3,750 credits?”

“That’s it?” she scoffed.

He laughed and tugged at his collar, even though Leia wasn’t doing a thing to him. “We’re a small garrison, Your Highness. Tatooine is a distant outpost, you must understand, we don’t have a large store of funds on hand…”

“Fifteen thousand,” she said sharply. “And that’s a low number. I’m sure you have it.” She turned back to the smuggler and asked, “Happy?”

Solo shrugged and turned one corner of his mouth up in a smile. “Well I was hoping for twenty, but whatever Your Majesty thinks is fair.”

“Fine. Make it twenty,” she said, just to annoy Jasha. “I think I’m worth at least that much, don’t you, Captain?”

He was very annoyed, to her satisfaction, but he knew better than to answer her question with anything more than a curt, “Yes, milady.”

“Now,” said Leia, as they entered the small fort, “when will we be ready to march on Jabba?”
Jasha straightened his shoulders and answered, “Your Highness, I do not think it wise for you to return to the Hutt’s enclave after what happened there today. Clearly, the fact that we are entertaining the notion of paying these criminals just for saving your life is indication that you must not go back there.”

“I fail to see why we are talking about this,” Leia said, her tone bored. “The Emperor has already signed off on this mission. Jabba’s insolence in attempting to kill me must not go unpunished.”

“Yes, of course, but I do not think you understand that Jabba’s palace cannot be stormed by our small garrison,” Jasha explained, his agitation increasing. “Why do you think we allow the gangster’s presence here? If we were capable of—”

“The Hutts and other crime syndicates are tolerated by the Empire because it is beneficial for us to do so,” Leia snapped. “But Jabba has overstepped his bounds and a message must be sent that our indulgence for the criminal element only extends so far.”

Jasha looked over at Solo and Chewbacca pointedly but Leia ignored it.

“I do not disagree that the Hutt must be dealt with,” said Jasha. “I merely think that such an endeavor must not be taken likely. It should be spearheaded by a military commander, not the Princess, and it will require far more troops than I have at my disposal. I only have stormtroopers. I must ask why the Executor, which is stationed in orbit above, is not being used to help us.”

Leia gritted her teeth together. This pompous ass clearly thought of her as a stupid child playing a game. She could not explain to this man why she needed to be the one leading the attack on Jabba and she could not explain why more of the Empire’s forces could not be used. The reason for both of these things tied back into the Emperor’s hold over her, and her need to avoid punishment for any perceived failure to carry out her mission, because the punishment would fall upon the Organas, not her. She had to expend as few troops as possible to get it done, since every resource the Empire lost on this mission would be her direct responsibility.

Instead of trying to come up with some other line of reasoning, she simply said, “You, sir, do not need to approve of this course of action. You only need to follow my orders. If you cannot do that, I will have to find someone who can to take your place.”

He got the message. “Very well,” he said, clicking his heels together, saluting. “I will prepare for our departure.”

“Good.”

“Lieutenant Barnes!” he shouted, clearly relishing the ability to exert some authority, “Pay this man and this… thing… a sum of twenty thousand credits and then escort them off the base.” He turned back to Leia. “Lady Vestre, would you like to wait inside?”

“No,” said Leia, despite the blistering suns beating down overhead. “Get to work, Captain. I am impatient.”

He saluted again and then rushed off to oversee preparations.

With nothing else to do in the meantime, Leia wandered back over towards the smugglers. They were standing about awkwardly while they waited for their payment, squinting suspiciously around the Imperial fort as if expecting an ambush.

“Well,” said Leia, “are you going to thank me for my generosity?”
“You know,” Solo replied, “that Imp does have a point. We just got you out of that mess at Jabba’s. A shame for you to go back and get yourself killed anyway.”

“What do you care?” she asked. “You got your reward. I doubt anyone will hunt you down for a refund.”

“They might,” said Solo with a brusque laugh. “But I’m not worried. It’s Chewie here who cares. He’s got a soft spot for you.”

She shook her head, smiling despite herself. “Thanks, Chewie. But I can take care of myself. I was doing just fine back there, anyway. Remember? I was running towards Jabba’s palace, not away from it.”

“Only because he blew up your shuttle with a rocket launcher,” Solo pointed out.

“Details,” she said, with a wave of her hand. “My numbers may be small, but that is of no concern to me. I have the Force on my side.”

“Oh boy, the Force,” said Solo, rolling his eyes.

“You don’t believe in the Force?”

“Not on your life. Whole lotta nonsense,” he told her. “Don’t get me wrong, a few magic tricks can come in handy, sometimes. But it’s not something I’d bet my life on. There’s a reason the Jedi all kicked it when I was a kid… but that was probably before you were born so I can see why you’d think a couple of lightsabers makes you invincible.”

“Not all the Jedi died,” Leia said. “I learned the ways of the Force from my father, who was a Jedi once.”

“How’s that working out for him these days?”

Leia was taken aback. She just stared at him, speechless, not really sure how to respond. Vaguely, in the back of her mind, she knew that she was not supposed to care about what had happened to her father. Not publicly. Not for a pair of smugglers from the Outer Rim to see. But still, the question shook her.

Chewie said something and Solo had the decency to look abashed for a moment.

“Well. Anyway. I’m sure you’ve got this whole attack under control,” he said, not even sounding sarcastic for once. “Princess With No Fear.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“I was just… I mean, when I was kid, I remember following the news on the HoloNet, and that’s what—”

“I know, and that’s why I don’t want you to call me that. My father is a traitor to the Empire,” she said mechanically. “Was a traitor. I do not speak of him.”

“Hey you brought it up.”

“Did I? Old habits. The Emperor is my true father now and I trust in the power of the Dark Side of the Force, not the trifling ways of the Jedi. You were right, they are extinct and their pathetic tricks could not save them.” She said it just a little too loud, as if announcing it to the whole garrison.
He held up one hand. “Alright, I won’t argue with that, Your Dark Majesty. But. You know,” he said, getting ready to offer more advice that she didn’t need, “you didn’t have to save Max Rebo’s band back there. You coulda just let Jabba feed ‘em to the rancor and your whole negotiation process would’ve gone smooth as silk.”

“Your point?”

“When you march on Jabba’s palace you’re gonna get a lot of people killed. Probably the band too, if Jabba hasn’t killed them already. He liked that band, but you know, I’m sure you left him in a very bad mood.”

Leia sighed and looked away. “Are you lecturing me? I’d think you’d have figured out by now that I don’t like being lectured.”

“No. You do whatever you have to do, Princess. You just don’t strike me as the kind of person who —”

“Don’t try to figure me out,” she warned him.

He shrugged and said, in a lowered voice, “You seem like you’re in a tight spot. Just thought I’d let you know that me and Chewie could use some Alliance credits to go with these Imperials ones, in case you feel like ditching this rock after all.”

She laughed, but looked around covertly before replying, “That would be quite the double payday for you, wouldn’t it? It’s a tempting offer, but, my place is by the Emperor’s side.”

Before he could say any more, Lieutenant Barnes came stepping brusquely towards them, carrying a suitcase in one hand. He opened it up and showed them the array of gold credit ingots inside.

“Twenty thousand,” he said stiffly, then snapped it shut again. “The Empire thanks you for protecting its most prized Crown Princess.”

Solo smirked and nodded, reaching out to take the proffered suitcase. “Think about it,” he said, turning to go. He glanced at the Lieutenant before telling her, “We’ll be at Chalmun’s cantina in Mos Eisley if you want to say ‘goodbye’ after you’re done storming the palace.” He gave her a small mock salute that turned into a wave as he left.

Chewbacca roared and lifted his arm in farewell, following Solo to their spaceship.

“Insolent fool,” Barnes said once they were out of ear range. “As if the Princess of the Empire would seek out a pair of ruffians in a dirty little cantina. Mos Eisley is—”

“Forgot about them,” Leia cut him off. “We have a Hutt to execute.”

The twin suns of Tatooine were setting as Leia marched up the road to Jabba’s palace with an entire regiment of stormtroopers at her back. The sky and the earth was a deep, blood red and the wind whipped at her cloak. She had changed out of her formal dress, no longer there to negotiate, and wore an athletic black ensemble underneath her robe.

A squadron of TIE fighters sent down from the star destroyer in orbit arced overheard, their ominous whine the only sound in the desert evening. The only sound, that is, besides the crisp march of the
stormtroopers’ boots against rock.

Jasha had convinced her to call down the TIE fighters for assistance, since the blaster cannon Jabba had on one of the parapets of his palace was a formidable obstacle for a ground attack. Leia, though loathe to take the Captain’s advice, had to agree that taking out the palace’s outer defenses with an air strike was the wisest option.

The cannon fired at the TIEs above, taking one out in an explosion that, for a moment, created a third sun in the sky above. But only one lonely anti-aircraft weapon was no match for the entire Storm Squadron, and the TIEs wove around in tight formation, blasting the palace with all their might.

Leia marched up the heavy entrance door amid blaster fire from thugs stationed around the palace. She let her stormtroopers take care of that. They formed a tight semi-circle around her as she plunged both of her lightsabers into the door. In a matter of moments, she had carved a large opening into the door, and she and her troops flooded into the palace.

The stormtroopers had strict orders not to shoot anyone who was unarmed or surrendering. Leia had given them a speech about how the Empire was mighty and just, a beacon of law and order in a disorderly world. She made it clear that they were there to take out Jabba, not to indiscriminately slaughter. But what she drove home most of all was that disobeying her, going against her orders, displeasing her, was the gravest sin they could commit and would be met with swift and decisive punishment.

She held her head high as she stalked through the palace, hunting the Hutt. She thought about Solo’s words, his warning that attacking the Palace would just result in the deaths of those beings she had tried to save. We’ll see about that, she thought. She was a better commander than that. She hoped the Bestine troops were more disciplined than that.

Leia found Jabba the Hutt attempting to escape aboard a large sail barge. She walked out into an inner courtyard where the barge was docked—where, she supposed, the Millennium Falcon had been docked earlier that day—and saw the oversized slug creeping towards his escape vessel.

Without hesitation she reached out and seized him by the throat from across the courtyard, dragging him backwards towards her as she advanced, the troopers fanning out around her and returning blaster fire from the various guards and thugs.

The Hutt was choking and sputtering, as he had done earlier, trying to slither towards the barge. But Leia’s hold on him through the Force was tighter than a titanium clamp. She became oblivious to everything else now that she had her quarry. She jumped on his back, climbing up his tail like his body was a hill and the head a mountain peak, then she lifted her twin sabers high and drove them through the base of the Hutt’s skull.

Leia had never before felt so powerful. So in control. She took deep breaths as she stood over the fallen Hutt, inhaling the scorching smell of blaster fire in the desert night.

It was all over very quickly after that. Seeing the Hutt’s quivering body go still took a great deal of the fight out of his cronies. Many of them surrendered, though a few still fought to the bitter end. Those that did met either blaster fire from the stormtroopers or the heat of Leia’s blades.

She felt flush with triumph as she swept through the palace, rounding up stragglers. She made her way down to the prison cells and found the hapless members of the Max Rebo band, and the dancers, locked away with an assortment of other beings that had made Jabba angry at one point or another. He could only feed the rancor so much in one go, they said. The prison cells were like the
rancor’s pantry. They fell to their knees (those that had knees) thanking her profusely for saving them.

She felt even better when she found Threepio in the droid reclamation room. He had been fitted with a restraining bolt, but was otherwise in good condition. “Leia! Thank the maker, you’re alright! I knew you would come back,” he exclaimed, forgetting in that moment that he was supposed to address her as “Mistress Vestre”. She didn’t correct him.

“Round everyone up,” she told Captain Jasha, as she stood with her hands on her hips, surveying the stormtroopers standing guard over the vanquished. “I hope your prison in Bestine has enough room for everyone here. After we’ve got this place cleared out I want you to torch it. Light it up and let it burn like a beacon for kilometers around.”

“Yes, milady,” Jasha said, bowing.

“Oh, but before you do, have your troops gather up any weapon caches they find and have them delivered up to the Executor,” she said. “That’s what I came here for, after all.”

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A few kilometers away, atop a mesa, Han Solo lay on his stomach on the rocky ground and lifted a pair of electrobinoculars to his eyes. He looked across the desert at the blazing ruins of what had recently been Jabba the Hutt’s stronghold.

“That girl is crazier than a bag of baby rathtars,” he muttered.

“She did exactly what she said she would,” Chewbacca replied in shyriiwook from where he crouched beside Han.

Han grunted, training the binocs on the parade of prisoners that were being led aboard the Imperial transports. Not all the refugees from the burning palace appeared to be prisoners, though. The girl—Vestre or Leia or whatever her true name really was—had managed to separate out the beings in the palace who had been slaves or prisoners of the Hutt, and they were unshackled, clearly being shown deferential treatment. The members of Max Rebo’s band were no slaves, Han knew that for sure, but they were all playing the victim (even sly old Sy Snootles, who’d been in no danger of being tossed into the rancor pit) because they could recognize the soft, mushy center beneath all the bluster. No one in their right mind went up against Jabba, and no one who had a strong sense of self-preservation went up against him just to save a bunch of musicians, so Han was convinced the girl had delusions of heroic grandeur if not a death wish.

Of course, the blazing remains of Jabba’s citadel retreat proved that maybe she wasn’t entirely delusional. She had the might of the Empire to back her up. They had firebombed what remained of the palace after the fight, and Han was glad he and Chewie had chosen the right side. Sometimes you make a lucky call, he thought, and deciding to back the girl had been both lucrative and life-saving.

He trained the binocs on her, where she stood far away surveying the destruction she had wrought. She looked very satisfied with herself. Just as he thought this, she turned her head, and looked up and away, straight into his eyes. As if she saw him watching her. That was impossible and ridiculous, though, since he was too far away for anyone to see with the naked eye. Especially not in the dark… But she stared into the electrobinoculars for a moment, and he held his breath, thinking absurdly that she would open her mouth, say something to him and he might hear it, beyond all
reason.

She turned her head away, gesturing and shouting to the stormtroopers who carried crates of weapons and goods across the sands to load onto the transports.

“Well I’ve seen enough,” said Han, lowering the binocs and getting to his feet. “Guess an ‘I told you so’ isn’t in order after all. We better get out of here before someone decides to round us up, too.”

“Do you think she’ll come looking for us?”

“Not on your life,” Han scoffed.

“I’m telling you, the Alliance wants her back. And she wants to go back there, too.”

“No, she doesn’t. You heard her, and you see her down there; she’s the one in charge. That’s no damsel in distress in need of a rescue.”

“The Alliance would still pay to have her back.”

“But who’s gonna make her come with us? You?” Han snorted and shook his head. “Not unless you want a lightsaber between the eyes.”

“She likes me.”

“I wouldn’t try your luck. C’mon buddy, you gotta learn to quit while you’re ahead.”

“Hey, it was your idea to go back for her in the first place. Remember?”

“Yeah, and I’m such a nice guy I let you take all the credit. Anyway, we’re not bounty hunters, Chewie. The only passengers that come aboard the *Falcon* are the ones who want to be there.”

Chewie shrugged and just made a noncommittal noise that wasn’t even a word in shyriiwook. At least not one that Han knew.

“Hey, look at what the Empire did to Jabba,” Han insisted, sweeping an arm back towards the red and orange glow lighting up the night. “I’m not sure it’d be such a good idea to cross them even if the girl did want a ride to the nearest Alliance base.”

“The Empire didn’t do that; Leia Skywalker did that,” Chewie pointed out.

“Vestre Palpatine,” Han corrected. “Princess Vestre.”

Chewie wagged his head as he boarded the ship. “Whatever you say.”

Leia walked casually into Chalmun’s cantina, pausing to survey the dim interior for a moment. A few beings turned to look at her, but turned away again, seeing nothing remarkable. And that was just as she wanted it.

She was dressed in the dingey, well-worn garb of a bounty hunter, pieced together from the bodies of different fallen foes at Jabba’s palace. Her face was covered by a mask that concealed her identity completely.
She had come from Bestine, from her guest room in the home of Mayor Visalis. She was staying there for a day or two, ostensibly enjoying the hospitality of Visalis as she awaited news from the Emperor telling her where her next rendezvous with the Hutts was to take place. If another rendezvous with the Hutts was even going to take place, that is. There was still a chance that they would reject the Empire completely and declare war because of what happened to Jabba.

Leia hated waiting to find out.

The Imperials thought she was still in Bestine, in the guest room, but it was really just Threepio there now. She’d given him instructions not to let anyone in her room and to tell any visitors that she was in a deep sleep and did not wish to be disturbed. She’d stolen a speederbike by using a mind trick on its owner and had taken it all the way to Mos Eisley.

At first she doubted that Solo and Chewbacca would actually be there, like they’d said they would, but then she caught sight of the wookiee at the bar. She walked over to him, keeping her stride steady and unconcerned. She nodded briefly to a pig faced humanoid and leaned against the bar near Chewbacca.

“Looking for work?” she asked, her voice coming out mechanical and gravelly.

He responded with a shrug and a caged growl.

“I’ve been told that you and your associate are available for a job,” she said.

He cocked his head to the side with an inquisitive air and said something that sounded like a question.

“Han Solo,” she said. “He told me you’d be here.”

She could see it in the wookiee’s eyes as it dawned on him who she was beneath the mask. He nodded and motioned for her to follow him away from the bar.

They went over to a relatively secluded table in the corner, where the pilot was lounging against the wall, looking around the cantina with a disinterested air.

Chewbacca sat down and spoke with Solo. The pilot sat up, eyeing her suspiciously. “That’s a new look for you,” he said.

“It does the trick,” she responded. “You don’t think I’d walk in here with a pair of stormtroopers playing ‘Glory of the Empire’ on trumpets, did you?”

“I didn’t think you’d walk in here at all, to be honest.”

“You’ll find I’m full of surprises.”

“I can see that. Well, does this mean you’re looking for a ride off this rock?” he asked. “Our fares are reasonable, aren’t they, Chewie? Cash on delivery.”

She shook her head. “No. Nothing’s changed. I’m not leaving… with you, at least. But I have a different job for you, if you’re interested.”

He sat back and gazed at her, eyes half-lidded. “I’m listening.”

She placed her hand on the table, laying it down casually, so that anyone looking their way might think she was simply resting it there. Concealed in her palm was a datastick. She turned her hand
ever so slightly so that Solo could catch a glimpse of it.

“I’ve got something I want delivered to a certain someone,” she said. “Discreetly. Shouldn’t be too hard for a man in your line of work, should it?”

“Depends on the certain someone,” he said, his eyes flickering to her hand and then away again.

“His name is Luke,” she told him.

“I see. And where do I find this… Luke?”

“I don’t know.”

He laughed. “That’s an important bit of information.”

“You’ll have to find him.”

“Oh, sure. We’re not exactly bounty hunters, you know,” said Solo, seeming more interested in picking at the molding along the wall than talking to her. “And a first name isn’t much to go on. Lots of Lukes in this galaxy.”

“If you know my name, you know his.” She had no intention of speaking the name Skywalker out loud in a place like this.

He nodded thoughtfully. “Alright. Well… where’s the last place you saw this guy?”

She thought back. “Vohai,” she said. “But that was six years ago.”

He laughed again, shaking his head. Another protest was forthcoming, but she cut him off, saying, “He travels in the company of…” and here she leaned in, glancing around, although the mask made it difficult to see, “a man named Kenobi. They have been known to visit certain bases.”

“Certain bases,” he echoed. “I don’t suppose you know where any of these bases are?”

“No. I’ve never been privileged with that information.”

“Is there anything you do know?” he asked, his tone rife with derision, and she bristled.

“I know that you’re a resourceful man,” she said, her voice deadly calm through the mask. He couldn’t see how her eyes flashed. “But if you don’t think you’re up to the task, then don’t allow me to waste any more of your time.”

She started to stand up, but Chewie reached out a hand and said something that sounded conciliatory, or at least, like he wanted her to stay. He leaned in close to Han and they conferred while Leia sat back down, as regally as possible given her disguise.

“What’s the payment?” Solo finally asked. “My offer was contingent on a reward from certain factions upon your arrival.”

“I can’t pay you in advance,” said Leia. It was true enough. She couldn’t very well commandeer more Imperial credits without the Emperor noticing and becoming suspicious. She was already hoping that he didn’t receive word of the payment she’d forced Captain Jasha to deal out. “But once you deliver this to Luke, he’ll pay you.”

“And how do you know that? How do you know he has any money, much less enough to make this worth my while?”
“He can get the funds from his mother,” she said, her voice measured, hoping that it betrayed none of the uncertainty she felt.

“I dunno, this is a lot less of a sure thing that just going to her direct,” said Solo. “Why don’t I take it to her and her friends?”

“You’d never get close enough to her to deliver it,” said Leia. “She’s a very important person with a sizeable bounty on her head. Even if you could find your way onto a base do you think her friends would allow just anyone to walk up to her with a ‘special delivery’? Not likely.”

He nodded. “Alright. But let’s say I find the elusive Luke, wherever he is… how do I know I’ve found the right person? And how does he know that you sent me?”

She tapped the datastick against the table lightly. “That’s the easy part,” she said. “When you find him you just have to tell him this one thing, and he’ll know I sent you….”

“What one thing?” Solo asked, raising an eyebrow.

Leia looked around the cantina surreptitiously. No one seemed to be paying them any mind, and the loud music and chatter drowned out their conversation well enough that it seemed like it should be safe just to speak the message out loud. But Leia didn’t want to take any chances. She slid around the table to sit directly next to Solo on the bench against the wall. He smelled sharply of motor oil, that old familiar mechanic’s grunge, as if he had just come from working on his spaceship.

She slipped the mask up so that she could whisper into his ear, “Ask him if he remembers who his favorite teacher was.”

Solo shifted away from her, seeming very uncomfortable. Perhaps he feared she was using a Jedi mind trick on him. He asked, “And what’s the answer?”

“Miss Ognoyn,” she said. “He had a terrible crush on her. You can tell him that I’ll never let it go. Not ever.”

“Fine. And how do I know that he’ll pay me?”

“He’ll pay you,” she said, leaning away from him and repositioning her mask. “I’m going to give you a bit of information to ensure it.”

“Which is?”

“The data is encrypted,” she said. “No one can access the message without entering the proper code. I’m giving you half the code. Once you get paid you can give it to him, and he’ll be able to figure out the other half based on what you give him. If he wants to crack the code and see the message, he’ll make sure you get paid. Simple.”

“And you’re sure he’s gonna want it bad enough?”

She clenched her fist around the datastick, but then relaxed, breathing out a long slow breath that made the mask crackle. Of course Luke would want a message from her.

“I’m sure.”

Solo looked past her to Chewbacca, and for a moment it was as if they were speaking telepathically. Solo raised his eyebrow and Chewie shrugged in response, prompting an exaggerated eye roll from Solo.
“Alright,” he said. “Why not. I want another twenty thousand for this job. Just like the last one.”

“Seems fair,” Leia remarked, hoping that Luke could figure out a way to come with that much money, or that he had a way to get it from Mother.

“So what’s my part of the code?” Solo asked, leaning towards her.

She put out her free hand to push him back. “No need to whisper,” she said dryly, the vocal distortion from the mask making the words into a buzz like an annoyed bug. “It’s R2-D2.”

“Got it,” he said, then held out his hand. “Pleasure doing business with you.”

She shook his hand, sealing their deal and transferring the datastick into his palm. Chewie made a soft noise and nodded to her, signaling his agreement as well.

Leia pushed past Solo and got up to leave. She didn’t say goodbye to either of them. She didn’t even look back.

There was something immensely satisfying about the way the next Hutt she met bowed and scraped and ceded to all her wishes.

From Tatooine she traveled directly to Nal Hutta, the homeworld of the Hutts, and met with Gardulla Besadii the Elder. This was the very same Hutt who had once owned her father and grandmother, and the irony was not lost on Leia. She wondered if the Emperor was testing her once more by sending her to Gardulla, instead of any other member of the Hutt Council. Perhaps he wanted to see if Leia would complete her original mission or would be unable to resist the opportunity to obliterate Gardulla as she had done Jabba.

Leia could not deny that it was tempting.

Gardulla did not give her an opportunity or an excuse, though. The Hutt was officious and deferential, apologizing for Jabba’s “selfish, renegade actions” and swearing that she would see to it that the Empire was satisfied with the outcome of this second meeting. If she remembered that she had once owned Anakin and Shmi Skywalker, she made no mention of it.

Leia knew that the Hutt was afraid: she could feel fear radiate off of her, along with hate, and a smell she had come to realize was a uniquely Hutt odor. She wondered if her father could see them now, and if he was pleased that his former master now bowed and scraped and feared for her life like the miserable slug she was. Leia was often certain, somehow, that her father could see her, that he was watching over her. She sometimes thought that she could hear his voice, but she could barely make out the words, and she was certain that however he was trying to communicate with her was taking all of his strength in the Force. Strength he should be using to hold on to life inside that tank until she could get him out.

Leia came away from Gardulla with an arms supply deal that was completely in the Empire’s favor, with the tacit agreement that the Hutts would accept whatever payment the Empire thought fit, and that all Imperial ships would travel unmolested through Hutt space.

Leia was tempted to go further, to make even more demands, the ones she personally saw fit, but unfortunately those went against the interests of the Empire and she could not think of a way to
excuse it to the Emperor later. Part of the deal struck with the Hutts was the unofficial, official agreement that the Empire would continue to look the other way in regards to many of the Hutt Cartel’s criminal doings throughout the Outer Rim. This included slavery and spice running, two things Leia thought should be eradicated from the galaxy.

Technically, slavery was against the law, just as it had been in the days of the Republic. But now, besides being unable or unwilling to crack down on slavery on worlds outside their jurisdiction, the government was actively participating in it. It was not called slavery when the Empire did it, though. They used terms like conscription, mandatory labor, or required service to the Empire.

Smuggling was another matter altogether. A person could be considered a smuggler for merely transporting any type of marketable good between planets without paying the requisite intergalactic taxes and tariffs. Or they could be someone, like Solo and Chewbacca, who worked for a crime cartel such as the Hutts to regularly move illicit goods between star systems.

Leia wondered what sorts of things her unlikely new friends smuggled. Weapons, drugs, living beings? For some reason she wanted to think of them as the sorts who had a limit to what depth of criminal depravity they would reach, but she knew that was an irrational, unreasonable thought. They had been in the employ of Jabba, welcomed and at home in his criminal headquarters, until she had happened along and firebombed the place. Just because they had helped her did not mean they were on the side of good.

She herself was not on the side of good. She kept having to remind herself of that. Anyone who allied with her was allying with the Emperor’s heir, Vestre Palpatine… the girl who had renounced her parents and everything that they stood for.

People who wanted to make friends with that girl were not to be trusted.

And yet, she did. She trusted them. She realized it even as her rational thoughts declared otherwise. She trusted that they would get the job done and would not betray her to the Empire for a bigger payday. She didn’t know why she knew this, for certain, but she had felt a curious instinct drawing her to them, pushing her to go to the cantina with her message for Luke. Perhaps it was the Force giving her a glimpse of direction, of certainty. At any rate, it was done and she could not continue to dwell on whether or not she had made the right choice. As with every move she made these days, she just had to do it, trust in the Force, and hope for the best.

From Nal Hutta, Leia returned once more to Coruscant, where the Emperor awaited her.

She mentally prepared herself to defend her actions on Tatooine. Her story was still that Jabba had decided to attempt an assassination seemingly out of the blue, and that she strongly suspected him to have been paid off by the Rebel Alliance to do it. The idea that a Hutt would do such a thing didn’t seem all that much of a stretch to Leia. After all, the Empire’s tolerance for the Hutt’s was in large part due to the continued struggled with the Alliance... once the Empire dealt with the Rebellion once and for all, they would crack down far harder on the crime cartels. It was in the Hutts’ interest to keep the war between the Empire and the Alliance going, neither side winning, and to play them both.

Convincing him that the Alliance wanted her dead was a little trickier, since even she didn’t think that her mother would outright want her dead. The fact that there was no posted bounty for her safe
return to her family was... troubling.... But it didn’t mean anything. Did it? At any rate, she had to convince the Emperor that she believed them capable of assassinating her. The Hutts’ supposed renegade actions made no sense, otherwise.

“You have done well, my dear,” said the Emperor, welcoming her back. She knelt on one knee before his throne in the Imperial Palace, her head bowed. “You have shown adaptability and ruthlessness in your dealings with the Hutts. I am most pleased, most pleased.”

“Thank you, master,” she said to the floor.

“You have earned a reward,” he proclaimed. “You will have a break from your training, tonight. I have arranged a gala in your honor. Of course we cannot publicize our dealings with the Hutts—such tawdry business as dealing with crime lords is not fit to be celebrated here—but who really needs an excuse to throw a ball in honor of a Princess, hm?”

She looked up. He wasn’t even questioning her about what had gone down on Tatooine. This unsettled her. Yes, they had spoken of it briefly over a comlink, but he had not seemed altogether satisfied with her story, then, and there had been the promise of more discussion to come. She wondered if it was too optimistic to think that he just didn’t care anymore, because she had successfully rebounded from that failure.

“Thank you,” she said. “May I go prepare for the event?”

“Yes,” he said, smiling benevolently. “Go on.”

Leia walked away, feeling a little lightheaded. Had she really gotten away with it? Had she really succeeded with no dire consequences? Why did she still have such a bad feeling coursing through her?

She put these doubts aside and went to her personal chambers to wash and change. She had sent Threepio there ahead of her, not wanting to tempt the Emperor by having him at her side when she went before him to make her report on her meeting with Gardulla the Hutt. Even when she was alone with just Threepio, she said nothing to him about the real reason the negotiations with Jabba had gone south, and he knew better than to say anything to her about it. Her chambers, though spacious and opulent as befiting a royal Princess, were over glorified prison cells, complete with round the chrono security cameras and microphones.

There were handmaidens assigned serve her, and usually she barely tolerated their presence, preferring to only have Threepio allowed in her private chambers. But tonight she allowed them to assist her with dressing, hair, and makeup simply because she was preparing for a politically significant party and knew she had to look her best, her most grand and important.

The Emperor would expect no less. This gala was supposedly in her honor, a reward for her success, but she knew that its true purpose to was to show her off to the Imperial elite.

If she showed up looking slovenly or even just less than impressive, he would consider it insubordination.

She entered the grand ballroom when the party in her honor was already in full swing, pausing at the top of a long staircase to survey the Imperial elite gathered below. There were senators and nobility gathered around, trying to outshine each other, along with high ranking officials—Governors and Moff and Admirals—rubbing shoulders with high class business people and gangsters who knew how to put on a decent face for the public. There were also faux intellectuals—professors at the Coruscanti universities who had no trouble teaching the propaganda of the Empire as history, along
with fawning artists, musicians, popular authors, famous HoloDrama stars and the like. None of these people meant anything to her, and she meant nothing to them besides an excuse to gather together and revel in how the Empire had benefited them while crushing the rest of the galaxy under its boot.

Leia glided down the staircase, drawing the eyes of all who gathered below. Her gown was made of shimmering black satin, and draped across one shoulder was a cape made of many layers of rippling, sheer black silk that fluttered around her like the gossamer wings of a moth as she walked. Her arms and legs, and the bodice of her gown, were adorned with a swirling pattern of dark feathers. She wore a matching headpiece of shining black metal that lifted her hair up above her head in a crown of braids. Her face and neck was painted the deathly white of the Naboo queens and she wore the scar of remembrance on her bottom lip—but tonight it was black, not red.

The Emperor was seated on a throne backdropped by floor to ceiling transparisteel windows. The glittering, ever moving Coruscant cityscape flickered and shimmered behind him. Leia swept past the Imperial elite, barely sparing them a glance, until she reached the Emperor's side.

"You are a stunning sight for this old eyes, my dear," he said, as she knelt before him. He reached out a hand adorned by a gaudy silver ring set with a deep maroon stone, and Leia kissed the proffered gem before rising to take a seat beside him. She hoped, beyond hope, that she would not be required to make a speech tonight, or dance with some idiot fool who dreamed that they could rise up to the Emperor's side by way of marriage to his Heir. The last time she'd been to one of these galas, the one thrown to celebrate the announcement of her joining sides with the Empire, several beings had tried (laughably) to sweep her off her feet and charm their way into an alliance.

The Emperor raised his hands, and the entire room went quiet. Everyone turned to him as he stood.

"My friends," he said. "Tonight I have a special treat for you. In honor of Princess Vestre, I have commissioned a special performance from a renowned musical group who (I am told) are highly sought after on many planets across the Outer Rim, but have been hitherto undiscovered here on Coruscant. This band is a particular favorite of the Princess. With that in mind, it is with great pleasure that I present to you, the Max Rebo Band."

The room erupted in applause as a curtain was swept aside to reveal the band already set up and ready to go on stage. As soon as the lights hit them, they began to perform a raucous dance rendition of "Glory of the Empire." The dancing trio was front and center, kicking up their legs and saluting in a row.

Leia clenched the arms of her chair and could feel the blood draining from her face, till the skin underneath the makeup was likely as pale as the paint on top. She dared not look at the Emperor, though she could hear his pleased laughter as he also applauded the band before retaking his seat.

"Well, my dear girl, are you not surprised?" Palpatine asked.

Leia turned to him reluctantly, to see him watching her from underneath his hood with sharp eyes and a sharper smile.

"Perplexed," she said. "I have no special affinity for this band. Whoever told you that they were a favorite of mine was mistaken, I'm afraid."

"I find them charming. In a crass, backwater saloon sort of way," he said, turning slowly back to look at the stage.

She smiled weakly, but dared not say anymore. He was up to something. Was bringing the band
here his way of telling her that he knew just how exactly she had messed up the negotiations with Jabba? How else would he even know of their existence?

The prisoners from Jabba’s must have said something… perhaps Captain Jasha had interrogated them back in Bestine while she was meeting with the smugglers and then traveling to Nal Hutta. The Captain didn’t like her, didn’t like her ordering him around and using his troops to storm Jabba’s palace. Of course he would have sought a way to undermine her with the Emperor! How could she have been so stupid, she thought. How could she have thought that leaving so many witnesses to her mistakes would result in anything short of disaster?

She could barely stay sitting as the band played on, as the room full of Coruscanti elite smirked and gave each other sidelong glances, as the Emperor chuckled softly into the velvet folds of his cloak. She could barely breathe.

What would happen to Astreia and Winter? She had come back successful; she had returned triumphant with the cooperation of the Hutts secured. What did it matter that she’d had a misstep along the way? What was he going to do about it? It wasn’t fair. Surely fixing a mistake was more important than making one in the first place… she would have to make him understand.

The band finished their song and the curtain fell back into place as the audience cheered and clapped… more out of respect for the Emperor and his Princess than appreciation for the performance, Leia was sure.

The muted strains of violin music started up again as the guests returned to their usual behavior, mulling about and sipping drinks or eating delicate finger foods as they congratulated each other on being so important. Leia dared not say a word, though a multitude of excuses and justifications rushed through her mind.

“You seemed troubled,” said Palpatine. “Perhaps you should join our guests, meet your future subjects, rather than sit up here in silence with an old man.”

For once, Leia was glad to get up and mingle with the Imperial citizenry. She stood up without a word and swept down the steps, away from the Emperor on his throne.

The rest of the night was a blur of sycophants flocking to her, trying to stand out from the crowd or ingratiate themselves with her. She danced and she allowed herself to be flattered and flaunted. She drank the finest champagnes and brandies imported from Corellia and allowed herself to be served platters of fancy foods, like shrimp dipped in Felucian spice sauce or shuura fruit tarts from Naboo. She listened to insufferable fools talk down to her about the state of the galaxy as they bent to kiss her hand.

The entire time her mind was on the dark shadow that loomed above them all. The Emperor sat on his throne, watching, with his aids and his guards gathered round him. Leia wondered how everyone could behave so carelessly, as if they were not oppressed by a great evil, as if they could not sense the darkness that Palpatine exuded. She wondered if it really was only her who felt it.

She waited for the other shoe to drop, for her master to reveal a new surprise, for him to let her know that all was not fine and dandy. She carried her heart in her throat and the fine foods and liquors sat like rocks and molten metals in her stomach.

Finally, the Emperor rose from his seat and bid his guests good night. Then he walked down the steps, flanked by his guards, and lifted a hand to beckon Leia to his side. She went, obediently, head down, and offered him her arm. He liked to appear as a frail old man who needed to lean on his young heir, in public. Her arm felt cold where his hand lay upon it.
“Come with me, my dear,” he said quietly, as the crowd parted for them, the Coruscanti elite bowing and scraping like the slugs they were. “I have something to show you.”

She swallowed thickly and said, “Yes, master,” dreading what she would see.

The Emperor lead her down a few levels until they came to a section of the palace she had never before been allowed to visit. The Palace was rebuilt from the ruins of the old Jedi Temple, and so it was a vast place, with many rooms, many levels, many ancient passageways.

They went to stand before a window of darkened transparisteel, and at the lifting of the Emperor’s hand, the darkness dissipated to reveal Winter and Astreia Organa seated together on a cushion. Leia drew a sharp intake of breath, and a smile curled across Sidious’s face.

“I thought you might like to see your friends,” he said. “To know that they are well.”

The Organas looked frightened, but otherwise unharmed, nor did they looked particularly unhealthy. They were dressed in simple garments but did not appear malnourished or bruised or scarred, and for that, Leia was only slightly relieved. They were still prisoners of the Empire and she knew that many hurts could be invisible.

“Can I speak with them?” she asked.

“Perhaps. First, we have some business to attend to.”

“What business?”

“Oh, I think you know. The business on Tatooine is unfinished.” He turned, his hand still on her arm, and led her to another similarly shaded window. As the opaque shield lifted, it revealed the members if the Max Rebo band. They were milling about their room, all looking quite nervous… those whose expressions she could read, anyway. There were twelve members of the band in full, and the room seemed small with all those beings gathered inside.

“What are you going to do with them?” she asked, not bothering to ask how he knew. He knew everything, she thought, dully. It had been foolish to think she could hide anything from him. She wondered if he knew about her secret dealings with the smugglers, too. She wondered if she would be soon led to a third window where she would see Solo and Chewbacca, as well.

“Their fate is up to you, my dear,” Sidious cooed. “You took such an interest in them, jeopardizing your mission to spare them from Jabba’s whims, that I think it only fitting you should continue to hold their lives in your hands.”

Leia turned to him, forcing herself to look fully into his face. “They are of no consequence. I suffered a momentary weakness at Jabba’s and I fixed the mistake, as you know.”

“We all have our moments of weakness,” Sidious replied, his expression one of insincere understanding. “I expect such weakness from you, Darth Vestre. You are still a child, after all, and you were raised to value compassion and selflessness as virtues… do not think I am so deluded into thinking that you can throw off your mother’s teachings so easily. No. What I do not expect, however, is for you to think that you can lie to me without effort.”

“I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“You claimed that Jabba attacked you unprovoked. Well, we both know that is not how it happened. You should have confessed your mistake.”
“I know. I was… I was not thinking clearly. I didn’t want to disappoint you.”

He laughed. “You feared punishment,” he said. “As well you should have. But do not fear. I am merciful, too. I am pleased with your destruction of Jabba the Hutt, with your swift action to remedy your initial failure. But I remain very displeased with your dishonesty, Vestre. Very displeased.”

“What are you going to do?”

He patted her arm before releasing his grip. “I will not punish you, my dear. This is my reward for your success in cleaning up your own mess. However, this is also a learning opportunity. You only partially cleaned up after yourself. You killed Jabba and the ones who stood against you, but you left too many alive. You tried to be treacherous and yet left witnesses to your treachery. This will not do. This is far too sloppy.”

She lowered her head. His words were confusing. Was he angry that she had lied to him, or angry that she had not done a good job covering her tracks?

“I have already instructed Captain Jasha to execute all of the prisoners you left in his care,” Sidious said. “And I have issued a bounty on the two smugglers who assisted in your initial escape from Jabba. You should have killed them as soon as you reached Bestine, and you should have slaughtered every living being you found at Jabba’s palace.”

Leia stepped away from him. “I told you before,” she said, “that I would never be a Sith in my heart. I killed those I had to in order to complete my mission. I did what you asked of me and nothing more.”

“But that isn’t good enough, my dear. Not good enough, at all. Besides, this is hardly a simple matter of Sith doctrine. It is pragmatism. Even a Jedi would deem your decision making to be poor. If you had wanted your lie to be unshakeable, you should have killed any and all witnesses to it. Everyone who was in Jabba’s palace to see your moment of weakness needed to die. You had a choice, my dear, to be honest and forthright with me or seek to deceive me. You chose deceit but did a very bad job of it.”

“It would be a waste,” Leia said, her shoulders slumping. “I saved them from the rancor pit, what sense would there be in killing them myself?”

“All the sense, Vestre. I told you that failure would result in the death of one of your friends.” He waved one hand towards the room where Astreia and Winter were kept. “You knew that Jabba had to die in order to ensure no negative repercussions, but you stopped short of doing what you knew needed to be done. You didn’t have the stomach to kill the others.”

“Please,” she said, unable to keep her voice from shaking, “I completed the mission as you asked. I secured the alliance with the Hutts. Please do not kill my friends. I succeeded.”

“Yes, yes,” he said, reaching out to pat her arm again. “Didn’t I tell you that there would be no punishment?”

She breathed out. “Yes.”

“And there won’t be. The girls will be fine, just fine. But—”

Her breath caught in her throat.

“You must finish what you started.” He turned her towards the window through which the band and the dancers could be seen. “They have been waiting for their payment for tonight’s performance.
They are getting impatient, as it has been several hours since they were ushered into this room to await their reward. I think it is time for you to go and give it to them.”

“But—”

“Unless you would like the Organa sisters to receive the payment instead?”

Leia closed her eyes. She felt him take her hand and turn the palm upward, then felt the cold weight of her lightsabers being placed there.

“I had them brought down from your room,” he said, with a slithering kindness. “Your gown is really quite lovely tonight, my dear, but you should consider keeping your sabers with you at all times, even special gala occasions. You never know when you might need them.”

“Yes, master,” she said. She took her white saber in her right hand and the red saber in her left, and with heavy footsteps, followed one of the Imperial guards to the door leading into the room where the musicians awaited her.

*There’s no way around it,* she told herself, trying to still the shaking in her hands. She could not refuse to do this without sealing Winter and Astreia’s fate.

*I will make it swift and merciful,* she thought as slow steps carried her forward. Surely this was better than the fate Jabba had intended. Death by the lightsaber blade was preferable to being devoured alive by a rancor. She would not toy with them or make them suffer. It would be quick. It would be painless.

It would be a mercy.

12... 11... 10... 9... 8... 7... 6... 5... 4... 3... 2... 1...

When it was done, when she stood alone over the fallen alien bodies, she looked at the blank wall that concealed the one-way window, knowing that Sidious watched her from the other side.

Another window lightened, to her left, and she looked over to see the adjacent room, where Winter and Astreia were huddled together. She stared at them for a moment, fearing some other instruction from Sidious, his bloodlust unquenched, but nothing happened.

Then, Winter looked up. She looked at Leia. Her eyes showed recognition.

Leia realized that the window was not a one way view this time. She could see them. They could see her.

Winter stood up. Astreia looked up in confusion for a moment before she also noticed Leia on the other side. She drew back even as Winter took a few steps towards the window.

Leia remained rooted in her spot. She held her lightsabers down at her sides and she turned off the blades, but it was too late. Winter had seen them.

Winter saw everything. The bodies. Leia at the center, white and red sabers in her hands.

They stared at one another for a long moment.

Then the transparisteel darkened again. The door to the hall swooshed open and Leia staggered out.

“Well done, my dear,” said Sidious. “You were swift and decisive. Very good.”
She remained silent. There were no words to say. Her head felt empty and light on her shoulders. The lightsabers in her hands were impossibly heavy.

“I noticed a curious thing, however. Perhaps you can help me to understand. You prefer to use two lightsabers, but for this task you only used one of the blades.”

“Did I,” Leia said, staring past him at nothing. Her voice sounded flat and distant to her own ears.

“Yes.” He motioned to her left hand. “You only used the red blade, though both were ignited. It would have, in fact, gone a little smoother for you if you had used both. You would not have had to chase them around the room quite so much, I think.”

“I didn’t realize,” she said, and that was a lie.

“Well,” he remarked, cheerfully, “no matter. You are still learning. You have done very well tonight. Very well indeed. Come, let us rejoin the party. There is still much to celebrate.”

Chapter End Notes

- R.I.P. Max Rebo and his band. Hey, look on the bright side: Oola survives in this AU, since Leia killed Jabba before he even had a chance to enslave her!
- Did the rancor survive? Does he even now roam the dune sea, terrorizing anyone who ventures near the ruins of Jabba’s palace? Do the children of Tatooine speak of him in hushed whispers for years to come? (Yes. The answer is yes.)
- WHOOPS looks like Han just can’t avoid that bounty on his head, can he?
- I used this as a reference for Leia’s gown: Star Wars Style
“I’m so glad that you could join me, today.”

Mon Mothma smiled pleasantly at Padmé as she poured a cup of tea for her guest and pushed a plate with small, crustless sandwiches across the table. It was a step up from the normal mess hall fare and Padmé knew that Mon was not the type to indulge in luxuries the rest of the base could not. Clearly, Mon was breaking out “the good food” for a very special reason. But, Padmé thought, not a positive one.

Padmé had known the day would come when Mon would take her to the side and tell her, gently, diplomatically, that she was no longer an asset. She looked at the sandwiches and knew that today was to be that day.

She balanced Lashmina on one knee and absently ran her fingers through the golden curls that now tumbled to her daughter’s shoulders. She picked up a sandwich and offered it to the toddler, but took none for herself. She had no appetite.

“I’m glad, too,” she said. “I haven’t seen much of you since…”

“I know. We’ve all been so busy.” Mon’s smile was strained. Padmé knew she was trying to find the words, or the courage, to broach the reason for this tête-à-tête. She wondered if she should make it easy on her or if she should sit in obtuse patience and wait for her to get around to the point.

There came a knock at the door, and Mon quickly rose to her feet, moving to open it. Ahsoka stood outside, and that surprised Padmé a little. Ahsoka looked unhappy, and Padmé realized that she must already know what this luncheon was about. Perhaps she was here to soften the blow?

Now that Ahsoka had arrived, Mon finally dispensed with the pleasantries. “You’re probably wondering why I invited you here today,” she said, and Padmé just gave her a steady look.

“IT has been some time since we’ve issued a broadcast,” Mon continued. “We know that we should respond to the recent events, but we have to be cautious about the manner of that response.”

“You’ve been having meetings without me,” Padmé stated.

She was not surprised, but it felt strange to hear Mon use the word “we” repeatedly, telling her about decisions made without her, as if she were outside Mon’s inner circle. But of course, she was, wasn’t she? She had been slowly drifting outside of it for a while now. It had begun with her difficult pregnancy, the insomnia that had made her ill, so that she was confined to her quarters far too often.
It had continued with Anakin’s death, the months lost to mourning, though she had tried to appear strong for the public eye. A war widow; unshakeable, wearing her grief like armor. Perhaps it had convinced some, but too many had seen through the cracks. And now… now Leia was taken by the Emperor. And Luke had run away. The Alliance leaders all looked at her with a pity that bordered on revulsion.

“I told them I didn’t like it,” Ahsoka spoke up. “It felt wrong to exclude you. For the record, I’m against all of this. I’m only here because I thought there should be someone who is on your side present.”

“We are all on your side,” Mon sighed, giving Ahsoka a weared look. Padmé could only imagine the arguments they’d had while they debated her fate in the Alliance. “We are all on the same side.”

“Out with it, then.”

“In light of all that has happened, we have decided that it would be best if you took a break from your duties for a while,” said Mon. “If, and when, we issue a broadcast in response to these events, we feel that someone else should take on the role of Ambassador.”

Padmé nodded. “I understand.”

“You are in agreement?” Mon asked cautiously.

Before Padmé could respond, Ahsoka interjected, “I’m not in agreement. The Emperor is clearly using Leia to undermine Padmé; to shake the galaxy’s faith in her as a beacon of hope, and by extension, the entire Rebellion. If she goes silent now, he succeeds.”

“He has already succeeded,” said Padmé. She looked to Mon. “Hasn’t he?”

Mon nodded slowly. “Morale is at an all-time low,” she said. “New recruitment has taken a sharp nosedive, and frankly, after Atollon we are in desperate need of new recruits. But with the Organas exposed, Alderaan under barricade, and the daughter of our Ambassador standing in direct opposition to our cause… well, reports from around the galaxy indicate that many feel this is a grievous blow. People are losing any conviction that the Alliance can make a difference.”

“Which is all the more reason not to give up,” Ahsoka insisted.

“We’re not giving up,” said Mon. “None of us are giving up. We are simply choosing the wisest course of action to move forward.”

To move forward, to leave me behind, Padmé thought.

“I’m a liability,” she said, smiling sadly at Ahsoka. She was sure that Mon had been over all of this already, but Ahsoka was too loyal to her to accept the cold reality of it. “People used to think of me as a symbol of hope and resilience,” she told her. “The famous Queen of Naboo standing up against the Evil Emperor? It made a good story. I made a good story. But that was years ago. Now they just see a defeated woman, one who has lost her family to the Emperor, aging before their eyes, looking older and sadder and more tired with every broadcast. They see a cautionary tale warning them not to fight against him.”

“I don’t see that. I don’t see that at all. You’re being too hard on yourself. Things have been tough, there’s no denying that. But what is resilience without hardship? I see a woman who has made sacrifices. Why is that a liability? We never set out to deceive to the people of the galaxy and tell them that fighting back would come without consequences.”
“There’s a difference between consequences, and years of defeat with no success to show for it,” said Padmé quietly. “There’s a difference between losing a family member to battle and having one renounce the rebellion and repudiate me publicly.” Her gaze flickered to Mon. “Besides, the decision has already been made.”

“I knew that you would understand the necessity of this,” said Mon, though the relief in her voice indicated otherwise.

Padmé just looked down and shifted Lashmina to her other leg. Her youngest child was still so quiet. Some might be glad of that, glad to have a rare two-year-old who could sit placidly on her mother’s lap and gnaw on a cucumber cream sandwich while the adults talked, but it was just another thing that made Padmé sad. She missed the lively chatter she remembered from Luke and Leia at that age, she missed the way they could never sit still unless exhausted from a day of crawling and walking and running and playing together.

She knew that Lashmina was sad, too, because Luke was gone. Mara was gone. Her two favorite people in her small world were gone and she had no way of understanding why they had left.

Padmé had no way to explain it to her. She wanted to promise her that Luke would be back, that Mara would be fine. But she couldn’t get the words out. All she could do was hold Lashmina close when she cried and promise her that Mama would never leave. Not ever.

“I will need a ship,” said Padmé. “Not a large one, but one with hyperspace capabilities, of course.”

Mon frowned. “Why?”

“I’m sorry?” Padmé tilted her head to the side, staring back.

“You must have misunderstood,” said Mon. “We don’t want you to leave. Of course not. It’s far too dangerous, and besides, where would you go? Goodness, Padmé. You don’t really think I would expel you from the base like so much discarded trash. Not after all our years of working together.”

“No, but there’s no reason for me to stay if I’m doing nothing,” Padmé replied. “Lashmina and I would just be a drain on your resources. I don’t want to be dead weight.”

“You’re still a valued member of the Alliance High Command,” said Mon stiffly. “We need—”

“Oh, Mon, please don’t,” Padmé stopped her. “We both know that I’m not. Not anymore. You’ve been excluding me from important meetings for a while now. You made this decision for me, rather than consulting me, as if you feared that I could not or would not face the truth. No.”

“You cannot leave,” said Ahsoka. “The Alliance needs you, whether they realize it or not.”

Padmé sighed and shook her head. “There’s no point to it anymore.”

“No point? The Emp—”

“I joined the Alliance to make the galaxy a safe place for my family,” said Padmé, cutting off her protests. “I wanted my children to grow up without fear of the Emperor. I wanted to secure a pardon for my husband so that none of us had to live in exile. But it didn’t work, did it? Luke and Leia are grown and they are gone beyond my reach. Anakin is dead. I have accomplished nothing.”

“You still have Lashmina,” said Mon.

“Yes,” said Padmé. “And a base is no place for her to grow up.”
“It is not safe for you to leave.”

“It is safe for me to stay? How long until Yavin IV is found by the Empire, like Atollon, like Dantooine?” Padmé asked, a harshness creeping into her voice that made Lashmina pause in her steady chewing and make a small whimpering noise.

“We’ve been working on finding a new base,” said Mon. “In fact, that is one thing I wanted to talk to you about. Our scouts have come back with information on favorable systems. We would like to send you with some of the first groups to migrate over to a new base we will be setting up in the Hoth system.”

“Hoth?” Padmé echoed. “I’ve never heard of it.”

And it was another briefing she had been excluded from, apparently, since this was the first she was hearing about the scouting reports.

“Precisely,” said Mon, looking genuinely pleased for the first time. “It is quite remote. We are going to set up a base on Hoth, which is currently uninhabited save for some sparse wildlife.”

“It’s an ice planet,” said Ahsoka. “Nothing but snow across the whole surface. Arctic climate year round.”

“Absolutely not,” Padmé said. “I’m not taking Lashmina to such a place.”

“It’s not a pleasant garden, granted,” Mon said, “but it will be safe. We’re planning on building the base into some natural caves. It’s not as if I expect you to pitch a tent on an iceberg.”

Padmé laughed. “Do you hear yourself? It’s bad enough that Lashmina is cooped up in this dank old pyramid, but you want me to literally bury her beneath the snow on an uninhabitable planet? No.”

“But where else can you go?” asked Ahsoka. “Padmé, I don’t like the way they are treating you, either, but you cannot just leave.”

“The Emperor would love to get his hands on you,” argued Mon. “I can only imagine what he would do to you, and to your child, if he captured you. That is why we cannot allow you to leave.”

“Allow me?” Padmé echoed. “Am I a prisoner, now? No longer useful but too valuable as a symbol of the rebellion to let loose into the galaxy unchecked? Mon you are one of my oldest friends; listen to the way you are starting to sound.”

“You are twisting my words,” Mon objected. “Yes, you are too valuable to us to let you fall into the Emperor’s hands. Think of what it would do to morale if the Emperor were to publicly execute you, or worse. And he already has one of your daughters: do you really want to make it easier for him to take the other?”

“Don’t talk to me about my daughters,” Padmé said. Ice crept into her heart, her eyes, her words. “You have already decided that no attempt will be made to rescue Leia. Do not pretend that you care about my children, now.”

Mon blanched. “That is unfair. You agreed that our efforts must go towards extracting our agents from Alderaan.”

“I said that I understood. Do not ever mistake my understanding with agreement.”

“Padmé, please, be reasonable.”
Padmé stood up, hoisting Lashmina up onto one hip. She was growing heavy, or perhaps Padmé was just growing frail. She could never tell, these days. “I am being reasonable,” she said. “Thank you for having me to lunch, Mon, but I think that we will have to finish discussing this later. It’s time for me to put Lashmina down for her afternoon nap.”

She turned to Ahsoka. “Would you walk me back to my quarters, Ahsoka?”

Ahsoka stood up. “I would be happy to,” she said. She nodded towards Mon and turned to follow Padmé out into the corridor.

Mon stood with them and walked as far as the door. There were lines of worry etched across her forehead, and she lifted a thin pale hand in farewell. “I will see you again soon,” she said, uttering each word with slow deliberation. She was weary. Weren’t they all?

Once they were out of Mon’s apartments, Ahsoka said, “Here, let me carry her,” and reached for Lashmina.

Padmé almost said no, but then she relented and passed the child over into Ahsoka’s arms. Ahsoka held her like she weighed nothing at all, lifting her effortlessly over her head to sit on her shoulders. Lashmina giggled and held onto Ahsoka’s montrals.

Padmé hated her own weakness for a moment. She had always been small, slight of frame, but in her youth she had trained and been fit, stronger than she looked, more capable than anyone ever assumed of her. And she had often carried around both twins when they were small. But the years had taken their toll. She felt diminished in her mind, body, and soul—like a rock worn down by unrelenting sandstorms, its surface slowly battered into grains that were swept up into the winds and away.

They were silent for several steps, then Ahsoka ventured, “You should come to Mirial. You can stay with Barriss and I. It will be safe.”

“Will it? What about Maul? He tracked you there. And no one has heard anything since he… since Anakin released him from that prison.”

It was a commonly held belief among the Alliance that Maul had tricked Anakin into releasing him from Sunspot Prison and had led him into a trap. The actual reports from Sunspot were fuzzy and contradictory. Anakin had been summoned to assist in Maul’s interrogation, and he had done so and left, but then returned later and somehow ended up leaving with Maul accompanying him. This is where no one could really say what exactly had happened. All anyone knew for sure was that Anakin had somehow convinced the guards that he had special clearance to do whatever he wanted and they had believed him, even though in retrospect they were confused as to why, since he’d had no documents or clearance codes from High Command. Regardless, Anakin and Maul had been allowed to peacefully leave Sunspot.

After that, it was anyone’s guess what had happened, except that Anakin’s death had been broadcast triumphantly across the galaxy by the Imperial HoloNows. What became of the Sith Lord no one knew, but it was likely that he had returned to serving Palpatine in secret, buying his way back into the Emperor’s favor with Anakin’s life. Padmé wondered if he was helping to hold Leia hostage, now.

“I don’t think that Mirial is quite as secret and safe as you would like it to be.”

“Perhaps not,” Ahsoka said, her tone wistful. “I have very fond memories of that house. It was a port in the storm. A promise of what life could be like all the time once we defeated the Empire.”
Padmé thought about her house back on Osallao, long deserted now. She banished such memories from her mind.

“I need you to stay with the Alliance,” she said brusquely. “I need to know what’s going on. I need someone I can trust.”

Ahsoka said nothing, but opened her mouth a little, questions on the tip of her tongue.

“Will you come inside with me?” Padmé asked, as they approached the door to her quarters.

Ahsoka nodded, one eyemark raising slightly.

Once they were inside Padmé’s quarters, Ahsoka set Lashmina down on the floor to play with her toys.

“I am worried about what the rest of the High Command is thinking—what are they planning ‘moving forward,’ as Mon put it. I fear that this isn’t just about public opinion or bad morale,” said Padmé. “If that were all, they wouldn’t be excluding me from briefings or having meetings about me behind my back. I don’t want to be paranoid, but…”

“What do you think is going on?”

Padmé took a deep breath and looked at Lashmina, who held a toy spaceship in her hands. She remembered how Luke would use the Force to make the ship fly around the room, much to Lashmina’s delight. Her youngest had not yet shown a great aptitude for telekinesis, but Obi-Wan and the others had assured her that Lashmina was very strong in the Force. He’d quoted midichlorian numbers and the rest to her, but she had barely listened to the particulars. All that she needed to know that Lashmina was very much her father’s child.

As was her oldest daughter.

“There may come a time when Leia is considered a threat to the Alliance,” she said. “I do not know what Palpatine has planned for her, but I fear the worst. And so do they, though for very different reasons, I think.”

“Leia is obviously a hostage. Everyone can see that.”

“Can they?” Padmé dipped her head.

“You don’t think they would actually…”

“I don’t know what they might do, if they felt they needed to,” Padmé said carefully. “But the fact that they have been so swift to exclude me, to forcibly retire me… it does not give me hope. I think… I’m afraid… that they only see her potential for destruction under the Emperor’s control. She inherited Anakin’s abilities in the Force and that’s why the Emperor targeted her. That fact must be clear to everyone. And those in the High Command know of Anakin’s past with Palpatine, even though it’s classified among the lower ranks. Their old mistrust of him extends to Leia now, I think. And Palpatine is likely going to want to use Leia for more than just publicity stunts.”

“Do you fear that, too? Do you fear what Leia may become if she stays by Palpatine’s side?” Ahsoka asked, crossing her arms and giving Padmé a frank look.

Padmé allowed herself a small smile. Ahsoka, she knew, had quite strong feelings of loyalty, and a staunch conviction that no one could ever truly lost to darkness. She was surrounded by people who had struggled with Palpatine’s evil, in one way or the other. Mara, Barriss… Anakin. Her belief
in their core goodness had never wavered, it seemed. And her belief in Leia did not waver now, despite the fact that Ahsoka had never really known Leia, had only met her briefly a couple of times, both of them a long time ago. Padmé appreciated this. It was one of the reasons she needed Ahsoka in the Alliance, she needed someone there who would not forget that Leia was just a girl, a stolen child, and not the true enemy.

The dreams Padmé had suffered when she was pregnant with Lashmina seemed like a far and distant memory, now. They had not troubled her ever since her youngest daughter’s birth. But as she contemplated Ahsoka’s question, the spectre rose in her mind: the shadow that bore Leia’s essence, that repudiated her and stole her baby from her arms. Seemingly, that dream had finally come true, with Leia standing before the whole galaxy and declaring her a faithless traitor to the Empire, renouncing her as a mother. The baby in the dream had turned out not to be Lashmina, Padmé thought, but Leia herself.

She told Ahsoka, “My worst fears for Leia have come true. Falling into Palpatine’s hands was the one thing I thought could never happen, must never happen, and I realize now that it was always an end in my mind. As if it ever came to pass then all would be lost. But it’s not the end, it’s just the beginning.”

Ahsoka was silent for a long moment. Finally, she said, “Mon and the rest know how close I am to you and your family. Do you think they’ll still include me in their meetings if they are planning on treating Leia as an enemy?”

“I’m Leia’s mother,” said Padmé, “and they think I’ve grown weak and sentimental, unable to see things clearly through my grief. They will value your input, though, as a former Jedi and a skilled Force user… one who has gone up against the Inquisitors. They cannot dismiss your insight and the valuable experience and perspective you bring to the table. They will want to hear what you have to say. At least, that is my hope.”

And Caraya knows I don’t have much of that left.

“If you won’t let me accompany you, at least let me send Barriss with you,” said Ahsoka. “I’m sure if I have a talk with her she’ll agree to it. Or Obi-Wan. Have you spoken with him about any of this, yet?”

Padmé tilted her head thoughtfully. “No,” she said. “I have not. But perhaps I should.”

Obi-Wan was not quite his old self, these days. He had taken Anakin’s death particularly hard, as if he had lost his own son. In a way, he had. Ever since then he had set aside the travels that he had undertaken when acting as Luke’s guardian, staying instead on base with them and seeking to help the Alliance by training the new recruits who arrived with no military or combat experience to speak of. He was able to lend his experience from fighting in the Clone Wars and his wisdom as a Jedi. But Padmé knew that he did not take to it with much gusto—he had confided in her that it became harder and harder with each passing wave to look into the faces of people who were just mechanics or farmers or merchants in their former lives, and to know that he was preparing them to die.

As Mon Mothma had said, morale was at an all-time low across the entire Alliance.

Perhaps a change of pace would be good for Obi-Wan. He needed a new purpose, and Padmé was sure that he would not refuse her request to help protect Lashmina.

“Now that I am no longer with the Alliance, I honestly do not want to be shadowed and guarded till the end of my days. But there is Lashmina to think about. She’s the only child of mine whom I can still take care of,” said Padmé, softly, and went over to sit next to the toddler on the floor. “I must
concentrate on the one child who is left to me.”

“You haven’t lost the twins, yet. Luke promised you that he would bring Leia back. You must have faith in your son,” said Ahsoka.

Padmé sighed. “He’s like his father. I fear he will come to the same end.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Why not? It’s the truth. I’m afraid for Luke, I’m afraid for Leia; all on their own. I’m afraid for us all.”

“Luke isn’t all on his own. He has Mara. And they both have all the years of training that we gave them—Obi-Wan and Barriss and I. Just as you and Anakin asked us to do. You knew the day would come when they would need it.” Ahsoka sighed and dipped her head. “I understand your fear, I do. I didn’t want to let Mara go. But I realized that I had to. I couldn’t have made her stay, so I wanted her to know she had my support.”

“I know,” said Padmé, remembering the determined set of Luke’s jaw and the steel in his eyes as he took his leave of her. She could not have made him stay even if she had tried. “It is hard to let go of children when they are grown, but it must be done. But that doesn’t erase the fear, the worry.”

“Or the hope,” said Ahsoka. “Haven’t you always said that we cannot lose hope?”

“In my speeches,” Padmé said, turning her face away.

“No. Don’t be that way. I know you’re not the sort of person to say something you don’t mean, even in a speech,” admonished Ahsoka. “Please don’t give up hope. Not now. Even if the Alliance Command is too dense to see it, we need you. We still need your strength.”

Sometimes just holding on to the will to live was as much hopefulness as Padmé could muster, and took all the strength that she had, but she did not say that to Ahsoka. She gazed up at the young togruta woman and marveled at the stubborn way she clung to her optimism and determination after a lifetime of war.

“As long as my children live I won’t give up hope,” she said, thinking that if Ahsoka could keep going, then so could she. “Fear? Dread? I have that in abundance. It’s good. I embrace it. The day I have no fear is the day I have nothing left to lose. Still... it is hard.”

“I know that it is hard.” Ahsoka gave her a smile. “Now you’re giving me that look that says you think I’m annoyingly perky. Anakin used to give me that same frown all the time when I was a new Padawan. As if he didn’t know where I got all the energy from.”

“From the Force, I would imagine,” Padmé said, returning the smile despite herself.

“I don’t know; I think it was just youth. Now that I’m older I have to make a conscious effort to keep going,” said Ahsoka, her smile fading away. “That, and I pretend to be more confident than I am.”

“Sounds like a lesson learned from Anakin,” Padmé said dryly. She still felt a twinge of pain in her heart every time they spoke of him, but somehow, sharing an old joke with an old friend lessened the hurt.

“Yes,” Ahsoka agreed, with a short laugh. “I suppose so.”
“It’s not a bad thing,” Padmé told her. “And it’s one of the reasons I need you here, with the Alliance. They’ve lost confidence in me, in part because I’ve lost confidence in myself. When you show weakness you become weak… that’s something I learned all the way back in the Junior Legislative program,” she added with a small, mirthless chuckle. “So it goes. I need you to speak on my behalf—on Leia’s behalf. I need you to be the person they listen to if it comes to that.”

Ahsoka nodded, her eyes grave. “I will do whatever I can,” she said, reaching out to lay a hand on Padmé’s shoulder. “I will not let you down.”

“I know you won’t. In the meantime, I will speak with Obi-Wan about accompanying me,” said Padmé, covering Ahsoka’s hand with her own, wondering how she could ever fully express the gratitude she felt for her unfailing support all these many years.

“Where will you go?” Ahsoka asked, repeating her earlier question, clearly still troubled. “What will you do?”

“What will I do?” Padmé echoed. “I’ll try to keep Lashmina safe. As to where…? I’m going home,” she said, surprising even herself, the conviction coming suddenly as she uttered the words. “To my mother. I think it’s time.”
Luke squinted into the hot, blinding white burn of the Tatooine desert and wondered how anything could survive this planet. He turned away from the blistering expanse of rock and sand that stretched out from the ruins and looked into the shadows of the burned out palace.

At his feet lay a curious, macabre sight: a robotic spider was crumpled and charred on the floor. A small clear globe that had hung from the underside like a synthetic sack was shattered on the stone, and it appeared that what had once been a brain lay desiccated among the shards of glass.

“A B’omarr monk,” said Mara, stepping up beside him. She gazed down at the overturned wreck of a creature and then nudged irreverently at it with her foot, as if she thought there were a chance it might come to life and skitter away. “I’ve read about these. They’re from an ancient order. Whenever a monk reached enlightenment, they would incinerate their body but preserve the brain in these containers, submerged in a nutrient gel, so that they could spend eternity contemplating philosophy without mortal distractions. They still crawl around their old temples thousands of years later, preserved indefinitely.”

Luke nodded. Mara was a veritable walking repository of odd facts and arcane minutiae about the galaxy. She liked to read and learn. In many ways she had changed since they were children, but in others she was still the girl he had first met, all those years ago, in a schoolroom in Breelden, smugly naming off the planets of the Alderaan system when he could not. In their time together Luke had become accustomed to, and fond of, her curious habits—like spending an entire evening with her eyes glued to a datapad screen, entranced by some new book or datachip she had gotten ahold of, or digging through electronic archives and databanks just for the hell of it. Knowledge is a weapon; that's why the Empire keeps its secrets so close, she would say. She valued the power of simply knowing things, of never being kept in the dark.

So he didn’t even blink when she was able to identify the origins of the bizarre brain spider droid on the floor. He just said, “Well it’s definitely dead now. Everything here is dead or ruined.”

The palace was well and truly deserted, which was strange. Despite what was rumored to have transpired there, enough of a building still stood for it to remain the sole sanctuary from the suns for miles around. The fact that no one had decided to claim the former Hutt enclave as their own was suspicious, to say the least. It was as if the place was considered cursed, and therefore shunned.

He really didn’t know what he and Mara would accomplish by coming here. But it was the only clue they had managed to find pertaining to Leia’s current state under Palpatine’s thumb.

The fact that Leia had been here, on Tatooine, was not something the Empire broadcast or advertised, but if you were looking hard enough it was not difficult to discover. Word got out quickly about a thing like Jabba the Hutt being killed. Still, there was no guarantee of truth to anything they’d
heard about it. Before landing on Tatooine and finding their way to the B’omarr monastery ruins, Leia’s supposed ransacking of the place was merely a rumor. Gossip spread around Outer Rim spaceports. Did you hear about the Princess? Someone who knows someone who knows someone says she killed Jabba the Hutt for sport and that his carcass is now stuffed and mounted in a secret wing of the Imperial Palace.

There was still no concrete proof that Leia was responsible for the ruined and deserted state of the palace. But Luke felt it, felt it with a certainty in the Force, as if she had left traces of herself behind when she walked through the halls of the palace. Echoes of her presence still lingered here. Just as, if he allowed himself to be fanciful, he thought he could feel the echoes of his father still orbiting this distant rock where Anakin Skywalker had spent his childhood. That was probably just imagination, or wishful thinking, though. While it was true that the Force had a long memory and carried the whispers of things far gone, there couldn’t be much left of his father on a planet he had lived on for only a few short years, decades ago.

Still, Leia had been here relatively recently, and she had left an impression. The obvious, physical marks could have been caused by anyone or anything… but when Luke closed his eyes and brushed his fingers along the dusty, scored walls of the palace he knew. He just knew that she had stalked down this corridor, a wild passion burning in her heart. A passion for what, though?

It couldn’t be so simple and lurid as the rumors they had heard… that Vestre Palpatine (just thinking that name made him feel physically ill) enjoyed a good solid sacking and had massacred the inhabitants of this enclave for the sheer thrill of it. No.

“We should go,” he said, turning away from the remains of the B’omarr monk. “There’s nothing else to see. She was here but she’s long gone, now.”

“Where do we go?” Mara asked.

“I don’t know where to go from here,” he admitted. “We could try to figure out where she went next, but what good will that do us? We have to figure out where Leia is going before she gets there. It’s no use turning up late to see what she accomplished after the fact.”

“I agree, but we’d need to successfully slice into the highest levels of secure Imperial databases or communication frequencies to access that kind of information, and even then, there’s no telling if we’d be able to figure it out. Any plans or preparations made for travel will be encrypted and even then they’ll be using code names to refer to Leia. You won’t find a manifest for a mission headed by Leia Skywalker or Vestre Palpatine anywhere. She’ll be called something else, a name we won’t be able to tell apart from any other Imperial officer or grunt.”

“I know,” he said, as they walked back towards their ship, a small shuttle set down on a plateau just south of the desecrated temple. “I know.”

It seemed hopeless. But he refused to believe that Tatooine was a dead end.

When he had left the rebel base on Yavin IV, all he had known was that somehow he had to save Leia. At first that seemed as simple, if incredibly difficult, as sneaking into the Imperial Palace and breaking her out of what, he imagined, was a prison cell. He’d thought that Mara would help him with this, since she had lived in the Palace as a child and knew its layout, but despite offering her assistance with the overall mission, she became reluctant to lead him to Coruscant.

They’d argued, at first. Mara thought that going to Coruscant, much less the Imperial Palace itself, would be walking straight into a trap. “I have a bad feeling about this,” she’d said. “The Emperor would be delighted to get his hands on you. You know that. What good can you do Leia by just
handing yourself to him on a silver platter? He’ll expect you to come for your sister. He’ll expect some kind of rescue mission.”

Luke had been frustrated by her sudden caution. It sounded too much like what his parents and Ben had been saying for years. He didn’t care about his own safety. He’d lived most of his life dictated by the need to avoid the Emperor, to stay safe and hidden while the rest of the galaxy suffered, and he was just about sick to death of it. Why was he, Luke Kriffing Skywalker, so damned important that he had to sit by and keep his head down and do nothing? What was the point of his life if he didn’t do something?

She of course had an answer for that, though. “You can’t be a hero if you’re so stupid you end up dead or worse and don’t have anything to show for it,” she told him, not one to mince words. “We are doing something but we need to be smart while we do it. That means avoiding the traps Palpatine has laid for us. And trust me, he’s laid traps upon traps. You have to get used the idea that Leia is bait… bait for you, or your mother, or the whole Alliance. I don’t know.”

Mara’s plan was for them to build up believable false identities that they could use to get close to Leia eventually, without arousing suspicion or alerting the Emperor to what they were doing. To sneak smartly, she said, not just pull hoods over their heads and try to scale the side of the Imperial Palace and crawl in a window. Luke didn’t like the idea of eventually, since every day Leia spent in the clutches of the Emperor there was no telling what was being done to her. But he had to admit that if they blundered into a trap they would be no help to Leia, or anyone else, so he agreed to the finesse approach that Mara favored.

They had fallen in with the scum of the galaxy—smugglers, spice runners, bounty hunters, slicers, and forgers. It was amidst these sorts in seedy spaceports that they had picked up on the rumors about Leia’s escapades on Tatooine, and it had given Luke hope. But it also made him uneasy.

On the upside, knowing that Leia was being sent outside the Imperial Palace, off Coruscant, and to a remote Outer Rim planet of all places, made him think that infiltrating the incredibly dangerous and inaccessible Palace was not necessary after all. They just had to intercept Leia, somehow, before she returned to the balustrade that was Coruscant.

The downside was that it made no sense, to him, for Palpatine to actually be sending his captive Princess away from his side so blithely. Did Palpatine not fear her escape at all? And then there was the little matter of her demonstrating the power and capability to destroy a gangster’s fortress. If Leia was that powerful, why had she not found a way to escape, yet?

There was, of course, the obvious answer. The answer that most people were saying whether he asked the question or not.

The idea that Leia was exactly where she wanted to be.

No.

Didn’t matter, anyway.

He was going to save her, regardless. If the unthinkable had happened and Palpatine had truly gotten his claws into Leia’s mind, then that was a challenge, but not an insurmountable one.

They had turned their focus onto following Leia’s trail, starting on Tatooine. Now, standing amid the ruins of the Hutt’s stronghold, Luke had to face the fact that Leia was being used by the Emperor to commit acts of violence against those he wanted destroyed. It was the only explanation.
Well, Palpatine would live to regret it. He may think he had a strong enough hold over her to send her off to places like Tatooine. But sending her off across the galaxy was just going to make it easier to get to her, so Luke felt that he should thank the Emperor, really, for being so overconfident.

“I think we should track down those smugglers with the bounty on their heads,” Luke said once they were aboard the shuttle. “I don’t think it will help us find her location, but I want to know more about what happened here, and it seems like they were the only survivors.”

“We’ll have some competition getting to them,” said Mara. “There’s a sizeable reward.”

“Yes,” Luke agreed. “We’ll have to get to them first, then. And I don’t know anything about being a bounty hunter, but no time like the present to learn new things,” he added with forced cheerfulness.

It had been Mara’s doing to find out about the bounty on the two smugglers, in the first place. She had set up traces on various databases and information networks to alert her to mentions of Leia Skywalker, Vestre Palpatine, Princess Vestre, etc. One of the more interesting things that had yielded was a pair of names added to the Empire’s Most Wanted list: Han Solo and Chewbacca. The reason they were wanted for capture was that they had allegedly made an attempt on the Imperial Princess’s life. They had last been seen leaving the Mos Eisley spaceport on Tatooine.

Clearly, this had something to do with what happened at Jabba’s Palace. The fact that both events had happened on Tatooine around the same time was too significant to be a coincidence, even if Luke was the sort of person who believed in coincidence at all. Which he wasn’t. Ben had always said that what looked like mere chance to others was the will of the Force.

“We’d better get started, then,” said Mara, pulling out a datapad and starting to tap furiously away at its screen. “Time to do some hunting.” A small smile was on her face, as if she had been waiting all her life to play the bounty hunter.

Luke sat in the pilot’s seat and looked over at her. He was glad, as always, that she was there with him. He would be doing this on his own—well, except for Artoo, his ever faithful droid—if he had to, but the fact that Mara was by his side made it a less daunting experience.

Finding the smugglers wouldn’t help with tracking down Leia, probably, but it might yield other information. And even if it didn’t, he’d have captured people who were trying to kill his sister. He eyed the fuel gauge and sighed, remarking to Mara, “We’re pretty low on fuel. We need to fill up before we leave Tatooine.”

“Do we have enough credits for that?” Mara said absently, as she worked away at the datapad, no doubt plugging the names and images of the smugglers into every search database she had at her disposal.

“You know we don’t. But we won’t make it to the next star system without fuel.”

She stopped and blew a huff of air upward, making her hair flutter away from her face. “Okay,” she said, “new plan. Get some credits before we leave, to make sure we have enough fuel to chase these smugglers down.” She paused, then added thoughtfully, “What are we planning on doing with these guys once we find them?”

“Find out what they know about Leia, or why they tried to kill her… they were probably paid by Jabba or someone else to do it, is my thought, but that’s just a guess.” He cocked his head to the side. “Why?”

“Well, the bounty on their heads is… significant.”
He scoffed. “Are you suggesting we collect the bounty on them? From the Empire?”

“Why not? We’re going to need the money. We can’t get funds from the Alliance because this is an independent, unsanctioned mission,” Mara said, waving one hand as she reasoned. “And if we’re going to be chasing after Leia who knows how far we’ll have to travel across the galaxy. Might even be good to have some credits to bribe information out of people, or hire a good slicer to help us get into the Imperial databanks. Wouldn’t hurt to get a whole new ship at some point, too. This one might be traced back to the Alliance.”

“Yes, but, the Empire…”

“…will fund our rescue mission,” Mara said with clear satisfaction. “And think, even beyond what we could do with the money… if we do some contracts specifically for the Empire, that could put us a few steps closer to Leia, wherever she may be. We get some of the Empire’s valuable targets for them and they’ll be likely think of us when they need jobs done. If they hire us, we could get passage into Coruscanti air space. Clearance to operate on Coruscant itself.”

Luke nodded. “Infiltration… not a bad idea. As long as we’re not turning over our own people to them,” he added. “Most of the names on their Most Wanted list are Alliance members.”

“Yeah… but not all. These smugglers don’t have any rebel affiliations, so far as I can tell. And if they do, in secret, well… I hate to say it…”

“The Alliance wouldn’t be behind an assassination attempt on Leia,” Luke said quickly. “My mother would never stand for that.”

Mara said nothing, just shrugged one shoulder, and went back to tapping at her datapad.

“Are you sure no one in the Empire would recognize you?” Luke asked, changing the subject. He really didn’t want to discuss his mother, at that moment, so he let Mara’s skepticism slide.

“Who’s going to recognize me? The Grand Inquisitor? Didn’t your father kill him a long time ago?”

“The Emperor would definitely recognize you.”

“I doubt he’s handling something so mundane as dealing with bounty hunters. He won’t even get wind of a pair of nobodies named Celina Marniss and Benjen Starkiller,” she said, citing the fake names they had been using since leaving Yavin IV, “until it’s too late. If we’ve gotten close enough to meet him face to face, well…”

“If we get close enough to him for him to recognize who we are, we’ll be killing him,” Luke said, grimly, and Mara raised one eyebrow.

She didn’t comment on it, though, and he didn’t comment on the sense of uncertainty and unease that he felt in her silence. He didn’t question her loyalty to him, and didn’t doubt that she would chose him over Sidious. If she had any doubts about killing the man she had once idolized, long ago, he just had to trust that she would put them aside.

Palpatine had killed his father and was enslaving his sister. Luke had no qualms about killing him. None at all.

“Anyway, it sounds like a decent plan. But we’ll decide what we’re going to do with the smugglers once we have them. For now let’s focus on leaving Tatooine,” he told her. “I’ve spent too much time on this dustball, already.”
"Care for a game of sabacc?"

Han Solo looked up, instantly suspicious of the mild looking young man standing before him. He appraised the towheaded lad, narrowing his eyes despite the innocuous appearance and the gullible, innocent vibe of his prospective opponent.

He eased a little when he could detect nothing threatening about him. Han recognized the type: some fresh faced kid straight out of finishing school looking to gamble his weekly allowance away. Normally, he'd instantly welcome such a fool, soon to be parted from his credits. But Han was twitchy now, a hunted man, wanted by the Empire on trumped up charges of treason. Attempted assassination: that's what they were calling his rescue of the Imperial Princess these days.

He'd already had to fight off four bounty hunters who had managed to track him down since leaving Tatooine. There were four less bounty hunters in the galaxy, now. But more would come. The sheer amount of credits the Empire was offering for his and Chewie's heads were enough to make anyone disregard safety.

Not for the first time, he cursed the damned fool idea that had gotten him into this mess, in the first place. He regretted ever laying eyes on the Imperial Princess. He still had her datastick burning a hole in his pocket, but he'd been too busy fending off bounty hunters to start a search for her elusive brother.

He didn't know what he was gonna do. He'd been in tight jams before, had debts too large to pay off, had used his wits and his charm to talk his way out of prison or worse. But there was no paying off this "debt." He doubted that even if he were brought in alive, he'd get a fair trial or a single shake at talking his way out of the mess. Didn't matter that he was innocent, for real this time. The Empire didn't mess around when they wanted you dead.

"It's your funeral," he said to the boy in front of him, deciding to take his chances. He waved one hand to the empty seat across from him. The kid sat down, and Han languidly shuffled the sabacc cards, asking, "Got a name?"

"Benjen Starkiller," said the boy, which Han very much doubted. It sounded like a name stolen from a bad HoloDrama, the kind that ran on a weekly basis and was hastily written and produced on the fly. (Han had been roped into being an extra on one, once, as a way of paying off a debt. He'd played an assortment of mooks across several episodes—masked bad guys that kept coming out of the woodwork to give the deathless hero a hard time and a satisfying bodycount. It sure as hell wasn't the opera and it didn't pay well but it had been one of the more honest, if not strangest, jobs he'd done in his time traveling the galaxy).

He didn't challenge the kid on that point of dishonesty, though. Most of these prep school, run-home-to-daddy types didn't want their real names circulated when they went slumming in the underworld for a lark.
Han exchanged glances with Chewie, who was leaning against the bar on the far side of the room. They tried not to be seen together these days. A wookiee was noticeable. But they hadn't split up and gone their separate ways, either. Maybe, Han thought, they should, but Chewie would never agree to leave his side. Wookiees took their life debts very seriously.

"So what's your name?" Starkiller asked brightly, as Han dealt out the sabacc cards.

"Vyyk Draygo," said Han. This kid was laughably gullible, he thought, since he seemed agreeable to the idea playing against Han using Han's own deck and letting Han shuffle and deal the cards. He didn't even suggest using a droid dealer, like most, just impassively watched Han toss the cards into the grav field on the table and then reached for his hand.

Han almost felt bad swindling the kid, until Starkiller flagged down a passing server droid and waved a credit stick at it, saying, "I'll have a Cloud City Special, and a drink for my friend here, too. What'll you have?"

Any mooft milker gleefully ordering Lando Calrissian's signature drink and waving around a credit stick like he owned the moons of Iego deserved to be taken down a peg.

"Nothing for me, thanks," said Han. Better to keep a clear head.

The boy reached into his pocket and took out some silver credit chips and laid them down on the sabacc table. Han raised an eyebrow, then matched the amount, trying to make it look like he had plenty more tucked away where that came from. Truth be told, he was lucky to have even that much, and was spared the embarrassment of not being able to match the boy's opening bet.

They played several hands, and though Han was careful not to overplay his hand and let the boy see just what kind of a player he was, he still managed to win each one. At the end of the set he claimed the boy's credits, and waited to see what he'd do next.

Starkiller plopped down more credits and Han laughed out loud, a short bark. "Careful kid," he said, "You might want to quit while you've still got a shirt."

"I'm doing fine. Go ahead and deal again," said Starkiller, taking a placid sip from his foamy drink. Han shrugged with exaggerated ease and repeated, "It's your funeral." He looked to Chewie again, to make sure things were still safe in the cantina, before proceeding. When he was focused on sabacc it was easy to forget to be aware of all his surroundings, so having Chewie as a lookout was invaluable.

The boy kept trying to make small talk, which Han deflected with short non answers, or turned back into questions designed to make Starkiller give up information instead. Surprisingly, the kid seemed to recognize the probe, because Han couldn't get a thing out of him. Maybe he wasn't as dumb as he looked, after all. At least, when it came to divulging personal information. He was terrible at sabacc. Han tried to throw a hand or two to give the boy false confidence, but he managed to lose every time. Han had to question whether he was even trying to win.

They finished the second set and Han collected his winnings.

Starkiller reached in his pocket and Han held up his hand in protest. "Kid, give up. Sabacc ain't your game. There's a dejark table over there—if you've got anything left maybe try something else."

"That generous of you, but I'm comfortable with my chances," said Starkiller with an affable smile. He leaned forward, put one elbow on the table, and asked, "Sure I can't offer you a drink?"
**Why is this kid trying to impress me with how much money he's got to lose?** Han wondered. Now, if this was a scam where he was supposed to be so overconfident from winning two sets that he was willing to get drunk, letting the boy suddenly sweep all his winnings out from under him, it wasn't a very subtle con. The boy was far too obvious. "No thanks," he said.

As he dealt the cards again, Starkiller asked, "So I figure you're a pilot."

"How so?"

He shrugged, looking into his glass and swirling it, pretending to be engrossed in the foam to liquid ratio. "I've been asking around. Told you might be willing to do a job."

Han tensed. He hadn't been advertising around these parts. He was trying to keep as low a profile as possible. "And who told you that?"

"Big hairy fella over there at the bar."

Han narrowed his eyes. He ran his fingers over the edges of the sabacc cards before flicking them into the grav field. "Is that so," he said. He glanced at Chewie, then back to Starkiller. "Speak wookiee, do you?"

The boy smiled. "Shyriiwook, you mean. A little. I study languages at the academy."

"Hmm," was all Han said. It was interesting to get a personal tidbit about the boy, even if it only confirmed his assumptions that this was a smug rich kid from the northern district. Han hadn't been hanging around these parts for very long, but he always made a point to get a lay of the land, figure out the locals. Still, there was something off about this statement. Shyriiwook wasn't the sort of language people cared about studying, not at posh schools like the academy in this city, anyway. They'd be studying languages spoken by the banking clans and trade guilds, for diplomacy, or archaic tongues used only for fine arts or historical study. Very few people gave a damn about what the wookiees were talking about.

"I also have a droid that can translate," the boy added, as if sensing that Han didn't believe he understood Shyriiwook.

"Why are you looking for a pilot?" Han asked, conceding nothing. The boy's excuses didn't put him at ease, because he knew that Chewbacca knew better than to blab their business to just anyone. For one, to do so would reveal that he knew Han, and they were pretending to be strangers. Second, they weren't looking for smuggling jobs right now. Too dangerous. Playing a little sabacc in a back alley tavern had been about as high profile as Han wanted to get.

Starkiller set his glass down on the edge of the table and leaned in conspiratorially. "I was hoping to charter a flight."

Han's eyebrows shot up. "There's a transport that runs the hyperspace lanes," he said.

Starkiller shook his head emphatically. "I'm not interested in public transport. Too visible. This is a matter of some delicacy."

"Oh?"

The boy leaned in even further, so that the grav field on the table make his hair prickle with static electricity. "I need to get off this planet. Quick and with no questions asked. What do you say?"

Han frowned, wondering why the boy had wasted time buttering him up with sabacc if this was
what he really wanted. Maybe it was some kind of trick. Or maybe the kid had just been too nervous to commit to the idea of running away. But there was something unsettling about all of this.

"Just you? And your droid?"

Starkiller nodded.

"Where are you headed?"

"Anywhere but here."

"Huh."

"Interested?"

"Got any money left? It's not gonna be cheap," Han said. He glanced again at Chewie, wishing he could pull the wookiee aside and ask him if he had really been talking to this kid and what he had said.

"Credits aren't a problem," Starkiller said, shifting away from the grav field. "Name your price."

"Twenty thousand, up front," Han said, watching him closely. Starkiller didn't even flinch, just nodded. Did this kid have a death wish? Who in their right mind went around telling strangers that they had unlimited credits and wanted to disappear? Han knew a few smugglers who would gladly make the boy disappear and steal his identity to gain access to all his funds. In fact, kidnapping fools like this one had been part of Jabba's racket, though Han had never personally been involved with that.

It was a big galaxy, and it was easy to kidnap a being for their identity. Protective measures such as retinal scans and fingerprint or palm print mapping presented a challenge for criminals like the Hutts, but made it more likely that the victim of such a scam would end up dead or at least missing a hand or an eyeball or two. You really did have to be born yesterday to go alone into a smuggler's den like this cantina and openly flaunt how rich and vulnerable you were.

Han nodded slowly, but his hand drifted down to the blaster at his hip as he contemplated his choices. If this was before that fateful day on Tatooine when the Princess had turned everything upside down, he'd jump at the chance to swindle this kid out of 20,000 credits just for an easy charter. But now he was looking for the lies, the little markers that things were not all as they seemed, and the more time he spent sitting across from Starkiller then more uneasy he got. Even the guileless look the boy fixed on him made his trigger finger itch.

"When are you looking to leave?" Han asked. "And is there anything I should know?"

"Like I said, I'm looking for a ticket, no questions asked," Starkiller refused. "I'm willing to pay for speed, delicacy, and disinterest."

"Disinterest in your problems is one thing, knowing if there's something I gotta worry about is another. Let's say you've pissed off the wrong cartel; how do I know I'm not gonna find myself in the middle of a gang war I don't care to die for?"

"It's nothing like that," said Starkiller, putting up his hands. "But if you don't want the twenty thousand credits, I can find someone who does."

"Fine," said Han, "you've got yourself a deal. When are you looking to leave?"
"As soon as possible, if you can."

"Alright. Give me some time to prep my ship. Meet me in docking bay 76 at 0500, with the cash. If you don't show up I'll assume you got cold feet or you're dead, and I'm outta here."

"Fair enough," said the boy, and tossed his hand of sabacc cards onto the table.

"You lose again," said Han.

"Oh well," Starkiller responded with a shrug. He stood up and drained the last of the Cloud City Special from his glass. "I'll see you at 0500."

Han waited for the boy to leave the cantina, then waited a little while longer for good measure, before slipping outside himself. He gave Chewie the subtle signal to follow before he left. He didn't go to docking bay 76, instead headed to a secluded location that he had scoped out early on as a safe place to rendezvous, and waited for him to catch up. The wookiee took his time leaving the cantina and finding Han, but as soon as he arrived, Han got down to business.

"Were you talking to that blond kid about chartering a flight outta here?"

"What? No," said Chewie. "I thought we agreed we weren't doing any jobs involving the *Falcon* while the bounty is out."

"Yeah, we did. But the kid claims he talked to you… used a droid to translate…"

"I haven't talked to any droids," Chewie denied, shaking his head. "I talked to a human girl earlier tonight, was surprised to meet someone who understands Shyriiwook, but we didn't talk about anything important. I think she was flirting with me."

"Hmpf," Han snorted. Chewie always thought girls were flirting with him. "Well this clinches it, I knew there was something off about that kid. It's gotta be some kind of trap. He doesn't look like a bounty hunter, but he could just be the decoy."

"What'd you tell him?"

"Told him I'd do it, but I gave him the wrong docking bay and told him to wait till 0500 to meet me. That should give us enough time to get off this rock before we get into any trouble."

"Good call."

They left the alcove individually, both heading towards the outskirts of the city, past the cantinas and shops and factories, through the labyrinthine slums that fringed the metropolis, but taking separate routes.

Outside the city were hills leading into mountains, drab dry earth and scrubby vegetation, the remnants of an agricultural society that had outgrown its roots. In the shadows of a valley the *Millennium Falcon* was docked, Han deeming it too risky to take their ship into town and dock it in one of the proscribed garages.

He was almost out of town when he felt a prickling sensation at the back of his neck. Han always felt like he was being followed, these days, whether he was or not. He looked around, taking in the smattering of alien and human beings who were out at that early hour. He'd been in the cantina until the wee hours of the morning, playing sabacc and just sitting back, observing the nightlife. Now the streets were all but deserted, though as he passed through the slums he saw a few beings shuffling home from bars or on their way to work the early shift in a factory. There were some animals there,
too, pets or strays it was hard to tell. A rusted out droid was feeding scraps of meat to a loth-cat in the doorway of a shack. It looked up briefly at Han, but seemed to deem him inconsequential and returned to its task.

Han lifted the collar of his jacket to shield his face and put his head down, but rested his hand on his blaster as he quickened his steps.

He was almost out of town when a figure stepped out from between the bent and rusted corrugated metal of the shacks in front of him. It was a girl, young, no more than a teenager. She had a blaster up already and pointed at him, and she slipped from the shadows of the alley with a curious, pointed grace, one fluid silent motion that caught him off guard despite how on edge he had been. He stopped in his tracks and pulled out his blaster quickly, cursing the millisecond of a moment's hesitation that the girl's sudden appearance had caused him.

"Lost?" asked the girl with a smile.

"I'm not looking for any trouble," Han replied, thinking he had wandered into some kind of turf war between the local street gangs. This was the bad part of town, if it could even be considered part of town, still. The southern slums were so far removed from the posh northern district with its academy and estates as to seem almost like it belonged on another planet.

"Your blaster says different," the girl said. In the flickering glow of the old lumen lamps that hung from posts near the shacks, he could see that she had a soft fleck of freckles across her face, which was framed by curling red hair. Under any other circumstances would look harmless and pretty, if a bit world-weary, the kind of girl that served drinks in cantinas rather than skulking in the street looking for an off-worlder to mug.

"Can't be too careful," said Han, nodding towards the blaster in her hand. "But I'm just passing through here on my way out of town. So I'd appreciate it if you just let me go."

"Where are you headed?"

He jerked his head, indicating the area behind her with his chin. "That way."

"Shouldn't you be going to docking bay 76?" she asked, the knowing smirk deepening into something predatory that Han didn't like.

"Change of plans," he said, and pulled the trigger.

Somehow, the blaster shot went awry, which shocked him because he had good aim and she was right in front of him. It should have knocked the blaster from her hand. But she just leaned out of the way and had the audacity to laugh. She didn't shoot back, and Han was about to pull the trigger again, this time aiming for the kill, when he felt his blaster yanked from his hand as if the air itself had grabbed it from him.

He looked up in horror as the blaster went flying straight up into the air and curved over his head. He turned around just in time to see it land in the outstretched hand of the boy from the cantina. Starkiller.

The boy smiled at Han in what now seemed like a mirror of the girl's self-satisfied smirk. He lifted Han's own blaster up and pointed it at him as he walked forward, and Han edged away warily, glancing over his shoulder at the girl. He was caught between them and it looked like a provisional surrender might be his only option. They hadn't shot him yet, even though they could have, so maybe there was a way to talk his way out of this.
"Kid," he said, turning his empty hands up, "I was just on my way to get the ship ready."

"Really," said Starkiller in flat disbelief.

"Yeah," Han told him. "I have it docked out of town, I was going to bring it over to the bay and meet you there. You don't trust me?"

"Oh sure, I trust you," said the boy. "But let's go to your ship together, eh? This is Celina, by the way. You tried to shoot her. That's not nice."

"Well, you know, a guy gets jumped in these parts you can't blame him for putting up a fight," said Han with nervous laughter.

"Turn around," said Starkiller, motioning with the barrel of the blaster. "Let's not hang around here any longer than we have to."

Han turned around, keeping his hands up. He wondered where Chewie was, and hoped he was already at the ship and would see them arriving. If he was keeping a watch out for Han he might be able to take out the two kids with his bowcaster before they had a chance to react. They both seemed to have tricks up their sleeves, the kind of kids who might have become Jedi in the old days but without an Order to take them in and train them just used whatever powers they had to cause trouble.

He didn't know yet if they were bounty hunters after the price on his head or just local kids looking to steal a ship. Whatever the case, the posh boy act that Starkiller had put on at the cantina was gone now. Despite his continual smiling there had been an icy edge to his eyes that told Han he could and would kill him if he had to.

The girl, Celina, fell back slowly to walk beside Starkiller, her blaster still trained on Han. They were savvy enough to stand far apart so that they were flanking him at a far enough distance that he couldn't try to knock their blasters from their hands. He knew enough about kids with Force tricks to know that he was outnumbered and outmatched. But Han wasn't that worried—they might know some tricks but he doubted they had powers comparable to what he'd witnessed in the Imperial Princess. He just had to hope they could be talked into letting him go, or that they were overconfident enough to get the upper hand against if he bided his time.

They made their way across the salt flats that spread out from the slums, the lights of the city growing fainter behind them. But a full moon and the bright stars above reflecting off the hard packed earth made it easy to see a distance without turning on any extra light, and the pair who held him captive didn't seem to feel the need. As Han walked he tried to probe at them and find out what they wanted.

"So is this the translator droid you mentioned?" he snarked, though he was pretty sure this was the same girl who had spoken to Chewie earlier, independent of her friend. These two had obviously been stalking him and Chewie from the start, and Han cursed himself for letting it happen.

"Hilarious," said the girl dryly.

"You'll get a chance to talk once we get to the ship, Solo," said the boy. Han raised his eyebrows at the use of his real name. So they knew who he was. Bounty hunters, then.

They neared the ravine where the **Falcon** was hidden. *C'mon, Chewie ol' boy*, Han thought. *Don't let us catch you by surprise.*

From behind, he heard the boy say, "We're almost there, Artoo. Is the area clear?"

Han snuck a glance over his shoulder and saw that Starkiller spoke into a comlink. Through the
crackle came a few bleats and blurs of a droid speaking binary, and whatever it relayed seemed to satisfy Starkiller.

"No sign of the wookiee?" the girl asked, and Starkiller shook his head.

Han turned back around quickly, hiding the relief he felt. Maybe Chewie wasn't at the ship but at least he hadn't been captured. But it sounded like they had a droid stationed nearby already, so they'd known exactly where he had the Falcon stashed. Han didn't like the way these two kids were ahead of him at every step.

Once they were upon the Falcon's hiding place, a small blue and white astromech droid came wheeling out from a hiding place behind some boulders. "Good work, Artoo," said Starkiller, "Now keep watch and alert us if you see his friend coming."

"What are you planning on doing when he gets here?" Han asked, sociably.

"Don't worry about it. Right now you're going to open up the ship for us."

"And what if I refuse?"

"I don't think that you want to find out."

Han didn't have a response for that. As much as he didn't want to admit it, having two blasters pointed at him was making him sweat a little, and right now his only hope was that Chewie wouldn't walk blindly into a trap. He decided that his best course of action was to keep the kids distracted, so he kept talking as he went to key in the hatch code. "You know, you're gonna have a devil of a time keeping me put while trying to capture my friend Chewie. It'll take both of you together to bring him down."

"Thanks for your concern but we've got it worked out," said the girl.

"Oh?" Han asked breezily as the hatch opened.

"Back away from the ship," said Starkiller, and Han took a few slow, exaggerated steps backwards.

The girl climbed aboard the ship as the boy stayed outside with his blaster trained on Han. Well, Han's blaster trained on Han, anyway.

"If you want the credits you lost at sabacc back all you have to do is ask," said Han.

"Keep them," said the boy. Han watched him closely for any signs of nervousness that he could exploit, but found none. The boy was utterly, deadly calm. That was, Han thought, what had really been bothering him this whole time. From the moment the boy had appeared he'd been calm, too calm to be a rich kid slumming it for kicks or looking to hire a pilot to run away from his family. Han only regretted that he hadn't blasted him right there under the sabacc table when he least expected it.

The girl reappeared, leaning out from the hatch. "All clear," she said.

"Alright, go inside, slowly," Starkiller instructed, while his friend backed up into the ship.

Han followed her in, with the boy and the blaster at his back. They both still kept at a distance from him, and Han was calculating if he could move fast enough to disarm one of them without getting shot. He didn't like his odds.

"Are you gonna imprison me on my own ship?" Han asked, scoffing.
"Yes," said the boy, tucking the blaster into his belt. He reached inside his jacket and took out a set of wrist and ankle cuffs. "Now, don't try anything. We don't want to have to hurt you."

"Yeah, I'll bet," Han muttered. As the boy cautiously approached, Han asked himself if he trusted his luck enough to try to knock Starkiller down and grab the blaster from his belt. The girl might miss him, and she might even hit her companion in the kerfuffle.

"Put out your hands," said Starkiller.

*It's now or never,* thought Han, and as the boy came closer he decided to throw caution to the wind, and lowered his head to headbutt the boy in the chest while reaching to snatch the blaster away from him. Quick as he was, though, Starkiller sidestepped him and Han found himself suddenly thrown to the floor and held there by an invisible hand.

Starkiller knelt down and pulled Han's hands behind his back and clamped the wrist cuffs on tightly.

"That was stupid," said the girl. "You're lucky I decided not to shoot you."

"Why didn't you?" Han asked, feeling surly and spitting into the hard durasteel panels of the ship floor.

"Because we want you alive," replied Starkiller, putting the manacles on Han's ankles, his tone matter-of-fact and his actions quick and businesslike. Then he lifted Han up, exhibiting a strength that was incongruous with his slight frame, and sat him up against the wall. He patted Han on the shoulder before twisting away to stand beside his companion.

She holstered her blaster and smiled down at Han, offering her own reply, "Maybe I will shoot you, but not now."

"Why wait, sweetheart? I'm all yours," Han said with a vicious smile.

Starkiller rolled his eyes, and pulled out his comlink. "We're coming out, Artoo. Still all clear?"

Affirmative beeping came from the link, or at least that's what Han assumed, since the response seemed to please Starkiller.

"Should we drug him?" asked the girl.

"We don't have time, the wookiee will be here any minute," said Starkiller, then he addressed Han. "Don't go anywhere, now. We'll be right back."

"Yeah I'm sure you will," Han called after them as they turned to go. "I hope it's without your arms!"

Starkiller stopped suddenly and pulled a handkerchief from the seemingly bottomless treasure trove that was his jacket pockets. He returned to swiftly gag Han, then gave him a condescending pat on the head. The cloth wadded up in his mouth tasted like metal polishing wax, as if it had been used to buff the astromech droid's chassis.

They left Han alone to stew, humiliated and hog-tied in his own ship. He tested his restraints as a matter of course, though he didn't expect he could do anything about that. It was a mistake to leave him in here, though. It was his ship, after all. He knew where he kept all his tools, the sort that could be used to cut or melt his cuffs off with a bit of patience and… well… free hands. Han cursed his predicament as he mapped out several different actions in his head. He could scooch along the floor of the ship but wouldn't be able to reach any of the door controls without an intense struggle to push himself up along the wall, and even then his arms were pulled back too tightly behind his back to be...
able to operate any of the ship's controls. Besides, he couldn't leave Chewie behind with the bounty hunters. Normally, he'd bet on Chewie against a couple of human teenagers any day, but these two had blasters and Force tricks and the element of surprise.

He allowed himself to worry for Chewbacca, then. The kids had said they didn't want to hurt him, but what about Chewie…? The bounty wasn't dependent on being brought in alive and they might decide the big hairy oaf was more trouble than it was worth to them to be humane about it. If only there was a way to alert him to the danger. He could try to shout through the gag but there's no way Chewie would hear him before it was too late.

It wasn't long before he heard the sounds of returning footsteps. He craned his neck to see who was approaching, and felt his heart sink when he saw the teenagers come into view, carrying Chewbacca's limp body between them. Carrying was not the right word, though. Floating. They floated Chewbacca over to lay down beside Han, who frantically searched for signs of life in his friend. Without being able to speak or move his limbs, all Han could do was look closely for the rise and fall of his chest or the flutter of his eyelids beneath his fur.

Chewie was bound with another set of cuffs. That was a good sign. If they had killed him, Han didn't think they'd bother restraining him.

Starkiller tugged his handkerchief free, and when the gag fell away Han coughed and spat and then asked, angrily, "What did you do to him? If you hurt him—"

"Relax," said the girl, flipping her hair over her shoulder indifferently. "We shot him with a tranq dart. Be glad we didn't use one on you."

In his upset, Han had only half noticed the astromech droid wheeling in after them. But it came to a stop directly next to him, so Han awkwardly thrashed at it with a half kick. It made a blatting noise in response, then one of its flaps opened up and an appendage darted out to zap him in the thigh.

Han shouted in pain despite himself, and Starkiller said sternly, "Artoo Detoo, that's enough. He's our prisoner, don't abuse him."

Artoo Deetoo? Han thought, asking himself why that meant something. R2-D2… a pretty standard designation number for an astromech droid. They'd called it Artoo a few times, which Han had not batted an eyelash at, since it was pretty clearly an old R2 unit. R2-D2, R2-D2, he thought. Why in blazes did that feel so—

Then he remembered. That was the code. The first part of the code that would unlock the information stored on the datastick Princess Vestre, or Leia, had given him.

"So," he said, still turning this realization over in his mind. "Are you gonna tell me why you've kidnapped me?"

It was too much of a coincidence that the name of this droid and the code Leia had given him was at all connected. She hadn't said it was a droid designation. It could refer to anything.

"Once we're in hyperspace," said Starkiller. "You stay put for a little while longer."

"Hyperspace?" Han echoed. "How are you gonna fly this thing without me and Chewie, huh?"

"Easily," answered Starkiller, with the same unsettling calmness he had done everything thus far. Without another word he walked away, towards the cockpit. The girl and the droid followed him.

"Chewie," Han hissed, rolling over to nudge the wookiee with his head. "Wake up, Chewie, c'mon."
But it was to no avail. Chewie was out cold. Of course those cowards had drugged him, Han thought. Even with their Force tricks they didn't have the stones to fight Chewbacca. Smart kids, maybe. But Han wasn't feeling especially generous in his thoughts towards them at the moment.

He felt the thrum of the ship's engines coming to life, and then the push and pull of it lifting off. He slid along the wall and floor a little ways, and then the girl was there, lifting them up without touching them and putting them in the lounge seats where she strapped them in.

"How kind of you," Han said, his voice thick with sarcasm. "Say, how fond are you of your buddy Starkiller? Care to cut a deal? Help me escape and—"

"Shut up, smuggler," she snapped, turning on her heel.

Han raised his eyebrows as he watched her head back up to the cockpit. Apparently, even joking about the prospect of betraying her partner was enough to get a rise out of her. She didn't exude that same calm as the boy, that was for sure. A deadly confidence in her abilities, yes, and a lack of fear, but he thought that if he were going to get under someone's skin with talk, it would be hers. The only problem was, he wasn't quite sure getting under her skin was something he wanted to do, if he valued his and Chewie's current status of being alive.

He was cut off from seeing out the viewports, but he could still feel the effects of their jump to hyperspace, and was glad to be strapped in place. Even if it had been another level of humiliation to be move around by the girl like he was a crate on a grav sled. His only comfort was that he wasn't unconscious, like Chewie.

His captors returned once they were cruising through hyperspace.

"Where are we headed?" Han asked.

"None of your concern at the moment," said Starkiller. The droid was close on his heels, and Han narrowed his eyes as he looked down at its blue and white dome. It was too much of a coincidence, and yet…

"Say kid," he asked, taking a deep breath, "can you tell me, do you remember the name of your teacher… the one you had a crush on?"

Starkiller tensed and looked at him in surprise. Han could tell he'd caught him off guard, but whether he'd hit some kind of nerve, or if the kid was just confused by such a random question, he didn't know. He wished that Leia had given him something more pointed to ask.

"What kind of a comment is that?" the girl barked, while Starkiller just gaze at him and touched his own chin in silent contemplation. "Why don't you shut up and let us ask the questions?"

"You know I'd love that," Han shot back. "Ask me anything! All you've done is push me around and not given me a single reason and I'd like to know why."

Starkiller sat down across from him and rested his elbows on his knees. "Isn't it obvious?" he asked. "The Empire has put quite the bounty on you and your friend here. Surely you've heard?"

Han shifted, his bound hands rasping across the seat, scraping his knuckles. He gave the boy a defiant look. "Yeah, I've heard. You gonna take me to the nearest outpost, turn me in, is that it?"

"Right now I'm more interested in why the Empire has a bounty out on you," said Starkiller, leaning in, an intent look in his blue eyes. "Attempted assassination of the Imperial Princess. That takes some nerve. Why'd you do it? Who hired you?"
“Why d’you want to know?”

The girl stood beside Starkiller with her arms crossed. She regarded Han coolly, and suggested to her partner, “You should just probe his mind, get whatever he knows and be done with him.”

“No,” said Starkiller. He glanced at her with a patient, but admonishing frown. “Come now. You wouldn’t really want me to do that. Anyway, what would Ahsoka say?”

“I don’t know; she’s not here, is she?” the girl replied, jutting her chin out.

“Hey, I’ll tell you whatever you’re interested in knowing, kiddos,” interrupted Han. “I’m very reasonable. Will you let me go if I do?”

They both looked at him silently, and Han didn’t like that one bit.

“What’s in it for me if you’re just going to turn me over to the Imps after you’re through with me?” he asked.

The girl leaned towards him and said, "If you cooperate we won't have to scoop out your mind like an overripe melon and leave your empty husk of a skull to rattle around the black dark void of space."

"Okay, that's… weird. It's fine. I can take care of this," said Starkiller.

Han thought he could tell what was going on. They were trying to manipulate him with the old good cop bad cop routine. As a seasoned smuggler who'd bullshitted his way past many different authorities in several star systems, he found their execution of the ploy clumsy and obvious.

The girl rocked back on her heels and shrugged.

"Look, I'll make you a deal," said Han. "I'll answer all your questions and more if you just tell me one thing." He licked his cracked lips nervously, but tried to smile with a certain amount of disarming charm.

Starkiller surveyed him through half lidded eyes, but bit. "And what is that?"

"Your teacher's name. You know, the one your sister teased you about."

"What—" began the girl, but Starkiller held up one hand.

"What do you know about my sister?" he asked.

"Depends on your answer."

Starkiller surveyed him with narrowed eyes for what felt like an eternity, but then he finally answered, "Her name was Miss Ognyn. She taught Galactic Geography."

Han nodded. "I know who you are," he declared. "Your real name is Luke Skywalker."

"Oh really?" said the girl. "And what's my name?"

Han shrugged at her as best he could with his arms pinned behind his back. "I don't know, Red. You're not important."

She glared at him and leaned forward menacingly.
"Stop," said Starkiller—no, Skywalker—holding up a hand between them. "Maybe you're right, but I wouldn't be too happy about that. That just means you made an attempt on my sister's life. And that means we're not friends."

"No," said Han, shaking his head, talking fast. "That's not how it happened at all. How come you think I know that little tidbit about your teacher? Huh? Who do you think told me? I'm working for your sister, buddy. Real good friend of mine, actually. You've got everything all wrong."

Skywalker and the girl exchanged glances, and it was as if something passed between them, an understanding without words. Then Skywalker shrugged and turned back to Han. "Sure. That is something only Leia would know. So tell me everything. What happened at Jabba's, everything you talked about, why the Empire put a bounty on you. How did she look? Was she well?"

"Why don't you free me from these restraints first," said Han. "As a show of good faith."

Just then, Chewie stirred, letting out a moan. Both Skywalker and the girl backed away.

Chewie came slowly back to life, grumbling about how his head hurt and then thrashing violently when he realized he was cuffed and strapped in place. Han reached out, saying, "Chewie calm down, calm down, it's alright, you're gonna be fine."

Chewie whipped his head around, taking in his surroundings, and growled at his captors, lunging forward against the seat restraints. Skywalker held up his hands in a placating motion, but it didn't have the desired effect. The astromech droid retreated as fast as its wheels could carry it, and the girl ducked out of the room into the hallway.

It was only at Han's insistence that Chewie eventually calmed down and stopped shouting obscenities and threats at the boy. His growls subsided into softly muttered complaints about his head.

The girl reappeared, holding a canteen in one hand and what looked like a pill pack in the other.

"Sorry about the sedative," she said to Chewie, approaching him cautiously. "Here's some painkillers, if you want it. I know that stuff can leave you with a nasty headache for a couple hours, but this should help."

Han watched in disbelief as she set the canteen and the pills on the dejakir table, with a friendly, conciliatory smile. "Are you gonna let us go?" he asked. "Can't exactly take a swig of water with our hands cuffed."

"I'm not sure that's such a good idea," said Skywalker. "I'm not sure you wouldn't try to overpower us."

Han tried his best to look innocent. Dopey, even. "Aw, we wouldn't be foolish enough to do that."

"Oh yes we would," said Chewie saltily, and Han glared at him, because apparently he'd forgotten that the girl, at least, could understand him. And maybe the boy could as well.

"I think we should wait awhile. Just to be safe," said Skywalker. "Mara can help you take a drink of water, can't you Mara?"

"Celina," said the girl pointedly.

"I don't think it matters," said Skywalker. "They know my name now."
"Trust me kid the name 'Mara' doesn't mean a thing to me," said Han, unable to resist the jab. The girl, Mara or Celina or whatever, glared at him and picked up the canteen, then very pointedly passed him by and offered it to Chewbacca's lips.

"I really am sorry," she said to the wookiee, "we just didn't want to have to hurt you, if you put up a fight, you see."

"I wouldn't be the one getting hurt," Chewie snapped back, while Han rolled his eyes.

"She was threatening to scoop my brains out like meiloorun fruit just a couple minutes ago, don't buy the whole 'I'm sorry' routine," he told Chewie.

"Your brains not his," said Mara, sniffing.

"I have done nothing to deserve this kind of treatment," Han protested, turning his attentions back to Skywalker. The girl just did not like him, for whatever reason, so he wasn't going to bother wasting his time appealing to her better nature. "Look, kid, I've got important business to do for your sister. You want to hear about it? Want to know what she's up to? Then let me go."

"As much as I'd love to hear what you have to say, I don't want to have to fight you in the middle of hyperspace," said Skywalker, smiling apologetically. "So if you're not going to talk we'll just have to wait."

"Not gonna lie, being held hostage in my own ship doesn't sit well with me, but I'll give you my word, kid. No fighting of any kind. Just a civil conversation between two people with a common interest."

"Don't listen to him, Luke," said Mara, even while Chewie accepted the water and pain pills she offered him, apparently deciding to play upon her sympathies and remorse. Han shook his head. Of course she liked Chewie. Of course she did.

"I'll uncuff you," said Skywalker, despite her warning, "if you start talking and I like what I hear."

Han sighed, but decided to give him something anyway, since talk was the only tool he had at the moment. "I met your sister at Jabba's, I was there when things went south, and I helped her escape the first time… though she'd say I just got in her way."

"Escape from what, exactly?"

"She made Jabba mad, or he made her mad, I guess… they made each other mad, there was Force stuff involved and then everyone had their blasters and lightsabers out. She told her pal the Emperor that it was a premeditated assassination attempt so he'd give her the go-ahead to come down on Jabba like a sandstorm, and that's what she did."

"And you helped?"

"Boy, she didn't need my help. Not for that. But… I have other uses."

"I doubt that," Mara muttered.

"Yes, I do," Han snapped back. Then he focused again on Skywalker. Luke. "I'm a smuggler. I worked for Jabba but that was just to make a living, you know? When your sister came along I realized that she was something special. I thought if I helped her I'd be better off, so that's what I did."
"Better off, how?" Skywalker asked.

"Alive and rich," Han said, smiling bitterly. "She gave us a nice sum of credits as a reward for helping her out of the Palace the first time around, and promised us more if we ran some errands for her around the galaxy."

"I don't follow," said Mara. "Leia is paying you? But the Empire has a bounty on your head, and Leia is with the Empire, so any money she gave you came from the Empire."

"Look, I don't know what happened after your sister left Tatooine," said Han, not sparing her a glance. "The money we got came from the Imperial garrison at Bestine, as thanks for saving the Imperial Princess. Then she leaves and a couple days later there's a bounty on our heads for attempted assassination. And so here we are."

"Hmm," said Skywalker, then asked, "what are these errands you refer to?"

Han smiled and leaned as far forward as he could, locking eyes with the boy. "Uncuff me and I'll tell you."

Skywalker sighed, but nodded. Mara reacted by drawing her blaster and training it on Han. "Try anything and I'll shoot to kill," she said.

"She won't," Skywalker said, pointedly. "She'll wound you though." He waved one hand and Han's cuffs fell away with a clank.

Han rubbed his chafed wrists and rolled his shoulders and neck, trying to hide how the boy's casual use of the Force unsettled him. He'd heard tales about the Jedi in his youth and seen what the Princess could do, but it still gave him the willies every time.

"Now," said Skywalker. "The errands."

"Where are we headed?" Han asked, jerking his head towards the cockpit. "And just how long are we gonna be in hyperspace?"

Skywalker and the girl exchanged silent looks again, then Skywalker told him, "We're headed somewhere safe. But why don't you answer the questions for now. If we're all friends, shouldn't be a problem."

"I just want to know that you're not planning on handing us over to the Empire," Han insisted.

"Don't worry about that."

Han sighed. What else was there to be worried about? But he said, "You know, the funny thing about all this, is that I was looking for you. Your sister wanted me to find you."

The boy looked intrigued at that, though he tried to hide it. Han was encouraged that any time he mentioned the Princess, the calm exterior cracked just a little. It let him know that perhaps he was talking to someone human after all.

"I've got something for you. A delivery. But, your sister said you'd pay me for it. So...."

"Did she? What exactly am I paying for?"

Han reached into his vest, and Mara tensed with the blaster pointed at him still. "Relax, Red," he said, freezing. "I'm not trying anything. Just gonna show you the delivery."
He slowly pulled the datastick out from the inner pocket where it had been safely hidden. "There's a message on here for Luke Skywalker's eyes only. You can have it for twenty thousand credits, though really I should up the price for kidnapping us and stealing my ship."

Mara stepped forward and plucked the datastick from his fingers, still with her blaster trained on the spot between his eyes. He didn't put up a fight, confident in the stick's worthlessness without the code to unlock the data. "It's encrypted," he said. "And I'm the only one who knows the code to unlock it."

"Meiloorun fruit, ripe," said Mara.

Skywalker laughed, which caught Han off guard. He laughed nervously with him, and even Chewie forced a chuckle. Mara was the only one not laughing. She cocked her head at Skywalker and frowned deeply.

"It's alright," said Skywalker. "I think we can trust these guys. I have a good feeling."

"Yes," said Han, "we're all friends of the Princess here, right? So you can stop with the intimidation act, now."

"Who says it's an act?" Mara asked, but holstered her blaster and leaned into the doorframe with elegant ease. "I've never mind probed anyone before but I'm pretty sure I could do it given some time to practice."

"It's not the way Jedi do things, and you know that," said Skywalker. "Just because our mentors aren't here doesn't mean we forget everything they taught us."

"Jedi, huh," said Han. "Explains all the Force woo and stuff, but I gotta say, you should be more careful flaunting that kind of thing. The Jedi are extinct for a reason."

Something dark worked its way across Skywalker's face, but was gone in an instant. "We were talking about my sister," he said, quickly. Han realized he'd hit on a sore subject, and he filed that thought away for future reference.

"Yeah, she told me you'd be good for the money if I got you the stick. Keep up your end of the bargain and the code to access the data is all yours."

"Fine."

"You have the credits?" Han asked, suspicious of the ease with which Skywalker agreed, especially since the boy still had the upper hand on him. Chewbacca was still restrained and they were hurtling through hyperspace to an undisclosed location.

"Credits aren't a problem," said Skywalker, though Han caught Mara mouthing "twenty thousand?" as if she disagreed. "Give me the code."

"Give me the credits."

"I don't have them on me," Skywalker told him, seeming a little irritated for the first time. "How about, in a show of good faith, I uncuff your friend," he nodded to Chewie, "and we'll deal with credits when we get to our destination."

"Your sister said that you could get the credits from the Rebel Alliance," said Han. "Are we headed to one of their bases?"
"Not exactly."

"Where exactly are we going?"

"To see an old friend of yours. Someone who helped us track you down. Who's interested in your troubles with the Empire."

Han stared at him blankly. "An old friend of mine?" he asked, running all the names and faces he'd swindled throughout the galaxy through his head.

"Yeah. Calrissian, that name ring a bell?" said Mara. "We were tracking you, our trail led us to him, he had some interesting ideas about where you were and how to bring you in. Very helpful. Gave us credits in advance, too."

"Wait a minute," Han said. "Lando? Lando Calrissian? Lando paid you to come after me?"

"Well not you, actually. He seemed mostly interested in getting this ship, back," said Skywalker, then added, glancing around, "though I can't say I understand why. This thing is a piece of junk. No offense."

"Watch your mouth, kid," Han snapped, though all that got from Skywalker was a look of amusement. "This is the Millennium Falcon you're talking about. The ship that made the kessel run in twelve parsecs."

"Eh, it's a YT-1300, right?" said Skywalker, shrugging. "Not the best freighter CEC ever put out. I prefer the G9 Rigger model. My father had one when I was a kid. Now that thing—"

"The G9 is a hunk of flying garbage," Han scoffed. "And completely inferior to the newer YT-series. Your dad had to be crazy to be taking one of those flimsy grease buckets around the galaxy. Only someone with a death wish would do that."

"Well, he did have a death wish," Skywalker said icily, and it gave Han pause. The boy sounded like his sister, all of a sudden. Han made a mental note to avoid mentioning their father again.

"...Anyway," he said, dropping the debate over freighter models, "I won this ship from Lando in a game of sabacc and he's never gotten over it, I shoulda known he'd be looking for an opportunity to get it back. But you don't have to take me to him, you know."

"I'd think you'd want to go have a talk with him." said Mara, almost affably. "It's better than the alternative."

"Which is?"

"We turn you over the Empire and collect the reward."

"You're not gonna do that, Red. Not now that I know for certain who your friend here is," said Han, waving a hand dismissively towards Skywalker. "The Emperor would sure love to get his hands on you, kid. And if it keeps me from a firing squad, I'll gladly tell him everything I know."

"Don't say that," Chewie admonished. "That's like asking them to kill you."

"He's right," Mara agreed. "I don't give a flying womp rat what the Jedi would have to say about it—if I think you might endanger Luke I'll kill you with a smile on my face and a song in my heart."

"That won't be necessary," said Luke, touching her arm. He turned back to Han. "I'm pretty sure the
Emperor would put you in front of a firing squad even if you did tell him everything you know, and I'll bet you suspect that too. You don't want to take your chances with the Imps. Your friend Lando seemed to think he might know a way to get the Empire off your back, if you're interested.

"Fine," said Han, "to Lando, then. But I'm not giving up the *Falcon* to him, whatever he's got up his sleeve." He glanced between Luke and Mara, then said, "Why didn't you tell me right away that an old friend of mine sent you? Might have saved us all this fighting and cuffing and drugging."

"Where would be the fun in that?" asked Mara, and then she gave him a wink.

Han squinted at her and was formulating a biting response, but before he could get it out, Skywalker answered him:

"I wasn't so sure that *would* spare us a fight. Lando said you might not take kindly to any mention of his name… something about a double cross and you being a lousy good for nothing swindler. And besides. I thought you might have tried to kill my sister. So you'll have to forgive me for not being completely upfront and honest."

"Yeah, sure," said Han, still rubbing his wrists. "But now that we're all such good friends, why don't you uncuff Chewie here? I'd feel a lot better if we both showed up to Lando's without shackles. And for the record, I didn't double cross him, that was just a misunderstanding. I'm sure he knows that. He was probably joking."

Skywalker raised an eyebrow.

"I'll be on my best behavior," said Chewbacca, grimacing a wide smile at Mara. "Promise."

After another moment of weighted silence, Skywalker nodded slightly, and Mara waved her hand over Chewie's restraints. He stood up, moving very slowly, and stretched. All four beings and the droid in the corner were cautious and silent. They warily orbited each other, until they were certain no one was going to try anything. It was going to be a long flight to Bespin.
Luke closed his eyes and breathed out a slow and steady exhalation, releasing his frustration and impatience into the air.

In the background he could still hear Calrissian and Solo laughing and chatting on about old times, swapping memories of this heist and that adventure from their pasts. He could picture, without cracking open an eye, the insouciant expression on Solo's face and the way he was lounging easily on the sofa, one arm thrown across the back and a leg crossed over his knee. Luke felt the slight weight of the datastick in his pocket and wondered how the smuggler had outwitted him, to the point where he still hadn't given up the code needed to unlock the message stored on the device, but was himself now happily free and easily shooting the breeze with an old friend.

He already knew what Mara would say, because he could tell what she was thinking. Not in so many words, but the combined worth of their close connection through the Force and his knowledge of her general opinions told him that she thought he had been too soft. They had agreed to work over the smugglers by adopting a sort of good guy bad girl dynamic, where Mara threatened and pushed and he offered reasonable options. Luke wasn't sure where the intimidation tactics ended and what Mara actually wanted him to do began, but he liked to think that Mara understood that digging into Solo's mind forcefully was a transgression not undertaken lightly.

If a simple mind trick could have sufficed ("you will tell me the code") that would be one thing, but Solo was not weak minded enough for that to work. Luke had already tried, back at the cantina over their preliminary game of sabacc, where he had masked his testing of Solo with casual chit chat. The smuggler didn't seem to notice what Luke was doing, but he didn't capitulate either. Luke had thought that Ben would approve, at the time. Being able to fail at using a mind trick without the subject knowing you were trying to mind trick them in the first place was a good skill to hone, because being caught awkwardly waving your hand at someone who wasn't buying it could lead to more trouble than the attempt was worth.

The trip to Bespin had been passed mostly by playing dejarik, and Luke had taken some small satisfaction in the fact that he was able to beat Solo time and again. "Tell me, kid," said the smuggler, "are you really as bad at sabacc as you seemed, or was that part of the act?"

Luke had just smiled and shrugged and said that perhaps Solo had been right: he had better luck with dejarik than sabacc.

Now that they were above Bespin, guests of Cloud City Baron Administrator Lando Calrissian, Luke was anxious to get things moving again. The sooner Solo agreed to Calrissian's plan and they could get on with their mission to save Leia, the better.

The only problem with the plan was that Solo didn't seem to like it, didn't trust the people Calrissian
had lined up to help them. Luke did have to admit that purchasing disintegrated organic remains from a bounty hunter was one of the shadier things he'd ever contemplated doing, and was inclined to agree with Solo that the likelihood of them being double crossed was high, but he felt a rising sense of desperation now that he knew Leia was trying to contact him.

There were many levels of danger in this entire endeavor. Forget worrying that the bounty hunter would double cross Calrissian—Luke also had to worry that Calrissian was setting them up, or that Solo was lying about his connection to Leia and the fact that the datastick was from her. His instincts were telling him to go for it, and he trusted in the Force not to steer him in the wrong direction, but that didn't mean he wasn't also preparing to be wrong.

He opened his eyes and took in the room around him again. Sure enough, Solo was lounging on the couch just as he had been last time Luke looked. Calrissian was standing beside him with one foot on a table in a dashing pose, his velvet lined cape pushed back from his shoulder as he gestured with one hand while telling a story. Mara was leaning against the wall, her eyes open and watchful as she listened to the tale. The wookiee, Chewbacca, was seated on another couch with his hands behind his head, nodding along with what Calrissian was saying.

Artoo was beside Luke, right up against his shin, and Luke absently put a hand on the droid's dome as he surveyed the room.

"How soon can we move ahead with the plan?" he asked, interrupting a story about a cantina and some twi'lek dancing girls on the seventh moon of Bar Shaddur.

Calrissian looked at him with a quirked eyebrow, then said, "If Han agrees to it I can contact my friends and have you on your way in one standard rotation."

Solo sighed heavily. "Come on, Lando. I appreciate your help getting me out of this mess, but the Falcon? She's my ship, buddy. I won her fair and square. I'm not giving her up."

"Han, Han, Han, how many times do I have to say it? The ship is still all yours, it's just a formality putting the title deed in my name. If you're a dead man you can't very well own a ship, can you? But you'll still the Captain, under an alias, of course."

"Yeah, sure, I'll be a hired hand working on your ship."

"Hey, I make a better boss than Jabba," Calrissian said with an infectious laugh. "But don't look at it that way. Sure, I've got some jobs that you and Chewie could do for me, but it's all a lot more above-board and respectable than what the Hutt had you doing. This is a win win situation."

Solo uttered another long, world-weary sigh. "Sure, sure," he said, waving his hand, "but do you really think you can trust Fett? I mean he worked for Jabba, if he's holding a grudge for my part in tanking his boss's organization…"

"You know better than I do that no one who works for a Hutt has any love for them," said Calrissian. "He's doing just fine for himself without Jabba. A bounty hunter never lacks for work in this galaxy, anyway."

"These remains," said Solo, "where are they from?"

Calrissian shrugged. "Don't know, don't want to know. Don't tell me that's the part that bothers you."

"Oh not me, but my young Jedi friends might object," said Solo, sweeping a hand towards Luke and Mara.
"I don't have a problem," said Mara.

Luke shook his head though he remained quiet. He thought his mother and Ben might have some objections, but he'd known that diving into the world of smugglers and bounty hunters would involve questionable deals with questionable people. He and Mara had made that choice a while ago.

"Then it's settled," said Calrissian brightly. "We just need some DNA from you and Chewie. Hair, clothes that you've worn, etc. Enough to be picked up by the testing equipment."

Chewbacca bleated.

"Exactly," said Solo, nodding to him. He turned back to Calrissian. "What happens if the test fails and they don't accept the remains?"

"Then that's our problem," said Mara. "If we get caught trying to pass off falsified remains to collect a bounty we'll be arrested. Or they can try to arrest us, anyway."

"And you're willing to do this for the reward money?" Solo asked incredulously. "It's high but it's not that high."

Luke shrugged. "We're not doing it for the money. You can have our cut of the bounty as payment for delivering the message from my sister. Besides. I have a good feeling about our chances for success."

He had thought the plan was risky back when Calrissian had proposed it, when they were on Bespin the first time around, and truth be told he and Mara hadn't been sure that they were going to go along with it. That was before they had captured Solo and Chewbacca and the message from his sister had been put on the table—back when he'd thought that Han Solo and Chewbacca might have actually tried to kill his sister. In fact, double-crossing the Baron of Cloud City and taking their quarry directly to the Imperials had seemed like their best option at the time, from a purely logical standpoint. Mara had definitely been in favor of doing it. Luke hadn't liked the idea of accepting Calrissian's help and credits to find Solo and then not living up to their part of the bargain, but he'd be lying if he said he hadn't even considered it. But Luke wasn't going to tell them any of that, now. He was just happy that they seemed to have gained some allies, however shady those allies might be. They had no love for the Empire, and sometimes, Luke thought, that was the only thing you really needed in a friend these days.

"If anyone has a chance of tricking the Imperials, it's us," Mara told Solo.

"Why do you think Boba doesn't want to pull the shyster on the Imperials himself?" Calrissian asked, nodding his agreement. "He's glad to be a middleman and take a portion of the reward because he knows only a damn fool would take the risk of waltzing up to the Imperials with false goods. Luckily for us, we've got a couple Jedi, the damndest of fools there are in this whole galaxy." He smiled and winked at Luke. "No offense."

"None taken," said Mara. "The only thing I'm worried about is this Boba Fett guy deciding it'd be a lot easier and more lucrative to turn the real Han Solo and Chewbacca over to the Imperials himself."

"For once, me and Red are on the same wavelength," said Solo. "I don't know what you're thinking trusting Boba with a job like this, but I gotta tell you, it's one hell of a gamble even for you."

"Relax," said Calrissian. "I've got it all worked out."

"If by 'worked out' you mean you're doing everything on a hope and a prayer, yeah, sure. I'm relaxed."
"Look, if the kids get themselves caught you just have to keep on laying low while they take the heat," said Calrissian. "If Boba decides to double cross us, he and his crew will have to fight you, me, Chewbacca, and the wonder padawans here. He knows that's a fight he probably won't win and it's not worth it to get a few extra credits off the Imps."

Chewbacca nodded and said something in agreement.

"Fine," said Solo, throwing his hands up and relenting. "Fine. Alright, you've talked me into it. I'm real touched that you're so set on saving our hides, Lando. Who am I to be second guessing you, huh?"

"That's the spirit. Just like old times, Han. You, me, and Chewie, with luck on our side. It'll all work out."

Solo quirked up one corner of his mouth in a reluctant smile. "Sure."

Seeing that they had finally reached an agreement, Luke said, "Now, about that code."

Solo looked over at him suspiciously. "What about it?"

"I'd like to have it."

"I was thinking it might be best to wait till after this whole deal is worked out," said Solo, "if it's your payment for helping me out and all."

"I'm still going to go ahead with the plan," said Luke, a little insulted that Solo thought he would back out once he got the code. "We're stuck here without a ship of our own, remember?" he added, thinking the cynical smuggler would trust more in Luke's inability to fly away than his honor. "But I have a feeling this message is important, so I'd like to not waste any more time before I see it."

Solo shrugged. "I guess that's fair. The code is 'R2-D2.' But it's not the whole code. Your sister seemed pretty paranoid about anyone else getting ahold of the message, so she only gave me the first part. She said you would know the other half to unlock it."

"The other half?" Luke echoed, temporarily frustrated into blindness. He couldn't think in riddles, not in this moment. What had Leia been—

Artoo started to beep rapidly, bumping into his shin. "Yes, Artoo, I know, it's you," said Luke, putting out a hand to fend off the excitable droid.

"I think he wants the datastick," said Mara.

Luke nodded, then pulled it out of his pocket and inserted it into the proper slot on the droid.

Artoo wheeled back suddenly, and then after a moment a thin blue hologram leapt to life from his photoreceptor, situated on the low table between the couches. Luke stared at it, stunned, and then realization washed over him. He knew what the second half of the code was, but it didn't matter, because Artoo had already figured it out and input the data himself, unlocking the message.

His other half, his counterpart, had always been C-3PO back when the Skywalkers were all together on Osallao. It had been many long years since the droids had been together, just as it had been many long years since Luke and Leia had seen each other, but they were a matched set.

The hologram showed Leia. She was staring into her recording device, wisps of hair falling from a loose bun as her head bent downwards. Unlike the images of her on the official broadcasts he had
seen over the HoloNet, she wore no elaborate makeup and was dressed in grubby patchwork leathers rather than a formal gown.

She looked up, her holographic eyes staring past Luke, and said, "Luke, I hope this message finds you soon. I'm sure by now you have seen what has happened to me. Don't believe anything you hear. Trust nothing that is broadcast over the Imperial channels. Ignore Palpatine's circus. Have faith in me, dear brother, don't…"

She stopped, looking as if she could not vocalize what she was trying to say, then she shook her head and changed her tack. "I have so much to tell you that I barely know where to begin. Our father is still alive, but he won't be for long unless I can save him. But I can't save him, not on my own. I need you. Father needs you."

Luke stared at the flickering image of his sister, dumbfounded, but there was little time to process what she had just said, because she kept on speaking rapidly, urgently, as if someone might burst in on her at any moment:

"The Emperor keeps him restrained in a facility aboard the Death Star, always hovering close to death, in terrible pain, unable to use the Force to get free… I don't even know how much of him is still left but he is very weak, he is very close to leaving us forever, I can feel it. Do you feel it? Sometimes I hear his voice from a distance, like a ghost, like he's already dead."

Leia paused again and ran a hand wearily across her face. Mara had come to sit beside Luke, and though he could not tear his eyes away from the hologram, he felt her hand brushing his hair comfortingly as Leia barreled forward with her message.

"I don't know how much you know about the Death Star. It is a battle station with planet destroying capabilities which is currently stationed in orbit above Alderaan. It is there to guard the planet while the Empire investigates its ties to the rebellion; that's probably what you've heard. But it's not all. It is there to hold Alderaan hostage so that I do not step out of line. If I do not play the part of the willing apprentice, every living soul on Alderaan will perish, an entire civilization gone in an instant. I can do nothing without the constant fear of its destruction.

"I need you, Luke, to help me. The Emperor must not know that I have contacted you. He must not know that I have tried to reach anyone in the Rebellion. I can do nothing myself, for now, but there are things that must be done."

She leaned forward, a frenetic urgency about her entire demeanor. Luke thought, for a flickering moment, that the hologram might leap to life and seize him by his shoulders, give him a few hearty shakes.

"And besides all that, the lives of Princess Astreia and Winter Organa are in my hands. They are kept imprisoned on Coruscant, and the Emperor uses them to poke and prod at me and make me do whatever he wants. Truth be told I fear for them more than I do Alderaan, most days. One wrong step even unintentionally and I might give him a reason to kill one or both of my friends. They are very dear to me, Luke. The Organas are the only family that I have had these past few years. They could never replace you, I don't want you to think that, but you must understand that I..." she paused, shook her head, and took a deep breath. "It's my fault they are in danger and I cannot let any harm come to them.

"You're probably thinking that you need to rescue me, but you don't. I must stay by Palpatine's side if I can ever hope to defeat him. My plan is to learn everything that he knows and grow more powerful in the Force as his apprentice, and then strike him down when I am able. I must become as strong as Father was, but wiser. To do this I must slowly convince the Emperor that he has won, that
his control over me is complete. He must think that he has broken me and remade me into a true Sith. Only then will his defenses be lowered enough for me to strike. So do not try to come for me. Promise me this, Luke. Promise me you will allow me to carry out my mission to destroy the Emperor from within.

"The only thing that you can do for me, now, is rescue the others. You must save Father, and you must rescue the Organas, and you must see that the Death Star is destroyed so it cannot be used on Alderaan or any other planet. But you must do all of this without my help. The Emperor will know if I am going against him. Even sending you this message is a terrible risk."

"Luke," she said his name again, and just like every time she said it he felt a stab in his heart, "you must be very careful. I know the Emperor is looking for you, too. He hasn't told me this, pretending to be only focused on my 'training,' but I have no doubt that he wants to control you the way he is controlling me. He has this obsession with our Father that I do not fully understand, but he will not be happy until he has both of us. It's like revenge."

"I am also concerned for Mother, and Ben. When the Emperor speaks of them it is with the utmost rage and hatred. I think," she shook her head a little bit, her brow furrowed, "that he blames them entirely for Father leaving his side. He talks as if Father was his loyal servant until they colluded to turn him against him, and stole him away... like he was property. I think that's why he keeps Father alive, in a cage of sorts. I have no doubt that he wants both Mother and Ben dead and the two of us enslaved to him. What he'll do with Father if that happens, I don't know; I don't know if Father will even survive the way he is much longer."

Leia sighed heavily. "I'm rambling," she said, and the hologram wavered unsteadily. "This is what you must do for me: save the Organas, save Alderaan, save Father. Destroy the Death Star. But promise me you will not let yourself fall into the hands of the Emperor. Do not get yourself caught trying to save me, do you understand? I'm not the one who needs to be rescued.

"Hopefully when I see you again I will have defeated the Emperor. He named me his heir, and that was a mistake. Once he's dead I will have control of his entire Empire. I can free the galaxy once I've killed him. I would do it now if I thought that I could, but I'm not strong enough, yet.

"There is one being that I think he fears. Do you remember when we were children, and Father and Uncle Ben took us to this strange remote planet, I cannot remember where it was or what it was called, but there was an old Jedi there. Do you remember? Master Yoda. If you can find him again I think he could help. I know he looked small and strange, but I think he is very powerful. He used to be the leader of all the Jedi. Perhaps you know more about him already? If not, ask Ben. I have only heard the Emperor say his name once or twice, with great disdain, but I sense fear behind his words that I do not think even he realizes he feels. If there is anything that Yoda can do you must convince him to help us.

"Goodbye, Luke. Please, know that I love you. Take this information to Mother, to the Rebel Alliance, get them to help you. Find Yoda, if you can. Tell Mother that I love her; that I never wanted to hurt her. Maybe I should have opened with that. Oh, well. I have to go now. I hope you get this message... you're my only hope, Luke. When I'm afraid that I will fail and everyone will die I remind myself that he doesn't have you. But I do.

"May the Force be with you."

The hologram blinked off and a heavy silence settled over the room. Mara was beside him still, her hand on his shoulder. Luke realized that he was crying, slow fat tears tracing their way down his cheeks. He wasn't ashamed to cry in front of the others, but he sat back, wiping his face with the back of his hand. He probably should have excused himself to a private room to view the hologram,
but Artoo hadn't waited for permission before unlocking and playing the message. It didn't matter.

Luke looked around the room. An idea was already forming in his mind. Solo was sitting forward with one hand over his mouth in guarded contemplation, while Calrissian now leaned against the wall, his eyes half-lidded but unable to fully hide his sense of intrigue. Chewbacca was difficult to read, but Luke suspected he might be the easiest one to recruit. Luke knew a little of the history of the wookiees under the Empire's enslaving grip, and it was not a good one.

"I need some help," he said finally. "It will be risky, but the reward will be great."

"What kind of reward?" Solo asked, shifting slightly and dropping his hand from his face. "And don't say the moral satisfaction of toppling the Empire, because I'm not interested in being a part of anyone's revolution."

"You helped my sister before."

"Yeah, with the promise of getting paid."

"There was never any guarantee you'd get paid," said Luke reasonably. "I think you helped her because you knew it was the right thing to do."

Solo laughed. "Whatever you say, kid. I'm willing to take risks, but only the ones worth taking. Besides, I've got enough on my plate right now. We're still on for faking our deaths, remember?" He motioned quickly between himself and Chewbacca.

The wookiee offered an opinion, and Solo just waved what he had said away. Luke glanced to Mara, who nodded slightly. Chewbacca was on their side, ready to fight the Empire, which was a good sign. Luke didn't think he would leave Solo's side, but he knew that the wookiee had a better chance of convincing the smuggler to help them than he did.

"We'll take care of your bounty first," Luke assured him. "Consider this another job lined up for the future."

"What are you proposing?" asked Calrissian, pushing away from the wall.

Luke nodded towards the now empty table where the hologram had been. "You heard what my sister said. There's a lot of stuff I need to do, and right now the only two things I can accomplish easily are giving my mother the news, and finding Yoda. I happen to actually know where he is, fortunately. I just need help getting there, seeing as how we ditched our last spacecraft when we picked you up."

"So you just need a flight back to your rebel base and you can get a bunch of eager-to-die soldier types to help you out," said Solo. "Perfect. I will be more than happy to give you a ride in the Falcon and then say tootle-oo." He waggled his fingers mockingly. "For a fee, of course."

Luke ignored Solo's attitude, saying, "Actually, Yoda is far closer to here than the rebel base where my mother is stationed." The Yavin system was on the opposite side of the galaxy and the Dagobah system was just a couple sectors away. "And if I can, I'd like to bring him back with us to the Alliance."

Solo shrugged. "If it's on the way," he said, "why not?"

"Great." And then, unable to resist a little attitude of his own, Luke added, "But I would of course need permission from the actual owner of the spaceship." He nodded towards Calrissian.
"Hey, he's not the owner yet."

Calrissian just laughed and said, "As the future official owner of the Millennium Falcon, upon the unexpected disintegration of my dear friend Han Solo, I say the new Captain I hire to pilot the ol' gal can use his own discretion in accepting charters."

"Gee, thanks," said Solo, shaking his head, but Luke thought the smile he cracked at Calrissian was only a little sardonic.

Amidst all the planning and plotting and the shock of the news, Luke wasn't able to fully process what he had learned until he was alone later. They were still on Cloud City, awaiting the arrival of their dubious ally and his supply of blaster cremated remains, and Luke stood alone in a room that Calrissian had set aside for him.

In the quiet of the Bespin evening, watching the orange suffused light wash over the city through the window, Luke grappled with the most unexpected part of Leia's message.

He had known she wasn't really a willing convert to the Emperor's way of thinking. He had always known that. Having her confirm it was a relief, and he was eager to show the message to Mother and the rest of the Alliance High Command as proof. Her idea that she could learn the ways of the Sith without falling into darkness, and overthrow the Empire from within, was a little troubling. Still, that was the hubris of a girl just trying to fight against tyranny in her own way, and the Alliance would have to see that she was still on their side.

But Father.

Alive?

He still didn't know what to think or how to feel about that.

Luke had spent the last two years trying to come to terms with the fact that Father was really gone. Now, he wondered, had his struggle been a natural process of grieving or had he known all along that it wasn't true? Had he been fighting against what the Force was trying to tell him?

If that were the case, why didn't Ben know that Father was alive?

Luke had drifted apart from Ben in the past two years, to the point where he had simply left the base in search of Leia without even consulting his old Jedi Master and guardian.

He hadn't wanted to admit it, but he didn't really know how to treat Ben anymore. Before Father's death Luke had announced to everyone that he didn't need to be trained by Ben any further and that his intention was to go with his father. That plan had been upended by the altercation with Maul and then… then Father leaving and never coming back. Nevertheless, it had still caused a separation between him and Ben that they did not discuss.

He'd spent almost all of his time with Mother, and Lashmina, and Mara, while Ben had found his own way to keep busy on the rebel bases of Dantooine and Yavin IV. They were not on bad terms, per se, but Luke understood now, looking back, that he had resented Ben for Father's death, for no real logical reason. He had also been unwilling to cling to Ben as his one remaining father figure, although some might have done just that. Luke had been afraid of… what, exactly? Losing Ben as he had lost Father? Making Father's death real by replacing him with Ben once and for all? Luke didn't know. It had been easier to just ignore it.
Ben had been close to father for longer than Luke had been alive, so he wondered why Ben could not sense that Anakin was not actually dead. Why couldn't Luke sense that his father was still alive? Did it have something to do with this 'facility' Leia had alluded to in her message? Father was in a cage, she had said, cut off from using the Force.

That must be it, he thought. Because otherwise he surely would have known, wouldn't he? Surely he would have felt it.

Luke put one hand to his head wearily as the sky darkened. He remembered the last time he had seen his father, in the flesh, when Anakin had left Dantooine for Sunspot prison. His itinerary had been simple; visit the prison, see what Maul was bullshitting about, then go to retrieve Leia.

It had been far too painful over the last couple of years to imagine what might have been if Father had done just what he'd said he intended to and had returned to Dantooine with Leia in tow. The Emperor would still be out there, a malevolent force to be reckoned with, but they would have been together. As they should have been.

Him, Father, Mother, Leia, Uncle Ben, and baby Lashmina. Ahsoka and Barriss with Mara, too. All of them a family together. Complete.

For two years he had thought he would never be able to ask his father why he had done it; why he had cut everyone who could have helped him out of his life at that last minute and put his fate in the hands of Darth Maul. Now, perhaps, he could.

For two years he'd forced himself to exclude Father from his imaginings of what their family would be like once this was all over and they had achieved peace and defeated the Emperor and it was safe to be happy again. Now, perhaps, he could.

And yet, having hope again was, at that moment, painful.

Father was alive but he wasn't here. Leia was not here. They were both in the clutches of the Emperor.

He could still lose both of them yet.

A soft knock sounded at his door, and he could sense that it was Mara on the other side. "Come in," he said, waving one hand to unlock the door and slide it open.

She came in, smelling nice and fresh and slightly damp from a shower. A real water shower, which was something they hadn't had for quite some time, so she was also radiating a contented happiness. Mara liked the finer things in life. Real water showers and good food and nice clothes. He was glad that she was happy.

"My father is alive," he said to her as she came to stand beside him. He wished that could fill him with the same quiet contentment that a simple shower had done for her.

She slid an arm around his waist and rested her head on his shoulder. "So it would seem," she said, carefully, after a moment of guarded silence.

"You don't believe Leia?" he asked, surprised.

"It's not that I think she is lying. I just… ah… ignore me. I'm just naturally suspicious."

"I believe her."
"I'm not saying I don't."

"Then what is it?"

She was silent for what seemed like forever, and he couldn't tell what she was thinking. Her mind was sealed off. "The Emperor is a master of lies," she stated at last.

"Not Leia."

"But she is under his control. She said it herself. I just… look, don't worry about it." She stopped abruptly and shook her head once. "I'm not letting my guard down, is all."

He sighed. He was too tired to argue with her, and besides, he knew that she was right about one thing. Leia was playing a dangerous game with the Emperor. They all were.
Leia gazed out the viewport at the blue and green planet hovering below, a fragile glow in the dark void of space. It reminded her of Alderaan. She knew it would be a beautiful place, just looking at it from afar.

She had, of course, studied Naboo extensively before now, so she had already seen holos of the planet, with its rolling grasslands, watery marshes, beautiful cities and elegant architecture. But now was the first time in her life she was to step foot on the planet of her mother's birth.

She stood in the shuttle, clenching and unclenching her fists hidden under the voluminous sleeves of her gown. She wore a simple flowing white dress, Alderaanian in style, though she knew that the Naboo people were given to far more ornate fashions. Lush brocades and velvets and elaborate headpieces were the norm here; clothes were an important indication of social status. She remembered it all from her studies. She told herself that there was nothing here that was unexpected or new. Not really.

She remembered the Emperor's sly smile as he called her from her solitary lightsaber form practice and told her that he had a new diplomatic mission for her. That smile gave her nightmares, now; in her dreams he was a shadow with sharp, yellow teeth. "You will be excited, I think," he said, "to hear what I have in store for you, my dear. A vacation, you might call it."

The shuttle landed and docked at the spaceport of Theed, which had been closed down to all other traffic in anticipation of the Imperial Princess's arrival. Leia adjusted the folds of her garment, trying not to appear fidgety and nervous in front of her troopers.

Her troopers… hardly. They had followed her into battle at Jabba's palace, and were technically under her command, but she still felt no real authority over them. It was all just for show. She wondered if they already had orders to shoot her if she were to attempt an escape, or if Palpatine would let her go only to send someone to hunt her down later, after Alderaan was gone and the Organas were dead.

*I can't dwell on that now,* she told herself sternly. She was here to play the Imperial Princess and it wouldn't do to mope around jumping at shadows, acting like a fool. She held her chin up and approached the shuttle hatch, where the new officer who had replaced Piett stood waiting for her.

They disembarked to meet their welcoming committee. At the forefront stood Queen Kylantha, in full facepaint regalia, with a towering fan headdress and voluminous sapphire gown that dwarfed and concealed the human dimensions of her body.

Leia could not help but remember holos she had seen of her mother in similar fashion, long ago, in the days of her youth. When she was Queen.

Leia had spent long hours in the archive room at the palace in Aldara, gazing at old holos of Padmé Amidala. This ranged from every archived instance of her mother appearing on HoloNet reports, first as the Queen of Naboo and later as a Senator, to private footage taken while her mother had been on
a diplomatic trip to Alderaan during the Clone Wars.

This was the history her parents had never allowed her to see as a child on Osallao; the stories they
didn't tell. She was sure, now, that the headpiece Kylantha wore was a direct homage to one of her
mother's iconic looks, and she made a mental note of it. Her mother had worn the crescent moon
iconry as a worshipper of the moon deity Shiraya, but since her mother had been such a popular
young queen in her day, the imagery had become associated with her. Kylantha wearing the
headdress now could not be a coincidence. But paying homage to Padmé was not, exactly, a wise
thing to do when welcoming Palpatine's heir. Was it meant as a misguided compliment to the person
Leia had once been, a passive jab at who she was now, or a coded message of support? Leia had no
way of knowing.

Kylantha was, from all the reports she had read about the current Queen, a puppet ruler that Palpatine
had installed to be compliant and loyal to him after the previous monarch, Queen Apalaina, had been
executed for harboring Jedi fugitives in the early days after the formation of the Empire. The
headdress, whatever it meant, was not what she would have expected to see on such a head.

In short, Leia was surprised. She did not want to be surprised.

Flanking Queen Kylantha were bodyguards and handmaidens as well as other Nubian dignitaries
and officials. After adjusting to the unexpected accoutrements of the Queen, Leia's eyes went
automatically to the current Senatorial representative from Naboo. She had to take a deep and
steadying breath at the sight of Pooja Naberrie.

Pooja was in her early twenties, a few years older than Leia, and she was the daughter of Mother's
older sister, making them first cousins. The family resemblance was clear. She had Mother's same
large brown eyes and cascading chestnut curls, which she wore pinned back by a simple circlet, in
contrast to the Queen's elaborate fanned crown. It was unsettling to look into the face of proof that
her mother had a whole family, a history, a lineage that Leia had never been privy to before.

She kept walking down the gangplank, fighting away a dizzying sensation and trying not to appear
affected by anything she saw or sensed on Naboo. She had an overwhelming feeling of her mother's
imprint here, as if Padmé Amidala's essence was a part of the planet itself. This was, Leia knew,
absurd, and not how the Force worked. Her mother had not been here in ages and though she had
once been the monarch, there was no ghost of her former self haunting this place. Padmé was
somewhere far away hiding out on a Rebel base, and Leia needed to get ahoi of herself. She just
needed to get through this ordeal, and hope that nothing permanently horrible and scarring was about
to happen here.

Her official purpose for this trip to Naboo was twofold. One, to oversee the Festival of Light, say a
meaningless but pretty sounding speech, rub elbows with forgettable dignitaries, nod and smile and
be gracious but impressive. Just like Queen Breha had always been at formal functions.

The second was to be received by the Naberrys of Naboo, who were eager to solidify a positive
relationship with the Empire by way of the new Princess. Leia had disowned her mother on the
HoloNet for all to see, but the Naberrys had still expressed a desire to claim her as one of their
bloodline, to welcome her to Naboo and honor her as Princess of the Empire. This is what Palpatine
had told her, satisfaction in his voice, as if it made perfect sense to him that they would want to climb
the social ladder and use her ankles as their grasping point.

She didn't even need to ask herself what Palpatine intended by sending her to preside over the
Festival of Light and meet with her extended family. His real reason, that is. He was doing it to kriff
with her head, like every other damn thing he did. Hatred for him burned in her heart even as she
smiled and greeted the Queen. She went on down the line, shaking hands and receiving bows or
kisses that grazed her knuckles, and tried not to stare openly at her cousin as she approached.

"Your highness," said Pooja, deferentially, bowing her head and giving a little curtsy as she took Leia's proffered hand.

"Senator Naberrie," Leia replied, "I am pleased to meet you."

"I never dared hope this day would come," Pooja said, smiling. "For so long we thought you were lost to us. I look forward to receiving you as an honored guest, my dear cousin." She stepped back, dropping Leia's hand.

Leia nodded, then turned away, careful to remain cordial yet appear distant and unaffected. She wanted to be relieved that the first meeting was done with, but she had more to come. She had other family in this place whom she must meet with after her duties at the Festival were completed. Each new name and face would be a gauntlet to pass without allowing herself to become emotional, to crack and show that she was not in control.

Palpatine was not there, but she knew that he had his spies watching, ready to report any irregular behavior. Any emotional outbursts. Any weakness he could exploit.

She remembered Palpatine's words to her back on Coruscant, telling her that for years Pooja and the rest of the Nabberies had been under close surveillance, but had never showed any signs of seditious action or thought. And, more importantly, had never been in contact with Padmé.

Pooja was allowed to enter the Imperial Senate about six years ago, despite the fact that her aunt was such a prominent member of the Rebel Alliance. It was a way for Padmé's family to distance themselves from their most famous and radical of members, to reinforce their loyalty to the Empire and reject Padmé as a traitor.

The Nabberies were a very old and well respected family in Theed; not the sort to engage in petty rebellion. For years they had mourned the presumed death of Padmé, but also saw it as the inevitable result of her reckless nature, and when she reappeared as a rebel leader, they rejected her faulty politics and regretted her poor life choices. At least, this was the public statement they gave, the things they told other Imperials, the faces they showed the galaxy when HoloNet reporters came snooping at their gates. What they truly thought of Ambassador Amidala was likely kept private, and secret, only spoken behind closed doors… perhaps not even then.

Leia could hardly believe that the Nabberies were really as staunchly loyal to the Empire as they wanted to appear. How could Padmé Amidala come from a family of Imperial supporters? It defied reason. But, at the same time, she realized that they were strangers to her; people her mother had barely ever talked about. Padmé only spoke of her mother or sister or father in slips of the tongue, and Leia had found it difficult to coax more information out of her. And so they were enigmas. Perhaps they really were as disapproving of Mother's politics as all that—perhaps Mother had known this and so had never spoken of them to her own children because they were already dead to her.

Perhaps.

But instinct made Leia think otherwise.

She was familiar with this kind of double life. The Organas of Alderaan had lived it for many years—praising the Empire with an inhale of breath and plotting its downfall on the exhale. Leia suspected that Pooja, as Naboo's young emissary to the senate, was not much different than Astreia had once been. She hoped that Pooja at least sympathized with the Alliance if not outright collaborated with them. But she had no proof of any of this, and neither did the Empire. Which was
just as well.

Part of her longed for some kind of sign from her cousin that she was in contact with Padmé, that she knew what the Alliance was planning on doing about Leia's current predicament. Were they going to try to rescue her? She could not go along with them if they tried, of course. After all, if she allowed herself to be swept up and taken back to the Alliance, so many other people would pay the price, and she would never be able to get close enough to Palpatine to end him if she ran from him as her father had once done.

Another part of her dreaded the meeting with her family because she was sure that Palpatine was sending her to Naboo and allowing her to meet with the Naberries as a ploy to reveal them as traitors. She hoped they would not reveal anything incriminating about where their true loyalties lay. What if Palpatine later questioned her? Would she be able to lie directly to him and convince him that the Naberries were loyal Imperialists? She was not sure that she could. She was always on guard against Palpatine digging into her mind, but his instincts for dishonestly were great.

She wondered if her message had ever gotten to Luke. She thought about Solo and the wookiee, who were still at large in the galaxy with a bounty on their heads, and wondered if being marked by the Empire had scared them off of looking for her brother as they had agreed. Probably, she thought. Why would they continue to help her when it was so clearly no longer lucrative or advantageous to do so?

She wondered if they would give up the datastick in exchange for their lives if the Empire should get ahold of them. She had encrypted it for a reason, of course. No one would be able to access the data without the code, so she should be safe from anyone seeing what she had sent. But if Solo spilled everything that he knew, the Emperor would no doubt confront her about it. Regardless of what the smuggled datastick held, the fact that she was trying to contact Luke at all was probably grounds for executing Astreia, or Winter, or both. Just the thought of that made her nauseous.

But she rallied herself and remained tall, her back straight, her eyes gazing ahead as she walked across the tarmac towards a transport waiting to take them to the Theed Palace.

The rest of the afternoon into the evening passed in a blur of preparations for the night's festivities. Those in charge of coordinating the event took their jobs very seriously and insisted on rehearsing the various speeches, dances, and songs that would take place before the crowning moment which the Festival always culminated in: the fireworks.

Leia was caught up in this pantomime, ordered to and fro by harried workers who seemed too preoccupied with getting their jobs done to be afraid of the Imperial Princess. *Stand here, test this microphone, walk there, stand under this spotlight, speak.* Her stormtrooper bodyguards were arrayed all around, scanning the plaza with blasters at the ready. They were undergoing their own sort of rehearsal process, under the auspices of their commanding officer, making sure they had the entire area covered.

It wouldn't do for the Princess to be assassinated here on Naboo. Not at all. The Emperor himself had never been back to Naboo after that one Festival of Light years ago, when he was still merely the Supreme Chancellor, and a Separatist attack had been narrowly thwarted by the Jedi. Her father, according to the records, had personally rescued Palpatine from the Separatist leader. How ironic.

She had accessed reports of the mission from the old Jedi Archives, along with holofeeds of Palpatine's interrupted speech at the Festival of Light. The Jedi had worked hard to guard the Supreme Chancellor from assassination, only a couple of years before he ordered their total destruction. Leia saw her parents in the footage, looking so impossibly young, her father barely older then than she was now. She even caught a glimpse of Bail Organa among the foreign dignitaries in
attendance. She had replayed the footage several times, wishing it were longer, wishing it didn't abruptly cut off when the assassination attempt began.

The one thing Leia almost enjoyed about being in the Imperial Palace and training under Palpatine's guidance was being able to access the archives. The Palace had once been the Jedi Temple, and she now had almost unlimited access to their records, which had at one point been the most extensive in the galaxy. Her curiosity had been primed on Alderaan, when she'd had long days to herself with little else to do besides sit in the archives there, and in the Imperial Palace she found even more to satisfy her fascination with uncovering the past. Much of what she was able to view was locked to all but the highest ranking Imperials. Her clearance was the highest besides the Emperor himself: a reward. One of his "gifts" to her.

She was not sure she would find anything of use in what he allowed her to see, but she grasped at everything she could, regardless. There was no strategy in her search to uncover all she could of her parents' history. Just loneliness.

Leia felt no joy as she stood on the platform and watched the fireworks explode in a myriad of colors across the starry Naboo sky. She had given her speech about the thousands of years Naboo had spent with the Republic and how that partnership had extended profitably into the new age of Palpatine's Empire. She spoke empty words about looking forward to a glorious future. She listened to the cheers and watched the colors burn in the sky and felt far removed from it all. As if she were in a bubble, a small plastic figure at the center of a falling star globe.

A banquet followed the festivities, and Leia was seated between Queen Kylantha and Senator Nabirie. The Queen was to her left, and Pooja Nabirie was placed to her right. Her cousin spoke to her again about how much she was looking forward to receiving her as a guest at the home of their grandparents, and how pleasantly surprised they were that such an honor had been granted to them.

Leia wondered what Pooja would think if she had seen her as Winter had seen her, standing amidst the fallen bodies of the Max Rebo Band. Would Pooja be so happy and relieved and honored to be receiving her as a guest then? Leia thought not.

"There were some security concerns regarding the house," she answered, the inane words dropping from her mouth like stones. She looked at her plate and half expected to see them sitting there on the bed of salad greens. "But thankfully that was ironed out."

"Yes," Pooja said with a laugh. "Your security officers were crawling all over the house inspecting every corner of it this afternoon. We were relieved to get the stamp of approval."

"Leia nodded wordlessly. She would be spending the night at the Nabirie household, though as far as any official itineraries were concerned, she was scheduled be at the Theed Palace. Having the Imperial Princess stay in an anonymous location was deemed a good idea by the chief of her security detail. That way if there were any plots forming against her, they would be targeting a decoy at the Palace rather than Leia herself. Only the Nabiries and a select few members of her squadron knew the truth of where Leia was heading after the banquet was over.

Leia wanted desperately to be alone. She looked forward to when the night was truly over and she could retreat to a private room and speak to no one. The pressure of keeping up the Princess Vestre persona weighed her down but there was no one she could trust to let the guise slip, save of course for Threepio. Under Palpatine's watchful gaze she was constantly on guard. Her handmaidens, stormtrooper guards, and the Imperial officers assigned to her command were all spies. And now the Nabiries, who were family by blood but total strangers in every way that mattered, would expect her to enter their home and be… what?
Was she really their hope for total redemption in the eyes of the Empire? A celebrated Imperial granddaughter to cover up the shame that was their Rebel daughter? Or were they rebel sympathizers hoping to find in her a double agent?

After the banquet, Leia went up to the guest room in the palace with her handmaidens and Threepio, and once inside she changed into plain traveling clothes. She reluctantly bid farewell to Threepio, who was deemed too conspicuous to travel with her incognito, and who must remain with her decoy.

Two of her stormtroopers were to accompany her to the Nabberries in plain clothes, shedding their white armor and helmets and traveling with her in the guise of festival goers. Their blasters were concealed under brocade cloaks and the three of them looked like well-to-do Theed residents going home after witnessing the celebration. Leia carries her duel lightsabers with her, nestled against her hip and hidden from view.

They left the palace with a crowd of other festival goers and hailed public transportation to take them to the residential district where the Nabberries lived. This method of travel was part of the ruse and Leia felt strange doing it. She had never really traveled this way before. Even when she was a child on Osallao, her father would take her and her brother to school personally. In fact, the last time she could remember traveling on a group transport rather than a private shuttle, was when she and the rest of her class had gone to the Shalla Canyons on a field trip that fateful day when everything had changed permanently. That day when Mara and Faisellu had been outed as spies from the Emperor and the veil had been pulled away from her father's true history, revealing that he had helped Palpatine destroy the Jedi and establish the Empire before going into hiding.

Leia thought back on that day as if the girl she had been was a totally different person. She truly was. She could not have guessed, even then, even as her world was shaken out from underneath her feet, that she would end up here.

One of Leia's handmaidens would be sleeping in the plush bed in her private Theed Palace quarters that night, and Leia tried not to think about what might happen to the girl if someone made an assassination attempt. She reminded herself that all of her handmaidens were employed by the Empire and were not her friends, were in fact more like her jailers than her servants or bodyguards, but it didn't help. If the girl was killed in her sleep because she was impersonating Leia, it would be yet another death to add to the growing list of fatalities her capitulating to Palpatine had caused.

The only thing that helped was comparing that list against the entire population of Alderaan and telling herself that more would be dead if she had refused.

She looked at the two stormtroopers travelling with her and realized that she knew nothing about them beyond their military designations. ST-7984 and ST-3521. She was sure they had names. She didn't really want to know them, though. It was odd enough seeing their faces, since on duty troopers usually never took their helmets off.

They arrived at the street where the Nabberries resided and got off the transport. It was dark and late at night, and as they made their way down the silent street, Leia got a strange shiver down her spine. She glanced around, ideas of assassins filling her head, but could not detect any immediate danger. She glanced at the troopers flanking her, taking note of how despite their civilian clothes there was an unmistakable military gate to the way they marched beside her.

Pooja was waiting for them outside the house, looking less formal and more nervous than she had earlier that evening at the banquet.

When Leia stepped inside she noticed the elegant yet homey decor and the soft, warm glow of the house lights, which dispelled the shiver of dread she had felt in the street. Her grandfather and
grandmother greeted her in the vestibule, standing side by side with their arms link as if bracing each other. Ruwee and Jobal were in their seventies, with gray and thinning hair, time worn faces, but Leia could still see the echoes of her mother in them. In Jobal's smile, Ruwee's silent grave expression, the brown of their eyes and the bone structure beneath their aged flesh. Leia felt surreal, because she had never before thought she would be in such a situation. She had grown up believing that her parents and brother were all the family that existed.

"We're sorry that Sola and Ryoo couldn't be here," said her grandmother, as she led them to a sitting room. "Sola and her husband are so busy these days: Darred is a highly sought after architect, you see, and right now he is in Dee'ja Peak overseeing a project. Of course Sola is with him. She so wanted to meet you, but the timing just wasn't right."

Leia stared at her. She wasn't sure that she was comprehending the words, because they made no sense to her. If her mother's older sister wanted to meet her, the long lost niece who was also the heir to the empire, then something as trivial as her husband's work taking him to a different city should not have even factored in to her being there or not.

Jobal became nervous under the weight of Leia's blank stare, and she fluttered her hands a little as she motioned for them to sit. "Please, make yourself comfortable. Excuse me for a moment, I will go get us some refreshments. Pooja, Ruwee, please help our guests feel at home, hm?"

There was no making the stormtroopers feel at home. It was their duty to stand at attention and monitor the windows and doors, not to sit and chit-chat with the family. They took up their positions in a curt, businesslike manner, nodding wordlessly to the Naberries. They had already been to the house earlier to scout it out and create a plan of defense should there be any kind of attack.

Leia sat down, however, and tried to hide how uncomfortable she felt. She was tired from the long day, from traveling all the way from Coruscant and having to give a speech, but she didn't want to show it. She looked curiously at her grandfather, who had yet been able to meet her eyes, and then glanced at Pooja. Searching for something to say, she asked, "And Ryoo?"

"Pardon?" Pooja responded, straightening as if the mention of her sister's name startled her.

"Ryoo, your sister. She is not here? I thought she would be." Leia had researched the members of her family beforehand, preparing herself to meet all of them. The absences were unexpected and she didn't like it.

"Oh," said Pooja, her eyes flicking to her father before coming back to Leia, "she's with our mother and father in Dee'ja Peak."

"I see," said Leia. Her cousin Ryoo was a woman of 28, and Leia thought that it was odd that she would be living with her parents when her younger sister was a senator who traveled to Coruscant and having to give a speech, but she didn't want to show it. She looked curiously at her grandfather, who had yet been able to meet her eyes, and then glanced at Pooja. Searching for something to say, she asked, "And Ryoo?"

"Ryoo is close to her parents," said Ruwee, as if reading her mind. "She is a very loyal child."

Leia glanced at him sharply. It was the first real thing he had said, besides a perfunctory greeting at the door, and it seemed to carry with it a double meaning. She decided right then and there that her grandfather did not like her. For someone who claimed publicly to disapprove of his younger daughter's politics, he seemed unable to pretend that he welcomed Leia as Princess Vestre now.
She thought that she should be happy about that, because she didn't really want her family to be Imperial sycophants who betrayed Padmé. But somehow it made her feel vulnerable, rejected. Alone.

Pooja laughed, although there was nothing funny about his statement. "Our parents don't know what to do with us," she told Leia. "Eccentric old spinsters, the both of us. I'm married to politics and Ryoo is just too headstrong to settle down with a man."

Leia raised an eyebrow. "What about a woman?" she asked, before pausing to contemplate whether such a question might be considered rude or not. She knew that Nubian culture was famously conservative. Involuntarily she remembered Winter and tamped those memories down, because such thoughts always led back to the last time she had looked into Winter's eyes, standing in that room surrounded by the unarmed dead.

Pooja just laughed again, and said, "Too headstrong to settle down with anyone, I guess."

Jobal came bustling back into the room, carrying a tray covered in glasses filled with pale green liquid. Leia counted six tall fluted glasses, and it took her a moment to realize that her grandmother had brought out drinks for ST-7984 and ST-3521, as well. She cocked her head to the side, wondering why that fact bothered her. Clearly Jobal was just trying to be a consummate hostess, not neglecting anyone under her roof.

Jobal handed her a glass and wavered as Leia reached up to take it. Leia looked up into her grandmother's eyes—so like her own—and saw a hint of tears glistening at the corners. Jobal reached out and touched Leia's face, gently, then drew her hand away and apologized. "I'm sorry. You look so much like your mother."

"Yes," said Leia, forcing her voice to remain neutral. "I do take after her. Though, she always liked to tell me that I had my father's temper. Mostly when I got in trouble at school." She smiled.

Jobal backed away, but returned the smile. "Your mother is not without a temper of her own." She turned to Pooja with a little wink, and said, "Speaking of headstrong spinsters married to politics, hm? It's ironic. When she was young I was always after her to retire and settle down to raise a family before she was too old…"

She drifted off and shook her head. Leia glanced at the stormtroopers guarding the doorways, wondering if she was going to have to warn her grandmother against speaking too fondly of Padmé Amidala. She was supposed to be the family pariah, a fact that Jobal's fond tone was not doing a very good job of supporting.

"It's a pity that she chose sedition and terrorism in the end," said Leia pointedly. "She did not make a very good mother, I'm sad to say."

Ruwee shifted in his seat, and Pooja forced a smile, as Jobal wiped at the corners of her eyes with a lace trimmed handkerchief. She turned away from Leia and picked up the tray again, moving towards ST-7984 where he stood at attention in the sitting room doorway.

"Please, have some refreshment," she said.

"I cannot consume any alcoholic beverages while on duty, ma'am," the stormtrooper responded in a droid-like cadence.

"Oh, it's non-alcoholic," said Jobal. "It's just sparkling shuura fruit punch."

ST-7984 glanced over to Leia, clearly awaiting her approval. "I suppose there's no harm in it," she
said slowly. "We'll drink a toast to the Emperor, and to family," she added.

The stormtrooper nodded and took the glass from the tray. Jobal smiled and turned to take the drinks over to ST-3521. ST-7984 thanked her and held the glass but did not drink from it, politely waiting for everyone to be served and for the toast Leia had proposed.

She found herself wishing the men were dressed in the dehumanizing white and black of the normal stormtrooper gear. She felt all wrong, sitting here in her grandparents-who-were-strangers house, sharing drinks with her soldiers who were there in part to guard her but also to keep an eye on her and the Naberries and report back any suspicious behavior.

Once everyone had their drink in hand they all looked at Leia expectantly, and she realized they actually were waiting for her to make some kind of toast. The idea of toasting the Emperor at that moment made her sick to her stomach, but she raised her glass, looked her grandfather in the eye, and said, "To Emperor Palpatine, the father of us all, and to my newfound family and our shared loyalty to the glory and prosperity of the Empire."

She was about to tilt the glass back and drink it when she got such an overwhelming sense of wrongness that she lowered it abruptly and said, "Stop. I've changed my mind."

ST-7984 and ST-3521 paused just short of taking a sip from their drinks, and reluctantly lowered them. "Is something wrong, m'lady?" ST-7984 asked.

"No, but this is a security assignment for you, not a social call," Leia said, schooling her tone to sound imperious and harsh. "It is beneath a royal princess to drink a toast with lowly foot soldiers. Set your drinks down and remain at attention."

They both did as ordered, and Leia thought they looked a little pale with apprehension. But they were businesslike as they snapped back into rigid positions.

"Now," said Leia, "we may drink." She tilted her glass back but did not let the liquid reach her lips.

Her grandparents and cousin drank quietly, each looking unsettled in their own ways by Leia's outburst. Jobal and Pooja exchanged guarded looks, and Ruwee frowned into his glass.

Leia set her sparkling shuura fruit punch down and said, as if nothing had happened, "My brother takes after our father in looks, though I can't really say what his personality is like, anymore. I wish I could give you a holoimage of Luke, I know you would love to see him. Did you ever meet my father?"

There was a moment of tense silence, then Pooja answered, "Um, yes. But only a couple of times, very long ago."

"Tell me about it," Leia said, despite the stormtroopers still at attention and listening in.

"Oh, um, well," said Pooja, glancing to her parents but getting no help, "I was very young. I barely remember it. He was very handsome, I remember that. Ryoo and I quickly developed a crush on him. We were fascinated by the fact that he was a Jedi."

She stopped short, realizing she had uttered what nearly amounted to a taboo word.

Leia thought of all the things Palpatine had made her say over the HoloNet, My father was a traitor who died a traitor's death and I do not mourn his loss, and she felt exhaustion at the thought of having to keep that up here, now, with her mother's family who had barely even known him. She stared at the untouched glass of punch and wondered if she was being paranoid, if her fear of
drinking what her grandmother had offered to her was a true premonition from the Force or the result of constant mistrust.

On impulse Leia took the glass and drained it, wondering as she did so how Palpatine would react to her dying here, poisoned by her own grandmother. Horrible deaths for her family all around, no doubt.

The bubbly punch has a pleasant, light taste, and Leia sat there for a moment waiting for any ill effects to take hold of her. She was almost disappointed when nothing happened. Paranoia, then. Ah, well. She should have known she wouldn't get out of this all that easy.

"I'm sorry, but I'm very very tired," she said. "It has been a long day. We will have time tomorrow to talk, over breakfast, before I must leave for Coruscant. In the meantime, could I…?"

"Oh, yes," said Jobal, standing. "Yes, we have your room arranged for you. Come, follow me."

Pooja stood as well, moving towards Leia hesitantly. "Sleep well, cousin," she said, and reached out as if to offer her a goodnight hug.

Leia leaned away from her and said, "I look forward to breakfast," then marveled as her own words reached her ears. How awkward and uncultured she sounded, and felt, as if nothing of her mother or Queen Breha's lessons in civility had stuck with her. She nodded stiffly to Ruwee and followed Jobal up the stairs, with her stormtrooper guards bringing up the rear.

*Coming here was a mistake*, she thought, even while knowing that it had never been up to her. Upstairs, ST-7984 and ST-3521 took up positions outside her bedroom door as Jobal led her inside.

"This was your mother's room growing up." said Jobal with a gentle smile as Leia took in her surroundings. "Wehaven't changed a thing from when she was a child. She used to stay here when she had a vacation from her duties; it was a comfort." The walls, draperies, and upholstery in the room were all a bright, lemony yellow, contrasting the furniture, which was an elegant but simple dark wood. It was like the rest of the Naberrie residence, homey and old-fashioned.

Leia shook her head. "You must be very sad when you think of her," she said.

Jobal had no response for that, and instead wordlessly covered the space of the room to go over by some holoimage units mounted on the wall. She turned one on, glancing towards the door as if the act was one of defiance, and in a moment Leia saw why. An image of her mother as a young girl flickered to life. Padmé was seated on the ground, smiling and reaching out to clasp a pair of young alien children in her arms, rocking them to and fro in a happy loop. Leia could almost swear she heard the distant laughter of days long gone as she looked at the image.

"Did they see this?" she asked flatly.

"No," said Jobal. "We kept them off."

"You shouldn't have them at all," said Leia, her eyes still fixed to the smiling face of her mother. "Not anymore." Young Padmé's cheeks were plump, her smile wide and genuine and untinted by sadness. Leia remembered the last time she had seen her mother; her gaunt face, her hollow eyes.

Jobal nodded, and switched the image off. Leia found herself staring at the empty frame.

"Good night, Granddaughter," said Jobal, careful to avoid using her name, any name. "Sleep well."

Leia was relieved that she did not make any attempt to hug her, as Pooja had done.
After she left the room, Leia glanced again to the empty holoframes on the wall, then shook her head resolutely and went to the door. She opened it and looked between the two stormtroopers, who guarded the hallway.

"Don't eat or drink anything they offer you," she said.

"Yes, m'lady," they said in unison, and she wondered if they understood her apprehension. She ducked back into the room and closed the door with a soft click. This would get back to the Emperor, she knew, already hearing him asking her, Why did you fear that your family would sabotage your guards?

A feeling, she thought. Nothing more.

Now she was alone, but she did not feel at ease.

She did not even feel alone.

They had put her in her mother's bedroom, and if Leia had earlier dismissed the idea that her mother's memory haunted the planet of Naboo or the city of Theed, she had a hard time clinging to that thought now. Her mother may as well have been in the room with her. Leia looked at the bed, the chairs, the dressers and the desk, picturing her mother seated here, standing there, lying under the covers with her head on the pillow.

The holomage frames on the wall were off but they were conspicuous in their deadened state. Blank black squares arrayed in rows.

Leia sat on the edge of the bed and just stared at them for a while. Then she got up and switched them on one by one. Most of them did not even depict her mother, instead there were pictures of the other members of the Naberrie family, her grandparents looking a few decades younger. There was one image that Leia knew must be her aunt Sola and family back when Ryoo and Pooja were just children.

But there were other pictures of Padmé with friends. People whose names Leia didn't know, and had never heard stories about, but who must have at one time been important enough for her mother to frame. School chums, probably. There was even a young boy with dark curls who looked to be getting ready to escort her mother somewhere, perhaps some kind of dance, judging from the formality of their clothes and the bouquet of flowers Padmé held to her chest. But they were both children, probably only 12-years-old or so, and as their images moved they seemed awkward, shy, unsure of what to do with themselves as they were captured for posterity.

Leia turned the images off. She turned the lights off and sat alone in the dark.

She knew that she should probably go use the refresher, unpack a nightdress from the small valise she had brought with her, get ready for bed, go through all the normal movements of a human being. But instead she sat frozen on the bed, staring straight ahead.

At some point she lay down and curled her body around a pillow. She buried her face into the soft plushness and knew that it was yellow, and she thought that somehow it smelled yellow, warm like sunshine and sweet like buttercups, when it should have smelled musty from years of disuse, of being a room that sat just as it always had been when its resident was long gone.

Eventually, she fell asleep. She dreamt of her father and her brother.

She sits on Father's shoulder because she is small and young, no more than a feather's weight on his strong back. Luke walks along beside them, his hand held firmly in Father's as they go. Father's
other hand, the prosthetic in its leather glove, holds onto Leia's leg so she won't slip off and fall. Leia feels the familiar cadence of her father's steps, but there is no ground beneath his feet.

They are high above the world in the night sky, surrounded by pinpricks of distant star systems. Up ahead glows the soft light of a crescent moon.

"Where are we going?" she asks.

"Home," he says. He is looking down at Luke, who barely comes up to his knees but who toddles alongside him gamely, no ground beneath. Father lifts Luke up, holding out his arm as Luke dangles from it. He swings him up and around to perch on his back next to Leia, so that he carries them both side-by-side.

Luke laughs on the way up. "I'm flying," he says, "I'm flying!" before he settles down on his new perch.

He reaches out and takes Leia's hand.

"Where are we going?" he asks across the back of their father's head.

"I don't know," she tells him. "Home, I guess."

"Where's that?"

"I don't know."

Now Father isn't there anymore, and neither is Luke; she is alone in the dark sky, no ground beneath her feet. It comes as no surprise.

Perhaps they have found home without me, she thinks.

She looks up and sees the moon far ahead of her still. She reaches out towards it, thinking that she can take it in her hands, like she has seen done by the statue of the goddess Shiraya, who holds the moon above her head like a trophy.

As she nears it she sees that it isn't a moon, not really, but a great oversized headress. Stars cascade down from its edges; the crescent shifts and tilts as the head beneath lifts up. Two glowing eyes made of galaxies look at her, and Leia feels very small, so small, a child small enough to perch on one of her father's shoulders.

Leia awoke with a start.

She sat up, wiping drool from the side of her face, dropping the pillow from her grip. She was momentarily disoriented, because she wasn't in her quarters at the Imperial Palace, which had somehow come to feel like home. Gradually her vision became accustomed to the faint light provided by moonlight shining in through the window and she could make out the indistinct shadows of the furniture in her mother's bedroom. The moonlight reminded her of the dream, and she shivered.

She wasn't alone.

Even in the dark she could sense that there was someone with her, and it wasn't the ghost of her mother's memory haunting her childhood room this time. It was something far more tangible.

There was someone sitting at the foot of the bed.
Leia might have leapt up and drawn her sabers, neatly bisecting the intruder with lightning fast Force reflexes, but she didn't.

"Mama," she said, her voice a half-whispery croak, "what are you doing here?"

The figure was silent, but lifted one hand out towards her, and without thinking Leia rocked forward, falling into a familiar embrace.

As soon as she felt Padmé's arms around her, the soft slope of her shoulder beneath her head, the tickle of her hair against her cheek, and inhaled the smell that had no name but Mother, Leia began to cry.

This was another part of the dream.

It had to be.

She would surely, soon, be gone.

But now she was here, and Leia cried as Mother rocked her gently, as she smoothed her hair and kissed the top of her head and said, "It's alright. It's alright now. You're safe now, my love, you're safe."

Leia opened her eyes again and pulled away. She gripped her mother's shoulders and looked at her as the realization that this was not, in fact, a dream, hit her hard. "What are you doing here?" she hissed. "Why?"

"Leia," said Padmé, placing her hands on either side of her daughter's face, "I've come to get you. I've come to take you away."

Leia shook herself free and stood up, moving towards the door.

"They're not there," said Mother, getting up to follow her. Leia stopped short and turned around.

"What?"

"The guards have been dealt with," Mother said, coolly.

Leia switched on the lights and stared at her in the harsh and sudden brightness. In the artificial light Padmé was not the ethereal moon goddess of Leia's dream, no galaxies in her eyes, just dark circles under them. She was dressed in plain travel clothes, a simple brown ensemble with her hair, grown back out again, braided over one shoulder and tied with a red ribbon. She looked, in that moment, more like a revolutionary than in any of her holobroadcasts.

"What did you do?" Leia asked.

Padmé just shook her head. "We got rid of them."

"No, no," Leia protested, running agitated hands through the disheveled remains of her buns, which had come loose as she slept. "What am I supposed to do, how am I supposed to explain this to the Emperor, he'll know they disappeared, he'll be—"

"Leia," Mother interrupted, taking a swift step towards her and grabbing her hands, pulling them away from her hair. "You're not going back to the Emperor. You don't have to worry about that. We're taking you away tonight, before any of the Imperials at the Palace realize—"

"Of course I'm going back to the Emperor," Leia said, "I have to! You don't understand. You never
"Message? No," said Padmé, her brow furrowed. "We got word from the Queen that you were coming to Naboo for the Festival, and Pooja worked out the—"

Leia groaned, tugging her hands away and turning around, putting her back to her mother. "I can't," she said, "I can't... how could you do this? How could you be so thoughtless? Don't you think that if I had wanted to leave, I could have taken out two measly stormtroopers all on my own?" She spun around again, staring into her mother's shocked face. "Now what am I supposed to do?"

"Come with me," said Padmé. "We'll all leave Naboo tonight. I have a ship that will carry everyone. We'll go back to the Alliance base."

Leia raked her hands through her hair, stepping out of her mother's reach. This was bad, very bad, she thought. How could she possibly explain turning back up to the Palace alone, without directly implicating the Naberries in the guards' demise?

"I didn't want to be rescued. I can't be rescued. Alderaan will be destroyed. The Organas will die. Father will die. And now, thanks to you, your whole family is probably going to die too!"

"Leia," her mother said softly, her voice wounded, her eyes gone sad. "Your father is already dead."

Leia laughed abruptly, a crazed sound in her own ears. "No," she said, "he's not. He's the Emperor's prisoner. He has been all this time."

Padmé gaped at her, hands falling down limp at her sides. She looked very alone and lost. All the color drained from her face.

"Are you sure?" she asked, her voice small and strained with repressed hope.

"Yes, I'm sure." Leia stepped towards her again, but she was in no mood to offer comfort. "Do you understand now? I must do as the Emperor bids me. I go only where he sends me and I must return to his side, or there will be dire consequences."

"No," said Mother, shaking her head, a tinge of red flushing her cheeks. "We will work something out to rescue your father, but you cannot go back to the Emperor. Leia, sweetheart, if you stay with him he will destroy you. He will change you even if you fight against it. I can't let you do that."

"And I can't let you stop me," said Leia resolutely. "It's the only way."

"No! Do you think this is what your father would want? It's the opposite," Mother argued, gripping Leia's arms. "Keeping you safe and out of the Emperor's clutches was his top priority, always!"

"I know this isn't what Father wants me to be doing," said Leia thinly. "But it's not his decision and it's not yours, it's mine. Besides, it's not just about Father. I am not exaggerating when I say that all of Alderaan will be destroyed. Surely you know about the Death Star. Its laser is pointed at Aldara, at the Organas, ready to blow up the entire planet if I don't cooperate. And why? Because they took me in, kept me secret for all those years. This is happening because you asked them to hide me. This is all your fault!"

Padmé gazed unflinchingly into Leia's eyes. "I will be forever grateful to them for raising you when we could not, but Bail and Breha are founding members of the Rebel Alliance and were deeply involved in the cause long before we sent you there. They knew the risks."

"How can you be so cold? You don't care about them at all? Their entire planet?"
"Of course I care. The entire Alliance cares. But I am your mother, I have to take care of you now. And I can't let you sacrifice yourself thinking that it will buy others' mercy. It won't. Do you think that if the Emperor wanted to blow up Alderaan, anything you do could stop him? It is beneficial for him to posture and threaten and not act."

"You underestimate him. He'll do it. He'll waste an entire planet just to prove a point. He destroyed all the Jedi, didn't he? Life means nothing to him, we're all just pawns."

"Don't be his pawn," Padmé objected. "What do you hope to accomplish by playing along with him? For how long? For the rest of your life?"

Leia shrugged. "For the rest of his," she said. "I can kill him, I can become more powerful, I can overthrow him."

Padmé dropped her hands from Leia's arms and backed away slightly. Her jaw was set, grimly stubborn. After a moment she spoke; "Your father said the exact same thing to me, once, after he had killed children and innocents in the name of... of saving my life. Of saving me from shadows and dreams. He was wrong then and you're wrong now. No good can come of serving the Emperor. None."

Leia thought of the way Winter had looked at her. Of the smoking ruins of Jabba's palace. She thrust out her own jaw and said, "I won't have the destruction of an entire planet on my conscience. If you want to help me you'll help them first."

"We are helping them. I mean, the Alliance is helping them."

Leia raised an eyebrow, catching the distinction. "Aren't you a member of the Alliance High Command?"

Padmé looked down sadly. She shook her head. "No. Not anymore."

"Why not?"

"They decided that the mother of the Emperor's heir was not an asset to them."

"Then they are complete fools."

"I'm still in contact with them," said Padmé. "But that doesn't matter. I didn't come here to talk about the politics of the Rebellion. I came here to bring you home."

"Home? Where's that? We don't have a home anymore." Leia looked around the room. "This was your home, but now it's compromised. None of you can stay here anymore."

Padmé nodded. "I know. Arrangements have been made. We will all leave here tonight, we will join up with my sister, who is waiting for us, and we'll leave the planet."

"Fleeing again?" Leia asked, her voice flat. "Like we fled from Osallao? On the run again, scattering across the galaxy?"

"Not scattering," Padmé said. "No." She reached up to touch Leia's face. Leia flinched away, and she withdrew her hand. "I won't leave you again," Mother said quietly.

"And what about Father? What about Luke?"

"Luke is out searching for you," said Mother. "I haven't been able to communicate with him, but
we'll find him and be together. And your father… now that we know he's alive we'll save him. Do you know where he is?"

"Yes. The Death Star. An impenetrable fortress," said Leia bitterly. "You'll never get to him."

"We'll find a way. Obi-Wan and Ahsoka will be overjoyed when they hear this news, they'll start working on a rescue mission right away. You must have faith in them, they're experienced Jedi." Padmé nodded, almost speaking to herself, as she reached out again. This time Leia let her stroke her hair, her arm, her face.

"I'm not a child anymore," Leia said, despite the dried tears on her cheeks, despite the fact that she knew she wanted nothing more than to collapse again into her mother's arms and close her eyes to everything. "I'm not a precious jewel that you need to keep hidden. I'm not helpless."

"You are helpless as long as you enslave yourself to the Emperor," said Padmé, her eyes darkening. "Your father could tell you that."

"I'm sure that he wants to," said Leia. "But he's a prisoner of the Emperor. You see the irony."

"Serving the Emperor will not free him." Her mother laid a cool hand on her cheek. "I have to tell you something, now. It's very important. It's something I should have told you earlier, before all of this happened, but…. I think now is the time. Perhaps it will convince you to come with me."

Leia felt an uneasy stirring, and knew that whatever her mother wanted to reveal, it was not something that she wanted to know. "Don't tell me," she said, having no idea what it could be.

"I have to. You have to know that you have family that needs you," said Mother, taking a deep, resolute breath. "You have another sibling, a sister."

Leia stared at her, the words not registering. "What?" she said at last. "When? How?"

"Come with me, and meet her," said Mother, glossing over Leia's disbelief and confusion.

"You can't be serious."

_I would have known, _she thought. _I would have sensed something. Wouldn't I?"

"I am. You have a sister. She is two years old, now. Her name is Lashmina. I'm sorry I kept this from you. But it's not too late for us to be a family again. Please, come with me."

Leia took a few steps away and sat down on a decorative chair in the corner. The wood creaked beneath her weight, slight as she was. It was probably an antique. Unlike her new sister. "Two years old," she echoed, quickly doing the math. "When you last visited me on Alderaan… were you pregnant?"

Padmé shook her head. "It was shortly after she was born."

"And you didn't tell me about her. Why?"

Mother folded her hands in front of herself, and Leia saw the way she twisted the skin nervously. "It's hard to explain. It was a very trying time. Your father's death… well, I thought his death… it was—"

"Did he know? Did he know before he left?"

Padmé nodded.
And so he had lied to her, as well. A lie of omission. It seemed almost absurd to care about that now, considering what had happened since, but it cut her. First Father, then Mother, coming to see her and leaving again, not trusting her. Keeping secrets. Keeping her from Luke, and now she understood, from a sister as well.

"You shouldn't have told me this," she said, suddenly remembering her situation. "Not now. The Emperor will find out. I won't be able to keep this a secret from him. He'll know!"

She stood up again, agitated, and paced the length of the room. The possessive way the Emperor viewed Father extended to her and to Luke, and would extend to any other children born to the Skywalkers as well.

"Don't go back to him," said Mother. "Come with me. Come meet your sister."

Leia laughed desperately. "Is that why you're telling me now? To blackmail me into coming with you? Because if I go back I might be responsible for telling him about your other daughter?"

"No," Mother protested, shaking her head as if she could not believe Leia would even suggest such a thing. "I'm trying to show you that you still have a family. And that I trust you. I trust you, Leia. You are a good girl. You always have been. You will do the right thing, I know it."

But what is the right thing? Leia wondered, shaking her head. She came to a stop before the hololmage frame, and on impulse she reached out and popped the holodisc from its slot. She turned the disc over in her palm and switched it on. The image of her mother and the alien children came to life, smaller than it had been on the wall, and Leia turned back to Padmé.

"You always seem so sure that you know what the right thing is," she said. "But it never turns out right, does it? Padmé Amidala, savior of the galaxy. You are more mother to these strangers than you have ever been to me."

Her mother rocked back a little, as if slapped, her eyes flickering shut. But then she opened them again and stepped forward, taking the holodisc from Leia's hand. She switched it off. "I am trying to save you."

"I don't need saving. I am the one who holds the fates of billions in my hands. I have to save them."

"These children," said Padmé, worrying the inert disc between her fingers, "they died shortly after this picture was taken, and there was nothing I could do about it. You cannot save everyone."

Leia thought of the Max Rebo Band, dead on the floor of their cell, and said, "Do you think I don't already know that?"

Padmé nodded, her expression grave. "Come with me," she repeated, maddeningly. "Before it's too late."

Leia felt caught between a rock and a hard place. She knew that her mother could do nothing to force her to come along with her, she was no Jedi or Sith, but it would be difficult to shake her now that she seemed determined to drag Leia away from the Emperor. And even if Leia went back to the Emperor, what would she say to him about her escorts? ST-7984 and ST-3521… she had told them not to eat or drink anything. Had they listened, or had they accepted a glass of fruit punch from a sweetly smiling Jobal or Pooja, and found themselves dead and poisoned on the floor? Or, had Mother done the deed herself, a blaster shot to their heads?

Leia sighed heavily.
"Where is my sister?" she asked, the phrase feeling odd in relation to this toddler she had never met. Padmé took that as acquiescence, because she smiled and said, "With Sola. We'll go there."

Leia nodded. She didn't know what she was going to do, but she had until the next day to decide. She allowed Padmé to put an arm around her shoulders and lead her out of the room, down the empty hallway with no sign of the stormtroopers, but a faint ozone smell that Leia recognized as the aftereffects of a lit lightsaber.

"What did you do with the guards?" she asked.

"Obi-Wan took care of them," said Mother.

"Obi-Wan," Leia echoed, picturing her old uncle dragging the bodies away, perhaps down to the cellar or dumping them in the Solleu river under cover of darkness. "Is he not with Luke?"

"No. Obi-Wan has been with me," Mother told her. "To guard your sister, mainly. Your brother is...very headstrong. He left as soon as we first learned that you had been taken by the Emperor. Mara went with him. Mara Jade, the girl who—"

"I know who Mara is."

The lights in the living room were on, and when they came down the stairs they were met by the nervous gaze of the Naberries. Obi-Wan was there as well, looking older and grayer than Leia remembered him, but not apparently too old to take out her guards. (She had already added them to the list of the dead she was directly or indirectly responsible for.)

"We're ready to go," said Padmé brusquely, nodding to Obi-Wan. "Let's not delay. Morning is almost here."

They threw on cloaks and hurried from the house, carrying only small travel bags they had obviously already had packed in anticipation of this night. Leia saw her grandmother look back once at the house as they hurried silently down the pre-dawn street, and she remembered how Mother had once looked back at the house in Osallao. It was the look of someone who knew they would never return home again.

All the memories, Leia thought, her mind going distractedly to the antique chair, the pillow, all the things that would probably be ransacked by the Empire. The holoimage discs in their wall mounts in her mother's bedroom, she thought, why hadn't they paused to take them... to preserve them... oh, but what a silly thought. Sentimental. She wasn't thinking clearly. She thought of Darth Sidious's yellow smile when he chided her for her weakness on Tatooine, her indulgence in compassion and her ineffectual attempt to conceal it from him.

She remembered Threepio back at the Theed Palace with her decoy. She would be leaving him behind.

You can't save everyone.

"Wait," she said, digging her heels in, coming to a stop. "Threepio. He's at the Palace. We cannot leave him behind."

Her family exchanged glances, then Obi-Wan said, "I'm sorry, Leia. It's too late to go back for your droid."

"He's not just a droid," she protested. "He's family. I won't abandon him any more than I would
He just looked at her with a pinched expression, then raised his eyebrows at Padmé, as if to say *She's your child, I don't know what to do with her.*

"I will send word to Queen Kylantha to keep the droid safe," said Pooja.

"No you won't," Leia disagreed. "It's too dangerous to do that. You would be jeopardizing the Queen if you contacted her now."

"Then what would you have us do?"

*I can't leave,* she thought, though she had known it all along. *I can't leave Threepio and Winter and Astreia and Father. I can't leave any of them.*

She put her head down. "I don't know," she said. "I don't know."

"Come," said Mother. "Threepio will be alright. He's very good at adapting."

She tugged at her again, pulling her along like she really was still a child. And Leia felt like a child, with her mother's arm around her as they fled in the night.

They reached a small personal transport parked in a garage at the end of the street. It seated about six or so humanoid beings, and so the six of them filled it to capacity. Obi-Wan took the driver's seat and pulled out into the darkness, and they glided along, the only travelers on the road.

Leia gazed at her mother's profile next to her, at the back of her grandparents' heads, at Pooja hemming her in on the other side. She wondered how they really expected this all to work. It had been a terrible risk just assuming that Leia was still a member of their family and not utterly swayed to Palpatine's side. A true apprentice of Darth Sidious would have killed them all by now.

She marveled that Mother had walked into her bedroom while she slept, all alone, without any fear. She wondered at what a poor bodyguard Obi-Wan made, just letting her go in there alone.

They really did trust her.

*If I go back to the Emperor now, I'll have to give them up to him,* she thought, feeling a cold, clammy sickness run through her. She would have to reveal that the Nabberries were traitors to the Empire, rebel colluders. There was no way around it. They had shown their hand and placed their lives into her command the moment they conspired to take out her guards, from the moment they had allowed Padmé and Obi-Wan to enter their home.

There would be no point in lying to the Emperor. This was exactly what he had, no doubt, hoped for—that the Nabberries would be unable to resist saving their granddaughter, that they would expose themselves. Had he known that sending Leia to Naboo would flush Padmé out? Had he suspected, or merely hoped? Or would such news be a happy surprise?

If she went back to him and told them that she let the Nabberries escape, she would be dooming herself to punishment for sentimentality and weakness, again. She would be proving that she had not learned the lesson he'd wanted to teach her after Tatooine.

The only thing to do, she thought, was to betray her family. To bring them before the Imperials, exposed as traitors. To, possibly, kill them herself if they tried to flee.

She looked at her mother. She could stop them now, she thought, before they got to wherever Sola
and the others were hiding with her sister... what was her name? Lashmina? (That's what Mother had said. Yes. A good, old fashioned Nubian name.) If she stopped them now, Sola would still be able to go into hiding with Lashmina. Leia would not be turning her younger sister into the hands of the Emperor if she stopped them now.

She knew what Palpatine would want her to do. He would want her to wait until they had taken her to Sola. He would want her to make sure she had all the Naberrries in hand before acting. He would want her to secure Lashmina and bring him the child.

She knew that if she stopped them now, that if she fought Obi-Wan and took her mother and other family members prisoner, that if she brought any of them before the Emperor, they would be tortured until the location of Sola and Lashmina was wrung from their minds. And she knew that if Sola managed to get off of Naboo and escape into the galaxy before she could be tracked down, Palpatine would blame Leia for allowing her that chance.

Leia sat in the speeder and stared straight ahead, unblinking, as the sun rose and first light blushed over the world. Her heart pounded in her chest and her palms were sweaty as she thought about the impossible choice she was faced with.

If she left with the Naberrries, or allowed them to escape without her, the Organas would surely pay the price.

If she betrayed her mother, her family, they would likely die and would most assuredly be tortured.

Her eyes went to the back of Obi-Wan's head. How foolish of him to be sitting there, back to her, taking her to her defenseless sister. What a terrible Jedi protector he was. Didn't he realize that she was the enemy? How could he let Padmé down like this? He had made no attempt to take away her lightsabers. Did he even realize she had them, or did he think that she was untrained, unarmed, a figurehead for the Emperor with no skills of her own to concern him? Or did he trust so completely in the idea that she was good despite it all? Didn't he sense that she would betray them?

Leia felt hedged in, restricted, where she sat between her cousin and her mother. As Obi-Wan picked up altitude and speed Leia looked out at the ground, temporarily mesmerized by the way it receded below them. They were going out of town, now, leaving the city for the grasslands. They must be going to Dee'ja Peak, she thought. That's where Jobal had said that Sola was, along with Darred and Ryoo. There was a chance that had been a falsehood to conceal their true location, but Leia was beginning to suspect that her family was not wise enough to lie to her about such things.

If she were seated on the edge of the speeder, she thought, she could jump out. Both the speed and distance from the ground at which Obi-Wan was now travelling made her certain the act would kill her.

It wasn't the first time she had thought of her own death as a solution to all her problems.

Other times, she had turned her thoughts away from such a dark path by reminding herself that if she died, Palpatine would simply go after Luke. And if she died, who would save Father? She had turned bitter thoughts outward, focusing on the idea that she must live to see Palpatine die, that she must see this through, that once she killed Palpatine it would all be worth it.

But would it be worth it? Her options now seemed so impossibly bad that the thought kept growing, and growing. She was better off dead, better off removed from the game than an unhappy pawn of Darth Sidious.

*Mother is right,* she thought. *Enslaving myself to Palpatine is not doing any good, he is only using*
me for evil. He used me to lure the Nabberries into a trap. He'll use me to hurt them, to hurt Mother, and perhaps one day he'll use me to trap Luke as well.

But I can't escape. I can't get free.

If I die, if force Obi-Wan to kill me trying to defend Mother, then Palpatine won't have anyone to punish for my failure or defection. I'll just be dead. He'll have to move on.

What if Palpatine decided to kill Winter and Astreia anyway, because they were of no use to him anymore, with Leia dead? She knew that was a risk, and she worriedly chewed her lip as she asked herself what was more likely, Palpatine killing them to punish her or killing them because he had no one to punish. Surely, the first option was more likely, wasn't it?

Padmé chose that moment to put an arm around Leia and pull her close, talking into her ear to be heard over the rush of air, "Once we meet up with Sola, we will leave Naboo and head to the nearest Alliance base. If no one in Theed is alerted to our departure from the family home, we should have no trouble getting off planet. Soon, we'll be safe. Once we get into hyperspace." She gave Leia's arm a squeeze. "I was so worried about you. I can't imagine what he must have put you through. We'll talk about it when you are ready, alright?"

Leia closed her eyes and breathed out a slow and steady exhalation, releasing her frustration and fear into the air. Mother lifted a hand to brush stray tendrils of hair away from her face, though it was a losing effort against the wind that whipped around them. She kissed Leia's temple, and Leia allowed herself to lean into the embrace, to drop her head to rest against her mother's shoulder.

The speeder was travelling across the Great Grass Plains, headed towards the Gallo Mountains, so Leia knew that they were indeed headed to Dee'ja Peak. Once there, she would have to make a decision. She would have to act.

Her lightsabers were heavy against her hip, reminders of the violence she could do with them. Reminders of what she had already done. Mother must know that they were there, she thought. She would have to feel them as she held Leia close.

She cracked open her eyes to look at Obi-Wan again, and wondered if the old man was even capable of killing her. He was far more experienced than she was, but still, with his old age and lack of a desire to kill her she might have to try very hard to get him to actually do it.

She closed her eyes again and listened to the beat of her mother's heart.
Luke awoke in the room on Cloud City and looked over, seeing Mara still slumbering on the other side of the bed, her red-gold hair fanned out on the pillow, a bare shoulder peeking out from under the blankets. Calrissian had respectfully given them separate accommodations, but there was no need for that. They were inseparable now, the only person the other could fully trust out here. Anywhere.

Artoo was in low power mode, plugged into a charging outlet on the wall, sleeping as much as a droid could, and Luke was alone with his thoughts for a little while longer.

Luke had dreamt of his father and sister. A dream in which he and Leia were very small children in their father's care. He closed his eyes and tried to hold on to the memory of the dream, that feeling of holding Leia's hand while they sat perched atop their father's broad shoulders. It was comforting.

He could barely remember those days, long gone now, when the world had felt safe and Father seemed like an indomitable mountain they could rely upon. In the dream his father had been the only solid object they could cling to in a vast, dark, empty space. Strange that he should have such a dream, now, of all times. Now, when the responsibility to save his father was thrust upon him.

He got up and headed to the fresher to get ready for the day, running all the things he had to do over in his mind. He had to keep up his end of the bargain with the smugglers, with all that entailed, then on to Dagobah to recruit Yoda.

He had visited Dagobah with Ben a few times after that first journey soon after leaving Osallao. Ben had put great stock in Yoda's wisdom and skills as a teacher. Luke had spent months training with the strange old Jedi when he was twelve years old, but Yoda's teachings had always seemed esoteric and unreachable compared to Ben or Father. Yoda had not been much concerned with lightsaber training or teaching Luke how to use the Force in any practical way. He loved to make Luke meditate for hours on end and talked about the unifying power of the universe a great deal. Luke, at twelve, had been perplexed and impatient for most of his time on Dagobah. He remembered not being sad to leave that place.

Looking back, he could see the value of the things Yoda had tried to teach him. Patience, understanding, connection to the Light Side of the Force and resistance to the fear and anger that led to the Dark Side. But he thought that Yoda had been none too pleased with him as a student, back then, and that was a likely reason why Ben hadn't taken him back to Dagobah.

He could still remember eavesdropping on one of Ben and Yoda's conversations, hearing the old master say, "Too much like his father, he is. Too old to begin, he was. Lacks patience. Much fear I sense in him. Waited too long to begin his training, you did."
Ben had seemed put out, and responded that it had not been up to him. "Anakin was resistant to either of the twins receiving training. He only very recently relented to the idea of teaching them basic self-defense."

"Know that already, I do," Yoda had said, scoffing. "Entrusted you with the care of the young ones, I did. Keep them safe, expected you to, I did. See to it that trained, they were, your task it was."

"I did try, but you know how stubborn Anakin is. I wasn't about to start a war with him over it."

"Convince Senator Amidala of the necessity, all you needed to do," Yoda had said, "and relented Skywalker would have. Why you are here now, is that not?"

At that point Luke had stopped listening, growing bored of the bickering. He had left his spot just outside the hut and gone off to play in the swamp. Thinking back on it now, he understood things that had escaped him at the time. Yoda's opinion that Father would do anything Mother thought was right, Ben's tired defensiveness, and Yoda's frustration with him all congealed into one clear picture which explained a lot of things about the past.

Luke hoped that the old Jedi Grandmaster would recognize that he had matured a great deal since he was twelve. He had applied himself to Ben's teachings. And the fear Yoda had sensed, well… he was still working on that. But the future was more uncertain than ever and he fought hard to maintain his hope and his conviction that goodness and light would win out in the end. If Yoda still thought he was a hopeless case, then the Jedi was wrong. No matter. He was going there to ask Yoda to help the Alliance, not to seek Yoda's approval.

No. That wasn't entirely true. He could not lie to himself. The thought of going to Yoda for guidance had occurred to him before Leia had suggested it in her message, and he had his own reasons to visit the former leader of the Jedi, as well.

When Ben had taken him to La'as Vinto to get his kyber crystal it had been a sacred rite of passage, one that had marked the growth from youngling to padawan in the old order. Luke had passed that trial. But Luke had not passed the trials that granted a padawan the promotion to Jedi Knight, so part of him still felt like Ben's lapsed student rather than a Jedi on his own.

He had stopped training with Ben upon Father's death, but he lacked any sort of official end to his training. No graduation from student to proficient, no official ceremony to bestow upon him the title of Jedi Knight. Perhaps something like that could not happen simply because the Jedi had been disbanded, but he had trouble thinking of himself as a true Jedi without it.

His fight with Maul and the dragon could be claimed as successfully passing a trial, considering Maul was a former Sith Lord and it didn't get much more challenging than that, but he didn't think that he could just claim it for himself. Perhaps, when he saw Yoda, he could ask for something to prove to both the Grandmaster and himself that he was a real Jedi. Yoda's response could be anything from outright rejection, telling him he would never be worthy of such a title, to assuring him that he already possessed the right to call himself such. Luke could sit here and wonder all day. The only way to know for sure would just be to ask.

He exited the fresher and started to get dressed.

Mara stirred, and he turned to look at her as she rose, stretching and yawning. As was her habit, the first thing she reached for was her datapad, checking the HoloNet news feeds obsessively even before getting dressed or using the fresher. He smiled fondly at her disheveled appearance as she frowned down at the datapad and absentmindedly ran her fingers through the nighttime snarls in her hair.
"What's the news?" he asked, coming back to sit on the bed next to her. "Anything we should be concerned about?"

"No," she said, switching the datapad off and tossing it aside. She stretched again and then flung the blanket away from her, swinging her legs over the edge of the bed and practically jumping out of it. Mara believed in the power of hitting the ground running in the morning and today was no exception. She gave Luke a quick good morning kiss (her morning breath was terrible but he didn't say anything about it) then disappeared into the fresher.

There was something odd about her, a reticence. He couldn't quite put his finger on it. She had been all for the plan to clear the smugglers' bounty and head to Dagobah, so that couldn't be it. It was Leia, he thought. The unease she had expressed yesterday had not dissipated. They would have to talk about it later. But not now. Now there were other things to focus on.

Despite all of Han Solo's many reservations, the exchange with Boba Fett went as planned, with the bounty hunter handing over the urn to Calrissian with only a few terse words as credits exchanged hands. Solo muttered a lot about having to sacrifice his favorite well-worn clothes and looked awkward with a head shaved down to a buzzcut. Chewbacca was missing quite a bit of hair as well, his formerly long mane of golden fur having lost a few inches all around. But hair grew back and clothes could be replaced, so Luke thought they were getting off pretty easy. It's not like they had to chop off a hand. He told Solo as much and got a snort in return.

They traveled to the nearest Imperial controlled star system, landing on the planet of Eriadu. Turning in their bounty ended up being an exercise in patience, having to queue up to see the appropriate officials and fill out data forms to make their claim. Hours passed before they could submit the remains, and then they had to wait even longer for the ashes to be processed and analyzed.

A bored Imperial clerk asked them if they understood that there was a 15% markdown on all bounties claimed via disintegrated remains, while scanning their documents, then held up the flimsiplast readout and read, "Thirty percent human, thirty-five percent wookiee, twenty percent rodian, and fifteen percent miscellaneous. DNA readouts confirm trace elemental matches to our records for Han Solo, former Imperial Cadet, and Wookiee Male Prisoner #664980."

Luke was surprised to hear that Han had been an Imperial Cadet. Of course, it did make sense. For their plan to work the Empire needed to have identity markers already on file, meaning Solo and Chewbacca both had to have been enlisted in the Empire or imprisoned by it at some point. But despite all his Jedi intuition, he hadn't taken Han for the Academy type and would have been willing to bet all of his credits on incarceration instead.

"Hmm." The clerk raised one eyebrow and frowned. "There is a substantial amount of human remains not matching Solo's, and the presence of rodian DNA is curious, to say the least. Care to explain?"

"No. Everything looks to be in order," said Luke. "You're satisfied with the results."

"Everything looks to be in order," the clerk echoed with a nod.

"Also, you're going to forego the 15% reduction and give us the whole bounty."

"And we're going to forego the 15% reduction," she said dutifully, tapping at her screen. "Please provide a viable credit stick for transfer."

Luke smiled and handed over the credit stick. She loaded it with funds, after, of course, stamping
several different flimsiplast forms and asking both Luke and Mara to sign, initial, and date about ten
different spots.

"Thank you for your service to the Empire our citizens thank you for ensuring a safe and peaceful
galaxy," she said, making it sound like all one long droning word. Then she waved them off, her
eyes glassy for reasons having nothing to do with any mind tricks Luke had used. He and Mara
walked away from the government building feeling a little dull themselves. But they had the credits
and now Han Solo and Chewbacca were officially registered as dead and their bounty alerts
canceled across the galaxy.


He expected Mara to laugh or quip back at him, but she didn't, she just shrugged, seeming distracted
by public monitors in the plaza, which displayed various HoloNet feeds. He glanced at it, but there
was nothing very informative. Just fluff pieces about the exploits of Coruscanti celebrities, carefully
filtered news reports of terrorist attacks on Outer Rim planets, along with other mundane stories such
as an expected rise in the cost of bantha milk.

They went back to the Millennium Falcon, where the smugglers were waiting for them.

"Congratulations, Han," Luke said, handing over the credit stick. "You're a dead man."

Somewhere along the way he'd become accustomed to calling Solo by his first name. Travelling
through hyperspace with nothing else to do but hang around the common room playing dejarik with
Han had done that.

He made no mention of the clerk revealing that Han had once been a cadet at an Imperial Academy.

"Death has never felt so sweet," Han said, pocketing the credit stick. "From now on I'm back to
being Vyyk Draygo." He did a little bow. "Captain Draygo, at your service."

"That's not a very good alias," said Luke. "Sounded fake to me the first time I heard it."

"Whatever you say, Ben-jean Starmurderer."

"Starkiller," Luke corrected. "Benjen." He looked around to see where Mara had gone and caught
sight of her retreating into a bunk room. He sighed, because he could sense that for whatever reason
she really wanted to be alone right now.

"Trouble with your lady?" Han observed, noting the sigh.

Luke did not deign to reply, just turned away with an exaggerated eye-roll. They were not that good
of friends just yet.

"Right," said Han, smirking but taking the hint to back off. "Let's get off this rock, too many Imps
crawling all over it for my comfort. You're gonna have to come show me the coordinates for this
Dagobah system, I've never heard of it."

"You wouldn't have," Luke said, following him to the cockpit. Han fell into the pilot's seat and Luke
slid into the chair usually occupied by Chewie, so that he could bring up the navigation computer. "It
doesn't have any civilization or infrastructure, which is what makes it a good place to hide from the
Empire."

"Maybe that was my mistake," Han said, leaning back in the pilot's seat, putting his hands behind his
head and his feet up on the control panel. "I should've found some uninhabited rock on the edge of
wild space to lay low on. You never woulda found me then."

"Things worked out for you, didn't they?"

"Sure, if you consider being legally dead and indebted to Lando just hunky dory."

"Doesn't seem that bad, compared to the alternatives," said Luke. "Lando seems like a good friend. He stuck his neck out pretty far for you."

Han just shrugged noncommittally.

"And you still have all your limbs."

"Why are you so hung up on limbs? Jeez. It's not like you're missing any."

"Think again," said Luke. He slipped off his black leather glove and flexed the robotic fingers of his prosthetic hand.

Han whistled. "Well, well. How'd you lose that? Drop your lightsaber? Your girlfriend get mad at you? No, wait," he held up one finger as if the perfect scenario had just occurred to him, "you tripped in the shower and got it caught in the door."

"It was bitten off by a giant Mirialan cave dragon, shortly before I killed it."

"Huh."

Luke smiled quietly to himself, since Han apparently couldn't come up with a quip in response. He brought up the Dagobah system on the ship's map and pointed to the screen. "$\text{There. Straight on down the Rimma Trade Route. How long do you think it will take?}$"

Han leaned forward to look at the screen. "$\text{Hmm, a day or two. Where's this Rebel base of yours?}"

Luke traced his metallic finger all the way across the galaxy up to where Yavin IV resided.

"Yeesh. You weren't kidding," Han groaned, stroking his chin as he calculated the distance. "$\text{Now that is gonna take weeks. Hope your Jedi friend Yoda is good company because we'll be travelling together for a long time.}$"

"Well," said Luke, with a thoughtful tilt to his head as he pulled his glove back on, "$\text{he's eccentric.}$"

"Perfect. I can't wait. You Jedi are going to have us outnumbered, but I still don't want any mystical mumbo jumbo taking over my ship," said Han, waving a finger at him.

"What exactly does that mean?"

"It means I don't want be tripping all over you while you meditate and levitate and become one with the Force... and no waving lightsabers around all willy-nilly, you'll break something. Or chop off one of my limbs, and that's all I've got going for me, as you so love to remind me."

"Right."

"And no trying to tell me my future."

"Have you ever actually met a Jedi before, Han?"

Han shrugged. "$\text{Does your sister count?}$"
"I don't know. Did she try to predict your future?"

"Sure, she promised me I'd be a rich man," Han said with a laugh.

"I just gave you 100,000 credits, so there you go."

"Sure and once I pay back Lando for all the credits he put down for me and split it with Chewie there'll be about 20,000 left."

"Still sounds like you're rolling in credits to me."

"Fair enough, kid," Han said, shaking his head as he prepped the ship for takeoff, "fair enough."

There was no HoloNet access in hyperspace, and when they reached Dagobah there was still nothing. The star system had no civilized planets, no satellites or space stations in orbit, no transmissions going in or out. Mara had never felt so cut off from the rest of the galaxy before.

She refreshed the HoloNet feeds on her datapad and got nothing but "no signal" errors. It had been days since they left Eriadu. She sighed heavily and put it in her knapsack.

"Is something wrong?" Luke asked.

"No," she said. "Just no way to check the outside world on this planet. We're cut off from everywhere."

Luke nodded, his eyes thoughtful as he looked at her. She felt the weight of his stare. He had been looking at her with concern for their entire trip, sensing that something was off, and she hated it. She knew she should not be putting up walls.

He never pushed her, though. Not outright. And today was no exception. He just nodded again, and said, "We shouldn't be here long. And we'll stop at other star systems on our way to Yavin IV to check the news, see if there is any mention of Leia, and to fuel up."

She forced a smile, hoping he didn't notice the clench in her gut at the mention of Leia.

"We'll be landing soon," he said. "I'm going to go show Han where to touch down."

"Alright."

He left for the cockpit and she put a hand to her head.

Everything had been fine, relatively normal, up until they had arrived on Cloud City. Once they came into orbit above Bespin, she had habitually pulled out her datapad to check on her feeds. She always did that right after pulling out of hyperspace and its isolating effects. Her heart had stopped when she saw that one of her alerts had pinged, but she had of course read it before saying anything to Luke. Because it could be nothing.

There was a rumor circulating that Princess Vestre was slated to visit Naboo and speak at the Festival of Light. The Princess had not been seen for several weeks, not since the last Ball she had attended on Coruscant. The Princess was, like the Emperor, an elusive figure. Given that she was a beautiful young woman, there was always chatter and rumors about her in the Coruscanti gossip feeds, and Mara felt that she could identify something that carried no merit, such as a famous artist who claimed to be secretly dating the Princess. The news that that artist had later been found dead on level 1313 of the Coruscant underworld, purportedly of a deathstick overdose, did not surprise Mara.
She hadn't bothered Luke with such sordid and frivolous stuff. She doubted Leia had ever even heard of the man in question. Palpatine would have silenced him just out of spite for daring to spread rumors about the Princess.

But this rumor….

She decided to hold off on saying anything and wasn't even quite sure why, at first. If Leia were to be headed for Naboo, it would be the perfect opportunity to get there ahead of her and try to set up some kind of rescue attempt. Luke would want to leave right away, and it could all be for nothing. And they were right in the middle of dealing with the business they had started with Lando Calrissian.

She reasoned that she would wait until that was sorted out to broach the subject of the Naboo rumor. After all, they had time. She would wait to see if there were any more follow up rumors, or better yet, official announcements from the Imperial Palace. If Leia were being sent to preside over a major holiday as a figurehead of the Empire, there would surely be forewarning. They would want to drum up excitement for the event.

When they arrived in orbit over Eriadu, she had gotten her update. Sure enough, there was an official press release sent to the Nubian HoloNet channels announcing the special visit by the Princess.

And still, she had kept it to herself.

Now she had a more concrete feeling about her own reluctance. Leia's message to Luke had clarified things for Mara.

She and Leia shared the same apprehension over Luke. The Emperor would want him, and what better way to lure him in than with Leia? And yet, despite Leia's repeated warnings against coming after her directly, Mara felt Luke would do just that if he saw an opportunity.

He was doing as Leia had asked, seeking out Yoda, because there was nothing else to do at the moment. As far as he knew, Leia was holed up amid the tight security of the Imperial stronghold. If she told him that Leia would be traveling to a mid rim planet? Would he listen to his sister's warnings? Would he heed Mara's wisdom? Or would he insist on rushing to her aid?

She knew that she should tell him and let him decide for himself. In her head, she knew this. In her heart, she worried. Luke was impulsive. If she hadn't been there to stop him and encourage caution he would have flown straight to Coruscant and flung himself at the Palace gates, she was sure of it.

She should tell him.

She calculated the length of standard days until the Festival of Light and knew that they could get there in time if they went straight to Naboo from Eriadu. Going to Dagobah would make things harder, but if they spent no time at all there and left immediately they could get there in time.

If she said nothing and they set course for Yavin IV, even with other stops on the way for fueling, they would miss Leia's appearance entirely.

She had hope that with Yoda along, there would be someone else to discourage Luke from acting rashly. Leia was right: the Death Star hovering above Alderaan would need to be dealt with before they mounted a rescue, or Palpatine might destroy an entire planet in retaliation. It was straightforward, and surely Luke would understand, but she knew that it wasn't really the fate of Alderaan that made her hold her tongue.

Leia was bait. Luke didn't care. He would walk straight into a trap, sooner or later.
She knew that she was meant to be helping him find his sister, and she had thought that she was. Her intentions had been nothing but good. But faced with the real possibility of intercepting Leia on Naboo, she went cold.

_Am I keeping him from Leia on purpose?_ she asked herself, had been asking herself all the way from Eriadu to Dagobah. _Am I any better than the Alliance, frustrating him so with their refusal to help Leia? What will he think when he realizes I've known about this since Bespin?

Yoda would know what to do, she decided. She had never met the Jedi Grandmaster, but of course he must be very wise. She'd heard that he was ancient, having lived 9 centuries so far, and Ahsoka seemed to hold him in high esteem, even if Barriss did not. Luke had already trained some with Yoda. Also, Obi-Wan Kenobi, whom Luke thought the world of, put great stock in his teachings.

She would tell Luke about Leia's trip to Naboo as soon as they brought Yoda on board, and he would listen to Yoda when he inevitably agreed with Mara that they should not walk into the Emperor's trap. And she would apologize for keeping it to herself for as long as she had, but he would understand. He would have to.

Dagobah had not changed a bit since the last time Luke had been there, and neither had Yoda.


"My time the galaxy to shape has to an end, come," said Yoda, not even looking at Luke as he stirred a spoon in figure-eights through a pungent, bubbling stew which seemed to mostly consist of moss. "Here my place is."

"But Master Yoda, you're not finished," Luke objected. "You can still do great things. I remember when you taught me, you were as strong in the Force as ever. You still are." Luke had not known Yoda in his youth or his prime, of course, but whether or not he had fallen off from some other point of greatness, he was still one of the most impressive Force users Luke had ever witnessed.

Yoda shook his head wearily. "Not listening, you are."

"The galaxy needs you."

Yoda lifted the spoon to his lips and sipped experimentally at the broth, making a slurping and then a smacking noise, which Luke thought conveyed exactly what Yoda thought of the galaxy needing him.

Frustrated, Luke asked, "You were once the head of the entire Jedi Order. You lived on Coruscant, at the center of everything. Are you really planning on living out the rest of your life all alone, in exile, dying here in obscurity?"

Yoda quietly went about adding a pinch more of one herb and a dash of another, before ladling his soup into a shallow wooden bowl. He sat down and looked at Luke gravely. "Yes," he said. "Sum it up well, you do."

Luke ran a hand through his hair, leaving it sticking up in tufts of agitation. "Why?"

Yoda just closed his eyes and lifted the spoon to his mouth.

Luke left the hut feeling more acutely the oppressive humidity in the air and the sluggish way the mud sucked at his feet. Fetching Yoda had seemed the only doable thing in all that Leia required of
him, but it was going terribly so far.

He was not ready to give up just yet, but he was getting nowhere with Yoda, so he needed to clear his head and regroup his thoughts. Speaking to Yoda felt like spinning in agonizingly slow circles.

Mara was in the clearing outside the Millennium Falcon—when they had arrived Luke had directed Han to set down the Falcon as close to Yoda's hut as he could find an open space large enough, and from there they trekked to the old Jedi's home.

Now, she was stretching and going through lightsaber forms beside a pond, and Luke was reminded briefly of their morning routine back on the Dantooine base. Only instead of standing under the bilba tree overlooking the rolling lavender hills she was next to a deadly still expanse of algae covered water. The low hanging, gnarled branches of the aged Dagobah swamp trees curled overhead like grasping fingers.

"Is he not coming?" she asked when she noticed Luke's approach.

When they had first arrived, she and Chewbacca had both accompanied him to the hut, but after Yoda refused to come away with them, the others had gradually wandered away while Luke tried to argue his case. Han had stayed with the ship, loudly declaring his disinterest in Jedi Business, but Chewbacca had seemed eager to come with them. Luke realized why once Yoda greeted Chewbacca by name, calling him, "old friend," and Luke had asked in surprise, "You know him already?"

"Yes. Fought together in the Clone War, we did," said Yoda, and Chewbacca roared a confirmation. Luke had wondered how it could be that Han, who scoffed so much at the Jedi and their ways, was good friends with someone who had fought side by side with the leader of the Order. But he didn't have time to dwell on it, having the more pressing matter of convincing Yoda to come out of exile at hand.

Luke shook his head, now, feeling ever more the failure.

Mara dropped out of the ataru form she had been holding and sat cross-legged on a flat rock. She frowned but said nothing.

"I just don't know what to do," Luke sighed, lowering himself down to sit next to her. He stared out at a shallow ripple spreading across the water as some creature made its way across the pond under the surface. "He just insists that he's done and his place is here. I don't know how someone who was once such a great Jedi could bear to live this kind of life, so out of touch with the rest of the galaxy. When I was younger I always thought he was biding his time, but now I think he may actually just want to sit here until he dies."

"He is very old," said Mara cautiously. "Perhaps he's just tired of living."

Luke frowned. The thought of Yoda simply being old and tired of it all felt wrong. Luke had seen him do amazing things when he was a child, and Obi-Wan had brought him here to train at the feet of the master Jedi. What was seven years in the lifespan of a nearly 900-year-old being? No. He could still play a role in the galaxy's struggle. His refusal seemed rooted more in stubbornness than anything else.

Sensing someone approaching, Luke turned to look over his shoulder and spotted Chewbacca walking toward them from the forest. Mara looked back as well and said, "All this waiting makes him restless. He's been exploring the swamp."
Chewbacca roared a question as he neared them, and Mara told him what Luke had said—that Yoda was still refusing to come with them.

"He wants to know if we're leaving without him," she said.

"I don't want to leave yet," Luke sighed. There was still the other matter of asking Yoda to officially grant him the title of Jedi Knight, though that almost seemed silly, now. Yoda didn't seem like he was very interested in playing the role of the Jedi Grandmaster anymore, so perhaps asking for his blessing was pointless. "There's some way to get through to him, I'm just not seeing it."

Chewbacca said something, tilting his head with a thoughtful air, and Mara translated, "He says that the wookiees have a marriage tradition, where if you propose to your beloved, they are not allowed to respond right away, even if they think they know the answer." She paused, letting Chewbacca speak some more, then went on, "You must wait twelve days, and once a day you must give your beloved a gift. On the twelfth day they may give their answer, but either way, they get to keep all the gifts."

Chewbacca laughed and shook his head, adding another comment.

"His cousin Jowdrrl received three marriage proposals and said no to all of them and made quite a good haul."

"That's fascinating," said Luke, meaning the exact opposite. "But I'm not trying to get Yoda to marry me and neither of us are wookiees so—"

"I know what he's getting at," Mara said. "You're still asking Yoda to change his life, to leave the only home he's known for 20 years, just because you've asked him to. Maybe he needs some time to adjust to the idea."

"I'm not asking for me, I'm asking for the galaxy."

"Technically, you're asking for Leia."

"Who is asking for the galaxy."

She just shrugged.

"I'm not sitting around here for twelve days waiting for him to stop acting demur," said Luke, feeling especially grumpy in the stifling muck that passed for air on Dagobah. "We're totally cut off from all communications here and have no way of knowing what's going on in the outside world. What if there's news of Leia while we're sitting here sinking into the mud?" He stood up, not knowing where he was headed but needing to move.

"Luke, wait," said Mara, standing up as well. She was silent though, when he paused expectantly. "Chewie," she turned to the wookiee, "can you give us a moment in private?"

Chewbacca nodded and headed towards the *Millennium Falcon*, where Han was keeping busy tinkering and making minor repairs.

Once he was out of earshot, Luke asked, "What is it?" He felt a twinge in the Force, and hoped that she was finally going to open up about what was bothering her so much lately. Now wasn't the best time, considering what was happening with Yoda, but he wasn't about to stop her, not after being so nonplussed by her unusual quietness all the way from Bespin.

"I wanted to wait until after we had Yoda on board to tell you this," she said. "But now I'm not sure
that's going to happen, so…” she paused and took a deep breath "...I have some news about Leia.”
His eyes widened and she put out a hand quickly, rushing to say, "it's nothing bad or really even that
significant but just so you know, apparently Palpatine is sending her as an emissary to the Festival of
Light on Naboo."

"She's going to be on Naboo? When? When is the Festival?"

"Soon," she said, pressing her lips into a thin line.

"Why didn't you tell me earlier?" he asked, feeling genuinely confused. This left them precious little
time to form a plan and travel all the way to Naboo in time to intercept Leia. But then he quickly
realized that that was, perhaps, the very reason she had waited. Before she could answer, he did it for
her; "You don't think we should go."

He could sense her relief and see it in the way she relaxed her posture, shoulders rolling back. She
nodded. "Leia doesn't want us to interfere with what she's trying to do. In her message she asked you
to stay away, to do other things… And I thought that, maybe…”

"I wouldn't listen and would rush headlong to rescue her, anyway,” Luke stated.

"Well… yes."

"And you're right, that's exactly what I want to do. Mara, I don't care what Leia thinks; she cannot be
left in the Emperor's control."

"I agree with her," said Mara, squaring her shoulders again and thrusting out her jaw. Despite the
outward confidence of her stance, Luke knew she was uncertain, uneasy, and not at all confident.
She had made the decision to keep this information from him until the last second, but she had still
told him, when it would have been easier just to wait until after the Festival was over and Leia was
back on Coruscant.

"Is there still time?" he asked, refusing to argue it out. "Give me an honest answer."

She faltered a little. "There is still time," she said, looking at the mud. "But we have to leave sooner
rather than later, and there's no time to make an adequate plan."

Luke shook his head and turned away.

"She won't come with us," said Mara, lifting her eyes, a stubborn gleam in them. "With everything
she said in that message, do you think she'll just drop everything the minute you show up?"

"I know. I know that. But you should have told me. We should have had this conversation back on
Cloud City," he said, turning back. "You're right, I want to go save Leia. You're right, she doesn't
want to be saved. But you weren't supposed to make that decision for me, Mara. I thought you were
on my side."

She nodded. "I am on your side. I just… I just don't…"

"You don't trust me to make the right decision."

"I'm sorry." She averted her eyes again and grabbed at her left elbow, at the old broken spot. "Are
you angry at me?"

"Angry?" he echoed, then sighed and raked his hand through his hair once more. "No, I'm just
disappointed."
She winced but said nothing.

"I've listened to you this entire time," he went on, reaching out, grabbing her hand to get her to face him. He could sense her guilt but also the stubborn turmoil, as if she couldn't bring herself to regret keeping such an important thing from him. As if she still thought it was best to keep him in the dark, for his own good.

"When you said 'let's go' I went, when you said to be cautious, I was cautious. I've followed your plans, took your advice, trusted your judgement. How are we supposed to be a team if you hide things from me? How am I supposed to trust you if you don't trust me?"

She opened her mouth and shut it again, and after a moment just said, "I don't know." Her hand felt cold in his.

"Mara. What are you so afraid of?" he pleaded earnestly.

"Nothing," she said, and it was a bad attempt at a lie. After a beat she asked, "What are you going to do now?"

He didn't answer, because he didn't know what to do. How was he supposed to focus on getting Leia back if Mara was dithering, was not helping him but standing in his way? It was too much. It was all too much. It didn't hardly even matter that she had withheld from him, but that she was so confused and unlike herself now. So unpredictable and withdrawn.

"I was hoping that Yoda would tell us what to do," she said, when he remained silent for too long. "Or give advice. He's wise. Isn't he?"

Was he? Luke was beginning to wonder. Yoda would say to do nothing, probably. Like he did. But perhaps it was worth asking, anyway. Obi-Wan wasn't around. His father and mother were not around. Yoda was the only one.

He let go of Mara's hand. "I'll go speak to him again."
Interlude - The Monster in the Deep

You'll hear me howl by the light of the moon
That's how you'll know that I'm coming for you
Gonna find you alone in the dark of night
When the World Ender comes better run for your life [x]

And then there was Palpatine, of course: he was beyond power. He showed nothing of what might be within. Though seen with the eyes of the dark side itself, Palpatine was an event horizon. Beneath his entirely ordinary surface was absolute, perfect nothingness. Darkness beyond darkness. A black hole of the Force. — *Matthew Stover, Revenge of the Sith*

Darth Sidious did not sleep.

In younger days he had a special bed that sped up the sleep cycle, allowing him to be fully rested in a mere four hours. He hadn’t had time to sleep, to dream, to waste away a third of his life in peaceful slumber.

But now he rarely even visited that bed now.

Instead, he meditated, allowing himself to drift into the Force, to immerse himself in the cold embrace of the Dark Side, and to probe in visions, looking ever to the future, seeking to peel away the veil and know with certainty what lay ahead.

And so it could not be said, exactly, that the dragon visited him in dreams.

At first he thought it was a deepening of his connection to the Dark Side, a manifestation of the Force, but there was a familiar presence that pricked at his consciousness. A name. A face. The dragon knew him well, perhaps too well, and the dragon hated him.

In the darkness it circled him, a malevolence swirling around him with a long, sinuous body and flickering tongue. In its footsteps it carried the sands of its native planet, Tatooine, and he could taste the grit on his tongue even after he emerged from his trance. The dragon sang out to him, it sang into his mind, its call a bone chilling, unnatural sound that would make any other living being quake in fear.

To those hapless beings the hunting cry of the krayt dragon meant certain, absolute death.

It made Darth Sidious smile.

Emperor Palpatine sat at his desk, a less formal setting than the opulent throne room where he received visitors in person. Today, he was speaking to holograms of men who were several parsecs away, in the Alderaan system.

Grand Admiral Thrawn was on the surface of the planet, stationed comfortably in the royal palace at
Aldara. Palpatine had no doubt that the eccentric Chiss was enjoying himself collecting and studying the fine art of Alderaan, but so long as he got results, Palpatine approved of whatever methods he wanted to employ. Short of harming the royal family, of course. He had promised Darth Vestre that they would be safe if she was obedient, and for now, he intended to keep that promise.

Admiral Motti was stationed aboard the Death Star, in command along with Director Orson Krennic. Motti had not been Palpatine's first choice to replace Tarkin, but other successors had suffered unexpected and violent fates: Grand General Tagge and Deputy Director Yularen were now dead, and were celebrated as having perished defending the Empire from rebel terrorist scum. The truth was somewhat more complicated, and was part of the reason for today's meeting.

Doctor Cylo, cyborg eye gleaming, was also aboard the Death Star. He was seated next to Admiral Motti on one side. Director Krennic, in his signature white gloves and cape, was seated on the other.

"Gentlemen," said the Emperor, injecting a touch of sarcasm into his tone, just to make them a shade more uncomfortable than they already were, "am I to understand that you are not feeling up to the tasks I have given you?"

Motti blanched, the draining of blood from his face evident even through the blue flicker of the holoprojection. Krennic pursed his lips, and Cylo frowned sourly, but Thrawn remained unflappable. He answered for the others, saying, "Not at all. Everything is proceeding according to plan. The Royal Family is obdurate, as expected, and the airspace above Alderaan is being closely monitored for any rebel activity. Captain Pellaeon is in able command aboard the Chimaera and reports shooting down a freighter trying to slip past our blockade just this morning."

"What," said Palpatine, "of your efforts to extract information about the location of the rebel bases?"

"We have interrogated several aides, officers, and staffers, some to the point of expiration," said Thrawn. "They either do not know anything or are remarkably resilient, and have not given us anything. As I have said before, if you were to allow me to channel my energies directly towards the Queen and her consort, I believe we could truly get somewhere."

Palpatine raised one hand in a dismissive gesture. "And as I have said before, the Organas are, for the time being, under my protection. They are very dear to Princess Vestre, as you know, and should any harm come to them I would not like to see her reaction. Nor would you, Grand Admiral."

Thrawn smiled slightly, ever unperturbed, but Palpatine knew that the threat was received.

Motti cleared his throat, getting ready to say something stupid, no doubt. "I believe the Princess should lay aside her sentimental ties to these traitors and let us do our jobs," he declared, not disappointing in the least.

Palpatine started to run through the names of likely successors to Motti, up and coming Vice Admirals who might like a promotion to the premier Imperial Battlestation. Krennic was always jockeying to be given sole command of the station, eager for the prestige the title of Admiral or Moff bestowed, but Palpatine was comfortable with keeping the man right where he was. His hunger for advancement was what made him useful, and it would not do to give him everything he wanted and allow him to grow complacent.

He did not want to lose the brilliant mind that was Grand Admiral Thrawn, and did not trust anyone else to lie in wait for the rebel forces, who would no doubt be unable to resist striking to save Alderaan. If he did allow him to unleash his diabolical methods of information extraction onto the Organas, it would break the contract he had formed with Leia Skywalker, and for now it behooved him to allow her to keep a semblance of control over her life and the lives of those she cared about.
The next time she slipped up—and there would be a next time—he could use that as adequate punishment. He would make sure to have their torture and possible deaths recorded so she could witness it. But he would have to make it look like it was Motti’s responsibility, so he could allow her the reward of exacting revenge on the hapless Admiral and leave Thrawn unharmed. That might take some doing, since Motti was one of the joint heads of the Imperial Navy now given command of the Death Star, and did not currently have direct involvement in anything that was happening on the surface of the planet. But that was a puzzle for another day.

"Your suggestion is duly noted, Admiral," he said. "I will deal with the Princess and her moods as I see fit."

Few people in the Empire understood the relationship between him and the Princess Vestre. Most people had no idea of his identity as a Sith Lord and therefore did not know that he had taken her as his newest apprentice and christened her Darth Vestre as well as Imperial Heir Apparent. Those who did witness her lightsaber use were given to understand that her knowledge and skill in the Force was her legacy from her dead Jedi father, the infamous General Skywalker, hero of the Republic in the Clone Wars turned traitorous Rebellion thug.

Skywalker's crimes against Imperial forces were well known, since he had spent about three years doing his best to terrorize locations integral to the Imperial weapons program, such as the brutal raid he had led on Eadu. Palpatine still wondered where he got his uncanny knowledge of classified Imperial locations, since Skywalker had spent precious little time by Darth Sidious' side as Vader before running off, defecting to grasp at his infernal wife's skirt tails.

Fortunately, thanks to efforts by Director Krennic and Grand Moff Tarkin, the Alliance had been unable to track down and destroy the incomplete and vulnerable Death Star before Skywalker was finally neutralized. Leading him and Maul by the nose into a trap by allowing them to think they had an opportunity to assassinate him had been suggested to him by Grand Admiral Thrawn, when the Chiss had been called in to lend his advice on what to do about the problem of the growing Alliance. Tarkin had, sadly, been rewarded for his troubles by being the first sacrifice to Darth Vestre's burgeoning blood lust, but Thrawn and Krennic still lived to enjoy Palpatine's favor.

Palpatine sometimes missed the competence and ruthlessness of Tarkin, but he consoled himself with reliving the delightful memory of witnessing how Vader's young daughter had taken so readily to murder, unleashing all of her pent up rage in a cold, silent, deadly Force choke. The expression on the girl's face had been one of righteous calm, and Sidious had known that it would be both a challenge and a joy to bend her will to his own, to rework her into someone who directed that glorious hatred towards targets of his design.

So like her father, he thought. Unlike her father, he was sure he could ensure her continued entrapment until she no longer had anywhere else to go or anyone else who would have her.

Meanwhile, if any Imperials who had survived General Skywalker's assaults resented seeing his daughter raised up by Palpatine, they were wise enough not to vocalize it. To second guess the Emperor, questioning whom he chose to favor, was tantamount to treason.

Tarkin and Cylo had been the only ones witness to the pact made aboard the Death Star, at the base of Vader's bacta prison. Thrawn was too intelligent not to suspect Palpatine's connection to the Force, and alignment with the Dark Side, which made him invaluable and dangerous all at once.

As for Cylo…

"Doctor," said Palpatine, smiling viciously at the cybernetics expert who was in charge of the medical and scientific detail tasked with monitoring Vader in his tank, "I understand you are having
some difficulties with the patient."

Cylo shifted in his seat, calculating his response. "Yes," he said finally, choosing the most simple and direct approach.

"Report."

"The integrity of the tank's walls continue to deteriorate. It is my recommendation that it be replaced."

"You do realize that you would need to transfer the patient to a new tank," Palpatine pointed out.

"Yes."

"And what happened the last time you did that?"

Another shift. "Severe losses to my team."

"That's a way to put it," sneered Krennic. "He nearly got loose because of your incompetence, and would have killed damn near everyone on this Battlestation."

"Brainwave readouts showed complete dormancy," Cylo retorted. "By all logical calculations it was safe to—"

Palpatine held up his hand again. He was in no mood to listen to those two go at it. Cylo and his staff had underestimated Vader and had paid the price, but that was in the past. For the present, he said, "How long do you expect before structural failure of the current tank?"

"The cracks grow larger by the day, Your Excellency," Cylo answered, clearly agitated at the thought. He had lost his entire staff except for the droids last time Darth Vader had needed a new tank. He claimed to be lucky to have survived, but Palpatine recognized the lie. He knew about Cylo's personal clone backup system, the ingenious way the doctor uploaded and transferred his consciousness into new hosts. Cylo thought he was in the dark, but such a thing was laughable to Palpatine. Still, he let the man have his illusion of secrecy.

Cylo's cloning research was one of the reasons why the Doctor was in charge of Lord Vader's keeping. The Doctor's main interest was in cybernetics, but his ability to stay alive, in one form or another, had proved invaluable for dealing with the increasingly murderous Lord Vader. At the Emperor's behest, and along with a detail of Kaminoans scientists, he had been working on attempts at cloning Vader for the past two years. Sadly, all of Vader's clones had been failures, either too unstable to manage or completely Force blind and thus as useless to the Sith as any other clone made from a mundane being. Even when augmented with Cylo's various experimental biological grafts and cybernetic implants, they had not satisfied Palpatine's hopes for a creature that combined the best of the scientific and spiritual worlds—a cybernetic Force user both powerful and subservient. Something like Grievous, but better.

Palpatine had given up on that program, ordering all clones incinerated, and had chosen instead to redirect his efforts to securing Vader's natural born children. Science was a marvellous thing, but the Force proved itself resistant to manipulation. Luke and Leia Skywalker were as close to clones of Vader as he was like to get... and fortunately they were young enough to mold but old enough now to be of real use.

No one in history had successfully cloned a Force user—Jedi, Sith, or otherwise. Palpatine had long cherished hopes of doing as Cylo did, transferring himself into a new host, but he knew now that it would not work for him the way it did for the good Doctor. He was far too strong in the Force and
he did not want a poor facsimile of himself to live on in a lesser body. That was not real immortality, whatever Cylo thought. Clones were best suited as servants and soldiers, but not Emperors.

A pity, since he was now in his 80s and the proverbial chrono was ticking. But he was still determined to succeed where his old master, Darth Plagueis, had failed. What good was this glorious new Empire he had built if he wasn't around to enjoy it for more than twenty or thirty years?

A concern for another day. For now, there were the cracks in Vader's tank to worry about.

He turned to Thrawn, noting that Krennic and Motti both felt slighted every time he asked for the Chiss's input on matters aboard the Battlestation. To them, Thrawn was supposed to be concerned only with matters on the ground, with ferreting out and interrogating rebel agents or sympathizers. "What do you suggest?" he asked. "It seems that our patient is being unruly."

"Do you want my honest opinion?" Thrawn asked, in that sleepy, reserved way of his. He always seemed to be in his own mind, thinking about other things.

"Would I have asked otherwise?"

"The patient is a liability. It is my understanding, though I am not briefed on the entire situation, that the cloning program is discontinued indefinitely, so I am not sure I see the point of his continued existence."

"It is not your concern," said Palpatine. "You only need know that his continued existence is, for the time being, a necessary factor in any plan you form."

Thrawn nodded.

"If I may offer some input, since I am in charge of the patient," said Cylo, clearly trying to shunt Thrawn to the side, "there is more to my report which needs to be considered."

"Go on."

"We are suffering more losses," said Cylo, "even with the patient secure in the tank. Droids collapsed in on themselves, my staff found strangled by an unseen hand, other unexplainable mishaps and mechanical or biological failures, etc. All occurring within a radius of the tank chamber that leads to me to believe the patient is becoming resistant to the suppressing gel."

"You had assured me that the specialized bacta compound was perfected," said Palpatine. "That its ability to subdue even the most gifted of Force users was complete."

"There was a time when that was true," Cylo replied. "But, as with all new technologies, time reveals certain… complications. Put bluntly, Your Excellency, the sheer length of time the patient has been immersed in the gel has resulted in a weakening of its effect. He is building immunity to it."

"Then perhaps you should be working towards increasing the potency of the substance," said Palpatine.

"I agree," chirped up Krennic. "It's just like any virus or infection—eventually these things build up immunity to vaccinations or antidotes and a new cure must be found. It is your job as a doctor and scientist to ensure—"

"The Director is right," said Palpatine. "The solution to your problem seems straightforward."

Cylo bowed his head. "Yes, but time works against me. If I am unable to adjust the potency and
effectiveness of the substance before he grows more resistant to it... well, let us just say that the substance must be cycled through the tank at intervals to refresh it, and a new compound can be administered at that time, but the process requires a certain level of hands on involvement that is very difficult when the patient is choking the life out of anyone who comes within a few floors of him."

"Floors?" Palpatine echoed. "Does his reach extend that far? The last time I received an update you reported that he could only affect those in the same room, and that exerting any such Force would drain his energy greatly and create a period of inertia which allowed for safe access to his tank."

"Yes. Time passes, and with every day, his reach and his strength grows. Administering electrical shock still works best to subdue him, but that becomes more and more challenging considering we are having to move our equipment further and further away."

"Doctor, the lack of control you have over the situation is becoming more and more alarming the more you speak," said Thrawn, though his voice and demeanor expressed the exact opposite of alarm.

Cylo lifted both hands in a defeated gesture. "I am working on solutions. But, I must be honest with you, Your Excellency. I agree with Grand Admiral Thrawn. We are no longer actively using the specimen and he is becoming too dangerous to handle. I have reason to suspect that being immersed in the substance is making him even stronger than he was before and that if he gets free, there's no telling what amount of damage he could inflict."

Motti grimaced and said, "You all speak of this prisoner as if he is more than a man. As if he is some powerful caged beast. Well, I am not convinced that all this fuss is warranted. Certainly not all your whining to the Emperor and wasting his time with overblown claims of Force driven destruction."

He turned to Palpatine, who was observing him with some amusement. "I have had command of this station since Deputy Director Yularen's unfortunate mishap, and from what I can observe, there is nothing more sinister going on than superstition fed by this man's hyperbole. He jabbed a sardonic finger at Cylo. "Any time a control panel shorts out or a crewmember has a case of indigestion, there are claims that the monster in deep storage is at it again, just like some fools claim there are creatures living in the trash compactors. Nothing more than the gossip of the rank and file, which Cylo here takes as confirmation of a brain dead science experiment's sorcerous revolt."

Cylo, who had gotten his hackles up and was leaning forward in his chair, waiting with quivering jowls for Motti to finish, snapped, "I have full control and responsibility for 'the monster in deep storage' as you so luridly put it, and have been in charge of him since before you came onboard, since before Yularen was assigned to replace Tarkin—hell, since before even Tarkin assumed command. I think I can tell the difference between a superstitious crew and real, tangible evidence of a growing threat."

He swiveled in his seat and addressed Krennic. "Director Krennic, you have been stationed on this Battlestation longer than anyone, overseeing its very creation. You have read every incident report I submitted and been witness to the carnage that remained after the last transfer attempt. What is your opinion?"

Krennic, who had been sitting back, seemingly more interested in smoothing down the fabric of his gloves than joining in the conversation, glancing up with pursed lips and said, after a moment of performative contemplation, "I take any and all threats to this station and its crew very seriously. I think it is foolhardy to do otherwise."

"Thank you," said Cylo, then turned back to address Palpatine directly, as Motti threw a perturbed look Krennic's way. "I will do whatever you command, Your Excellency. But I must submit my formal recommendation that the patient be eliminated. Sent the way of his failed clones."
Palpatine sighed and folded his hands in front of him on his desk. If they spent less time second guessing his wisdom and arguing that he should kill Lord Vader outright, they could be channeling their energies towards a real solution. Killing Vader at this time would be a great mistake: as much as Princess Vestre cared about the other lives at stake, there was no greater method of control over her than the tantalizing prospect of rescuing her father. The fanatical devotion the Skywalkers had to each other was to his advantage. Besides, Palpatine was not done with Lord Vader just yet.

"If I may offer a suggestion?" said Thrawn.

Palpatine nodded.

Thrawn turned towards Cylo, and said, "You are a man of science, Doctor. But, it is my understanding that the Force is of a more… spiritual nature, yes? Have you considered methods of containment that are more," he paused, waving one hand languidly in the air, "closely aligned with the threat you are dealing with?"

The large, oversized glassy eye grafted into Cylo's skull bulged out even more as he glared at Thrawn. "What are you getting at?" he asked.

"Well, you see, I have an interest in artwork—"

Palpatine caught sight of Krennic rolling his eyes expressively at Motti, though Thrawn seemed not to notice his colleagues' exchange of looks behind his back.

"—and although I claim to be neither a scientist or a student of the Force, I am reminded now of a pair of statues that I once collected, which depicted creatures that local legend said could repel, or subdue, the Force around them, as a defense mecha—"

"Yes, yes," Cylo interrupted, "the ysalamiri of Myrkr. I am familiar with these creatures, as anyone who is involved in research pertaining to Force users would need to be. I have invested time and resources into studying these creatures and have already written up an entire report on the unsuitability of employing them, which I submitted for the Emperor's perusal long ago. They are highly impractical because of their fragility. The specimens have no effect unless they are alive—trust me, I have studied whether or not their remains could be utilized—and disturbing them or dislodging them from their natural habitat always results in their death."

"Forgive me, Doctor," said Thrawn mildly. "It was merely a thought."

Cylo swiveled his chair away, putting his shoulder towards Thrawn even as he said, "Your eagerness to offer help is appreciated, though I believe you would best direct your energies to military intelligence matters, as is your position, and leave the rest to me."

"Of course," Thrawn said, deferentially. His smile was predatory, though only Palpatine seemed to notice.

"Thank you for your input, Grand Admiral," said the Emperor, then addressed Cylo: "Doctor, I recommend that you seal off the entire section of the Battlestation which houses the patient. However large the area needs to be, do it. But monitor him closely. Work on developing a more effective substance to keep him neutralized, and make any sacrifices necessary to maintain the structural integrity of his enclosure. Do you understand?"

Cylo nodded curtly.

"And Motti," continued Palpatine, "I appreciate your support in my decision not to eliminate the patient, but I would caution you against taking the power of the Force so lightly. The purpose of
housing the patient, as you well know, is to study scientific solutions to the threat that Force users present to the safety and stability of our Empire.” He formed an indulgent smile onto his face and added, "It is true that regular, straightforward men grounded in reality, such as yours and myself, cannot always comprehend the sheer fantasy of what we hear about their supernatural abilities. But do not forget that merely two decades ago, the Jedi held the galaxy in a death grip thanks to their sorcerous ways. Do not underestimate a specimen as powerful as our patient. You may not live to regret it."

"Yes, Your Excellency," said Motti, looking appropriately reprimanded. "I will not let my guard down."

"See that you don't."

Darth Sidious closed his eyes and drifted into the Force. The Dark Side enveloped him and soon enough the krayt dragon called to him. Its murderous cry filled his entire mind.

"Do you think you are frightening me?" he asked, as one would speak to a child in a bedsheets playing at being a ghost.

Vader could rattle his cage all he wanted.

The krayt dragon could cry and howl into the dark as much as it pleased.

Darth Sidious was the dark, the shadow that blotted out the light.

The shadow feared neither the dark nor the monsters that lived there.

And it certainly did not fear a pet that it kept floating in a tank like a faa fish.

"You are no match for me," said Sidious to the skulking vision that threatened him.

He concentrated his will and conjured his own form into something bestial, to match the illusion of the krayt dragon. In the Force he was not a man but a dark, looming thing, at first formless but then coalescing into a towering vision of the great sando aqua monster from the deep waters of Naboo, a creature that many believed only existed in stories. Twice as big as the greater krayt dragon, he was no longer the hunted but the hunter, and soon the dragon dissipated, retreating back into the Force so that Darth Sidious was alone again.

Without the constant call of the dragon in his mind, he could think more clearly again, and he probed into the darkness looking for hints of the future, for guidance.

Eventually, he found it in a surprising place.

His search lead him to a girl. A frightened, lost, and questioning girl, who was also looking for answers in the Force. He found her in a vision, in a memory. The sando monster bared its teeth into a loathsome smile, and emerged from the deep, thinking, *Mara, my dear, my how you've grown…*
Visions in the Dark, Voices in the Rain

Oh you fool, there are rules, I am coming for you.  
You can run but you can't be saved.  
Darkness brings evil things, oh the reckoning begins.  
You have opened the yawning grave. [x]

Mara grew restless waiting for Luke to come back. She hated herself at that moment, felt weak and stupid which only deepened her turmoil. *You should have told him right away or not at all,* she told herself.

She almost wished he had been angrier at her, that he would have accused her of treachery greater than mistrust, of working for the Emperor or wanting to see Leia destroyed. That sort of reaction would have given her something to get her back up about, to respond with a defensive *"How could you think that?"* Anything other than feeling terrible and exposed.

But that wasn't Luke. Of course he would react with disappointment and frustration but also sadness and concern. All things she could not think of a defense against. He was right, about everything. They needed to trust each other now more than ever and she was ruining it with her fear. With her lack of faith. With her mistrust.

*What are you so afraid of?*

She could not just sit and stew and she did not want to intrude on Luke and Yoda's discussion. She did not feel comfortable around Yoda, not at all. Her hope that he would be wise and know exactly what to do was not completely dismantled, but she didn't like the way he talked, or the way he looked at her, or his lapses into judgmental silence. And besides that, she felt that Luke needed to speak with the Jedi Master alone, and probably wanted to speak with him about *her.* And that was the worst thought of all.

She got up and started jogging around the clearing, distracting herself once more with exercise.

The air on Dagobah was heavy and still, but she thought she heard the whisperings of leaves shuddering in the breeze from inside the swamp. It almost sounded like her name, uttered with a regretful sigh, but she knew that was just a trick of the mind. There was no one in this swamp but Yoda.

And yet she felt drawn to it, compelled to keep on going deeper into the aged trees, hopping over logs and dodging puddles or patches of quickmud. The difficult terrain challenged her, made her think quickly and strategize a path, as well as strain her muscles and test her flexibility. She kept on going, happy to have something that she could focus on. It gave her clarity. The path ahead was unclear but not impossible to navigate.

Eventually, she felt winded, and paused for breath, leaning over with her hands braced against her upper thighs. She had strayed quite far from the clearing and she knew she should go back, should be there when Luke returned so he didn't worry about her.

A snake of cold air wound its way around her, blowing her hair gently away from her face, and with the breeze came that sighing again. *Mara...*
She shivered and looked in the direction of that singular current of air.

There was a very old tree in the shadows, even older still than the ancient flora which populated this entire area. Its roots were thick and raised above the ground, but somehow she knew they went very deep, very far, as well. It was as if the tree itself were calling to her.

Ghosts, Faisellu would have said. I knew the cave was there because I could see the ghosts.

Mara did not believe in the souls of the departed hanging around bothering the living, but that was because as a child of the Force she believed in the notion that all living things, sentient or otherwise, passed into the Force as energy when they died. So, in a way, she did believe in ghosts. Just not the way HoloDramas portrayed them—whispering and shaking the trees. The Force was a living ghost, Barriss would say, made up of the energy of everything that had ever lived and died and those who were living still.

Mara came to the base of the tree and bent down, peering into the dark between its massive roots. A snake, small and black with red sports, slithered away from her when she disturbed its hiding place.

Mara… the cold breath whispered.

She remembered when she was younger, little more than a child really, and had gone into the cave on La’as Vinto with Luke to find their kyber crystals. The vision of herself, of her own voice speaking to her, that had been sent by the Force to lead her to her crystal had unsettled her at the time. But this did more than that. This chilled her to the bone.

But still, she was drawn to it.

She dropped down between the roots and crouched in the dark for a moment, allowing her to eyes to adjust. Then she started forward cautiously, not knowing what she was looking for but sure that something lay beyond. Something important.

The further in she went the darker and colder it got, and so she pulled out her lightsaber and held it at the ready, telling herself she feared no lizards or snakes but needed the kyber crystal's comforting glow to see by. She thought about the dragon that had made its home in the ruins of the temple on Mirial and had taken Luke's hand before he took its life, but she didn't think anything like that awaited her here. When she probed out into the branching tunnels of the cave she sensed nothing, as if the cave was void of life, the intrepid little snake at the opening an exception to the rule.

Eventually she saw a distant light at the end of the tunnel, too intense to be filtered sunlight from above. Mara switched off her lightsaber, because now it was too much, too bright. She approached the light cautiously, holding her hand up to shield her eyes. It was blinding and she could not see what lay beyond. But she knew she must go there.

She stepped over the threshold and found herself on a beach, staring out at the endless expanse of an ocean. There was no sound but the susurrus of the gently lapping azure waves moving back and forth, back and forth over the sand. Suddenly she felt very warm under the sunlight, which baked the sands a bone dry white around her. It was the kind of sun that would make freckles pop out on her skin and burn her red as her hair if she stood out in it too long.

Mara turned to look back where she had come. There was no cave. On the hills rising above her was a beautiful city, its skyline a collection of blue green rooftops above cream colored walls. She traced the outline of the buildings, the square shapes that gave way to curved domes, rising spires and columns. Palm trees dotted the grassy hills and lined the cobblestone streets.
Mara did not know the name of the city, but she knew this place. It lived within her memory in miniature, enclosed by the clear plastic shell of a falling star globe.

She climbed the stone steps from the beach into the city. It was an empty place. No life here. It could not be real, though she could feel the ocean breeze and smell the soft scent of velanie flowers coming from the meadows that stretched away to the horizons not bounded by water. The city was utterly silent. She walked down the streets, through an empty plaza, past marketplace stalls filled with lush fruits and bouquets of flowers. The tent awnings flapped in the breeze but nothing else stirred.

"What brings you to this place?" asked a whispery voice from the shadows.

Mara did not answer at first. She came to a large fountain at the center of the plaza and gazed at the streams of water bubbling up into overlapping arcs before falling into the reservoir. Small trinkets lay on the tiled floor of the pool, bits of jewelry and coin tossed into the waters for luck.

"Sentiment," she said at last.

"Do you know this place?"

"No," she denied, though her heart said yes. "I don't think I've ever been here."

"Then how do you come here? Whose eyes do you look through?"

Mara cocked her head thoughtfully, then turned to look at the figure who had come to stand by her side. He was a pillar of darkness in the warm light. "I see through my mother's eyes," she said, looking up at the walls of the buildings, their silhouettes against the sky. "She knew this place well. She loved it, I think. She kept a memento of it. A souvenir."

"Did she now?"

"Yes." Mara nodded. "I broke it."

"A pity."

She looked at him again. He smiled a little. The lower half of his face was the only thing she saw peeking out from under his hood.

"Do you know it?" she asked. "The name of this city."

"Why is it important to you?"

She was silent. She turned away from the fountain and kept walking. He fell in step beside her. "Sentiment," she finally repeated.

"Yes," he said, lifting his head to look around them, the dark hood turning to and fro. "Kaadara. In my youth, my family would vacation here, as did many others. It has been a long, long time since I stepped foot on these shores."

"Were you ever young?"

He chuckled. "Yes, my dear girl. Is that so hard to imagine?"

"Of course it is, she thought, not even bothering to reply. He knew that it was.

"Over there," he said, raising one desiccated hand to point to an empty promenade running along the edge of the city. A fence separated the walkway from the drop-off overlooking the beach. "There
used to be an ice cream stand just there; my mother would buy us treats. My father said it would rot our teeth."

"You killed my parents, didn't you?"

"Of course I did," he said, congenially, dropping his hand back to his side, the ghost white flesh hidden once more in the black folds of his robe. "Yours, mine, and a great many others'. What does it matter?"

"It mattered to you. If it didn't matter, you wouldn't have killed them." She walked all the way to the railing and leaned on it, looking down at the gentle waves lapping against the sand.

"I could have left them as they were, yes. But they were not happy to let you go. Even though they acquiesced they may have caused problems for me later. Complications. At some point they would have demanded to see you, or to take you back home. There was no logical reason to let them live—only sentiment, only mercy for the sake of kindness, and what an empty reason that is."

"You asked for my loyalty but you betrayed me the first day we met."

"Betray?" He sounded genuinely surprised at this. "How, pray tell, did I betray you? Perhaps your memory is not clear. You told me that you wanted to come with me and learn the ways of the Force. And did I not teach you?"

She remembered. It was one of her earliest memories. She'd felt that it was her destiny to go with this strange old man who had appeared in their apartment. She had been certain that her future lay with him because the Force told her so. She turned away from the outlook to pace the length of the promenade.

"You see, my dear," Darth Sidious went on, still by her side every step she took, "I did not happen upon you by accident. Your parents offered you to me. Indirectly, of course. They desired my patronage, my benevolence, and thought that having a gifted child would raise them above their station. They were loyalists, I suppose, proud that the Emperor came from their home planet. It is not unusual. I am accustomed to grasping opportunists from Naboo feeling as if they have some form of kinship with me, as if I must somehow be interested in their fortunes because they happen to share a point of origin. Your parents were no different—transplants from some unheard of swampland village wanting to be raised up among the elite of Coruscant."

"But they were different. They had something you wanted."

"Of course, my dear. Of course they did. A young child, strong in the Force, who would no doubt have been sought after by to the Jedi had she been born a few years earlier." He smiled, cracked lips curling over yellow rotting teeth. "They told me that they were relieved the Jedi were no more, you know. They were glad. Because the Jedi gave no recompense or recognition to the parents of the children they took." He chuckled. "I do believe that it was only at the last, when I came to take you from them, that they realized their folly."

"When you killed them."

"Are you angry at me, Mara? Did I not give you the life you wanted? The recognition you felt you deserved?"

"You gave me nothing," she said, her voice a harsh note in the quiet whispers of the empty city. "You took. You took me from my parents, you took my childhood, you would have taken my connection to the Force if you could. You promised me a place by your side but you never meant it."
You betrayed my parents' trust and you betrayed mine."

"These are Lord Vader's words, not yours," he said in a hiss. "I see his attitude in your thoughts."

"No."

"Yes," Sidious countered. "I see it in your mind, in your feelings. He told you I was a monster, not to be trusted, and you believed him because you wanted to. Why? Did he seem to you like the father you might have had? Did he teach you to crave the sentiment of family, to embrace the weakness of attachment?"

"No," she repeated, even though she could remember with absolute clarity the words Skywalker had said to her, first in his home on Osallao, then on the base at Dantooine. But he was not the only one. If Skywalker had taught her that she did not have to believe the Emperor's lies, Ahsoka had taught her love and compassion, and Barriss had taught her how to forgive herself. But the Emperor would never understand. He believed his own lies too completely for that.

"These complaints against me are the sad, self-pitying things Vader would have you believe about yourself," he insisted. "Is this why you failed me? Is this why you abandoned your purpose? Did he tell you I would not reward you? Did he make you believe that you are a pathetic, weak, pitiful victim? I am sure that he did. What a triumph for Lord Vader, to take my prized student and turn her into a sniveling coward."

Mara laughed. "It's always about him with you, isn't it? See, you prove him right even with your protests. You never cared about me and you never intended to raise me up. I was just a tool to get what you really wanted."

"Of course you were a tool. Did I not teach you about the strong having dominion over the weak? Do you think I took you in out of benevolence? No. I recognized that you could be of use to me. I told you no lies. It was up to you to become an indispensable tool, worthy of being raised up to act as my hand—or to prove yourself weak, useless, and unworthy. Sadly, you have chosen the latter. You betrayed me, Mara. You betrayed me. Do not forget that."

His words filled her with anger and shame. She closed her eyes and tried to find a response, a way to defend herself, to untwist his lies and show that she wasn't a coward, a traitor, a defector.

"Mara!" came a shout on the breeze, and she looked down to the far end of the promenade. Faisellu stood there, her hand on a blaster at her hip, her eyes wide and her chest heaving as if she had run to them. "What are you doing?" she called out.

"Nothing," Mara answered. "It's not real." She looked over at Palpatine. "We're not really here."

"Of course it's real!" Faisellu objected, her breathless voice awash with incredulity, as if she could not believe Mara could be so foolish. So naive. "You have to leave, Mara. Now. Run!"

Mara just looked to the Emperor again, uncertain.

"He will find you! You. Need. To. Run!"

The Emperor smiled again. Slow and patient. "Where are you, my dear girl?" he asked. "Is Skywalker with you?"

Mara looked down the promenade. It was empty again, no sign of Faisellu. She suddenly realized how near Palpatine was, how close, his graveyard breath on her cheek as he asked, "Where?"
She turned and ran. She ran along the wide empty promenade and down the steps to the beach, but she still felt his presence beside her, could hear his voice in her ear, asking, "Where? Where are you Mara? Where are you? Where?"

She stumbled in the sand and fell to her knees, her palms striking the earth. And then she wasn't on the beach anymore, she was back in the dark cave, far far away from a small coastal vacation town on Naboo. But he was there, still. He was standing above her asking, "Is Skywalker with you?"

"You're not real," she insisted, scrabbling to her feet, slipping on the slick mud and reaching out to steady herself with an aged tree root. Her palms burned as if ground in glass.

"Of course I'm real."

"You're not here." She tried to find calm, telling herself that Sidious would not be crouching in a slimy mudhole on an uninhabited planet far away from his palace on Coruscant. He was not here. He was not real.

"Bring me Skywalker," he said, and she squeezed her eyes shut, shaking her head. "Bring him to me, make yourself useful, and perhaps I will forget your earlier failures and welcome you back into my service. We'll dismiss these past few years as confusion, say that Darth Vader's lies twisted your mind, and leave it at that. Return, Mara, and I will allow you to try your mettle against Lady Vestre. You can still supplant her as my chosen heir. You have the skills, the strength in the Force, the experience. Bring me Skywalker and I will give you another chance."

"No," she said, grinding her teeth together and covering her ears. "Never!"

"Your feelings are strong for young Skywalker. You fear to lose him, I know. I see it. But you could both be by my side, at my right and left hands. Together. Think on it. If you prove your loyalty and your strength you could have the life you want—a life of significance."

"I am done listening to you," Mara said. She turned, her hands against the damp rock walls, dirt sifting down onto her head, and walked back toward the cave entrance. He did not follow, perhaps could not, but she still felt his graveyard breath on her skin as his laughter echoed off the walls behind her, echoing in her skull. "You're not real," she repeated as she went, to drown out all the rest. "You're not real, not real, not real."

She pulled herself up out of the cave opening between the tree's roots and found that it had begun to rain while she was below the earth. It was a warm, steady downpour. Her hair was quickly plastered to her head and her clothes soaked through, but she just stood there under the heavy stream letting it batter her skin and fill her eyes with water.

Slowly, she made her way back to the Falcon.

"Whoa," said Han Solo when she appeared in the common area. He began to protest that she was dripping muddy water all over his ship, and asked where the hell Luke was, but Chewie told him to shut up and went to grab a blanket to wrap her up and dry her off. Mara let him scrub at her hair, and he muttered on about how humans have got no fur to protect themselves except for an itty bitty spot on the top and what good does it do?

"Go sit by a heat port," he ordered her sternly, and she went without a word.

Solo trailed after, looking a little nonplussed, and asked, "So what's the deal, Red? When are we leaving? Where's Luke?"

"He's with Yoda," she said, shivering as a blast of warm air from the vents struck her. "Trying to
decide what to do."

Solo made a dismissive sound and said, "The sooner we leave, the better. I don't like this place. Gives me the heebie jeebies."

_Me too_, Mara thought, but she just shrugged and lowered her head. She might have told him about Leia on Naboo, about Luke's dilemma, but she didn't. They would have to convince Solo to fly the _Falcon_ to Naboo if that is where Luke decided to go, but she would leave that up to Luke. Solo liked him better, after all.

"Maybe I should go out there, try to help."

"Help with what?" she asked.

"Talking the Jedi into coming with us."

She raised her eyebrows. How was Solo, an outspoken nonbeliever, going to convince a Jedi to do anything?

He noticed her skepticism and added, "Don't give me that look. You know, I think you Force-worshiper types could use a good hard dose of reality once in awhile. If Yoda's been hiding out here all alone for 20 years that's something he's lost all touch with, I'll bet."

"And you're the perfect guy to remind him of that?" Mara asked dryly.

"Sure. I'm all about cold hard reality. And nothing against your boyfriend but if I know anything about teachers, they never listen to what a student of theirs has to say, current or former, so it's no wonder Luke's not getting anywhere."

"Sounds like you've had bad teachers."

He just shrugged, then went over to a closet and pulled out a poncho. He was really going out there in the pouring rain? She gawped at him for a moment, then surmised, "You're just bored out of your skull waiting here."

"Maybe," he said, not at all bothered by the dismissive tone behind her statement. He shrugged into the poncho. "But I'm not just waiting around while the _Falcon_ sinks into the mud." He nodded to Chewie. "I'll be back."

"Whatever," Mara muttered, settling down on the seat by the dejarik table.

Her mind wandered back to the vision in the cave, and beyond that to the conversation with Luke.

*What are you so afraid of?*

Well the answer to that was obvious, wasn't it? She was afraid of the Emperor, and always had been, even when her terror had manifested as awe and respect. Why did he even need to ask?

Losing Luke to the Emperor was eating away at her, specifically. But he hated to hear that, and she understood why. Of course it made him feel like a child to have everyone in his life constantly trying to protect him, and she knew that he was as capable a fighter as there was. But it wasn't lack of skill or prowess that was the problem, it was his strength in the Force, his skills learned over years of studying at the feet of a Jedi Master, which made him such a desirable target—even moreso now than when she had first been sent by the Emperor to insinuate herself into the Skywalker twins' lives.
And wasn't that just it. She had been sent by the Emperor to recruit them, to lead them by the hand into his world, to lay a path before them which could only result in kneeling before Darth Sidious.

Leia was there already. Mara had done nothing to lead her there, besides the initial disruption she had caused by coming to Osallao at all, but still, Leia was right where the Emperor wanted her all the same.

I don't want to be the one to lead Luke into his clutches. I can't be.

She thought of Faisellu, of the things she had said back on Yavin IV, about Mara still faithfully carrying out her mission for the Emperor after all these years. Could she be doing it without meaning to? Was Sidious' reach that great? Was she fated to do his bidding whether she wanted to or not? She thought of the vision of Faisellu on the beach, appearing suddenly as if wherever she was in the galaxy right now she had sensed Mara's distress and had found her, had run to help her disentangle her mind from the Dark Side's trickery.

But Faisellu couldn't be real, any more than the Emperor was real standing beside her in the Kaadara plaza. Granted, if anyone could reach across the galaxy to manifest in her mind, it was Darth Sidious. But Fai could not even touch the Force inside herself, anymore, much less transcend space to reach out to Mara. And even if she could, why would she? Her feelings about Mara had been made clear on Yavin IV. No. It was only Mara's own wish for connection that made her appear. That had been why, once before—on Mirial when Mara had quarrelled with Luke then fought with Maul and been near death—she had conjured up an imagining of Faisellu coming to her in times of trouble. Here on Dagobah Mara felt disconnected from Luke once more. It was clear. Her stress about Luke had brought on the vision of Palpatine and Faisellu.

They lived in her mind like ghosts.

She wished that Barriss were here. She wished she could ask Ahsoka for help. They had always had the answers in the past. They had always told her that her life was her own, her choices her own, but that there was no real choice to make if she was only ever shown one way to live. They had taught her that, as a child, she could only see the singular path set forward by her master, and that recognizing all the other possibilities life held was part of growing up. But what were the possibilities? What could she do? If only they were here now, surely, all this confusion would go away.

They were real and solid. They always had been, for her.

"Returned again?" Yoda asked when Luke ducked back into his hut. He had finished his supper and was comfortably snuggled under a blanket, looking as if he wanted nothing more than for Luke to leave him alone so he could sleep.

"Yes," said Luke. He sat down next to Yoda's bed. "I've learned something from Mara that complicates everything."

"Hmm," Yoda sighed, closing his eyes. "Troubled, you are."

Luke told him about the fact that Leia was going to be on Naboo soon and that he must decide quickly whether he would go after her, or honor her wishes and steer clear of her, staying focused on getting her message back to the Rebel Alliance.

Yoda cracked his eyes open and regarded Luke for a moment, before saying, "Tell you what to do, I cannot."

"Know what must be done, none of us do," Yoda told him. "Guided by the Force on our own paths, we are. Each our own path, we have. Difficult to see, that path is. Impossible it is to see the path of others."

"What would you do if you were in my place?" Luke pressed. He had come all this way. Yoda had to give him something.

Yoda chuckled, as if the notion of being in Luke's place was the most far-fetched of imaginings. But then he sobered. "Luke," he said, sitting up and seeming focused for the first time since Luke had arrived there. "Old, I am. The last of my kind, I am. 900 years, I have lived. Many, many faces I have known. Friends, family, generations of beings have I seen pass into the Force."

"What are you saying?"

Yoda shook his head, and the moment seemed to pass. He lay back against his pillow. "Rest, I need. Tired, I am."

"Ben said you were the wisest being he ever knew," Luke said, allowing disappointment to be evident in his voice. "The greatest warrior, the best teacher. Leia thinks you can save the Rebel Alliance and help us bring down the Death Star."

"Leader of the Jedi I am no longer," insisted Yoda. "Passed, my time has."

"You can't just give up," Luke said, frustrated. "We still need you."

"So young, so impulsive. So impatient," Yoda just sighed.

"I'm trying. I'm always trying to be patient. But I can't just sit and watch the galaxy go by," Luke shook his head.

"Decided then, what you will do?"

"I know what I want to do, but I don't know if it's right. I need to do the right thing. I want to do what a true Jedi would do."

"Desire to be a Jedi, you do?"

"Yes," Luke said. "Always." Ever since he had been a child and had, along with Leia, pieced together the facts that his father and Uncle Ben had once been Jedi and were fugitives in hiding, he had dreamed of being a Jedi like them. Life had been simpler then, before he had known that Father was responsible for helping Palpatine destroy the Jedi. But even after that he had clung all the more to the notion that he could make things right, that he could bring them back, could atone somehow for what Father had done. Could save his family, could save the galaxy. If only he was patient and learned how to be a true Jedi.

Yoda sighed. "Already master of many skills, you are. Proved yourself in your trial against Maul. Nothing more I can teach you, there is."

"Then I'm a Jedi?"

Yoda surveyed him gravely, then said, "One challenge I will give you, then a Jedi Knight you will be."
Luke sat up straight. "What is it?"

"For advice on what to do about your sister, ask your father, you must," Yoda said, turning over and putting his back to Luke, while simultaneously tugging the blanket up around his shoulders.

"What? But... I can't. He's a prisoner on the Death Star, I can't—"

"Can't, can't, can't," muttered Yoda. "Always it cannot be done, with you. Remember when, a child you were, you told me that too big was Master Kenobi's ship? That lift it you could not?"

Luke remembered, of course. Yoda had wanted him to levitate the *Daring Duchess,* and Luke had complained a great deal after failing, because the entire freighter? It was just too much. Yoda had shown him that it was possible, however, and blamed his lack of belief on the reason for his failure. That was soon before he and Ben had left Dagobah for the last time.

"Speak to your father, I can. Speak to him you could, too, if you learned to speak not with your mouth but with your mind."

Luke doubted that Father was spending his time and energies as a prisoner chit-chatting telepathically with Yoda, but he knew better than to keep on questioning. Yoda was clearly in a scolding mood.

"Alright," he said, though he was sure Yoda was just trying to get rid of him. But he humored the old Jedi, and got up, leaving the hut to find a spot outside to meditate.

He sat on a bed of moss and closed his eyes, regulating his breathing, and centered himself in the Force. It took a bit of doing, since he was still agitated about Leia, and Mara, and Yoda's continued refusal to do or say anything to help.

He could sense Mara, and felt that she was upset, but he tried to push thoughts of her out of his mind. He could not focus on that right now. He focused his thoughts instead on his father, as Yoda had instructed. His father, whom he had tried so hard not to dwell upon for the past two years. He let all that go and allowed himself to feel the fullness of all the hurt, the anger, and the sadness. He relived the pain of losing his father, the confusion at his death and then the recent shock of the revelation that he was still alive.

Luke went back even further than that, thinking about how betrayed and shaken he had been when at ten he had first realized that his father was a murderer, that he had betrayed his brothers and sister in the Jedi Order and aligned himself with a Sith Lord. How perplexing it had felt to still love, and even admire, a man who was not what Luke had believed him to be. Not a hero; merely a man, and an extremely fallible one at that.

He wasn't sure how long he sat there, in meditation, but eventually it began to rain. Softly at first, fog transforming into a fine mist that gave way to a drizzle and then a downpour.

Luke opened his eyes and pushed aside the soaking wet fringe of his hair. Before him, the sheets of rain shifted and out of the streams formed a shape that was something like a man. As he stared, he thought he could see the face of his father.

"Luke," said the rain.

"Father?"

"Yes, Luke. I'm here."

Luke scrubbed at his eyes, wanting to be absolutely sure. The vision didn't disappear, so he said the
first thing that came to his mind. "Why?"

"Why?" Father echoed.

"Why did you leave? Why did you abandon us?"

Father was silent. The vision of him shimmered and shook like a bad hologram. "When is it?" he asked finally, sounding lost.

Luke realized he was not asking the question he was meant to. He said, "I need your help. I need to know what to do."

"What to do?" Another echo, the vision in danger of slipping away, of growing weary and turning aside to rest as Yoda had done.

"Yes. Leia is danger, but she doesn't want me to help her—she wants me to help other people instead. I don't know what I should do." The rain beat against his skull like little hammers.

His father seemed clearer now, his face suddenly nearer to Luke as he said, with a rumble of thunder, "Save your sister."

"I—"

"Kill!" the vision said, a blunt shout. "Kill anyone who hurts her. Kill them all. Every last one."

Luke rocked away, shaking. It was his father, but it was an unstable, feral version of his father. As if in the Force he was stripped of everything but his primal instincts.

"Kill," the thunder muttered, before the vision suddenly snapped back into focus. "Luke," Father said, rain falling from his mouth, his eyes dark as they bored into Luke's very soul, "save your sister."

Luke nodded. "I will," he affirmed. "I'll go to her."

"Luke," Father repeated, more urgently, "save her."

"I will, Father."

"Dagobah. You will find her on Dagobah."

Luke leaned back, caught by surprise. He was on Dagobah. And Leia certainly was not.

"I thought that she was going to be on Naboo."

"Dagobah," Father repeated. "Dagobah. She is going to Dagobah."

"I understand." He didn't, really, but he knew that Ben would tell him to trust in the Force in this situation. Even, or especially, if the Force was the face of his agitated father begging him to save Leia. Demanding that he save his sister.

This seemed to finally appease the spirit that was Father, and before Luke could ask him to stay, he faded away into the mist. Luke closed his eyes and took a deep, ragged breath.

"Hey! Kid!" came a voice from behind. It was Han.

Luke opened his eyes and turned to look, seeing the smuggler standing there, covered in a poncho
with his hands on his hips in a strangely indignant pose.

"What in the blazes are you doing?" Han shouted.

"I'm meditating," Luke said, as if it should be obvious.

"Kriff, Luke. Between you and Red I'm gonna have two pneumonia cases on my hands. Come back to the *Falcon*. And don't tell me the Force keeps you dry."

Luke got to his feet, slipping a little in the slick moss that was quickly sinking into the mud. "It doesn't," he said, with a self-deprecating laugh.

"Did you talk to Yoda?" Han asked as they squelched their way back to the ship. "Is he gonna come with us or what?"

"No," said Luke. "I've decided to stay here for a while. To wait."

"Wait?" Han stared at him with wide eyed skepticism. "Don't you have important things to do? I thought we were in a rush to get to the Alliance."

"I have to wait here for Leia," Luke said, mentally adding an "*apparently*" to himself. But to Han, he gave a serene and confident nod. "The Force showed me the way. Leia will come to me."

"Oooooookay," Han responded, lifting his hands up in defeat. "Whatever you say, buddy. You're gonna pay me extra for every day we spend parked here twiddling our thumbs, though. I've got places to be, other jobs to do."

"Do you?" Luke asked in a blunt tone. "Really?"

Han was surprised into honesty, muttering, "Well, no. But this place gives me the creeps."

"The Force is strong here," said Luke, rain streaming down his face, soaking his clothes till they clung to him like ten ton weights. The *Millennium Falcon* was in sight, looking extra welcoming with light gleaming from its viewports. Mara would be in there, and dry clothes, and a caf machine that could brew up hot chocolate pods. Just those thoughts made him feel warmer already.

The unsettling vision of his father was behind him, but, for the time being, he finally felt that he knew what he was supposed to be doing. He would do as Father said. When Leia came to Dagobah, he would be there, waiting for her.
Dee'ja Peak

Wolf-mother, where you been?
You look so worn, so thin

Wolf-father, at the door
You don't smile anymore

The child had golden curls like wispy clouds lit by the rising sun, and eyes of the clearest blue. Her face was plump, cheeks rosy pink, her hands small and chubby as they reached out to grasp at Leia's sleeve.

"Woo?" the child asked, her tone curious, experimental, as she gripped the brocade on the Nubian traveling cloak that was part of Leia's disguise from the night before. She sat on Leia's knee, where Mother had put her—the gesture awkward and tentative, as if the child were a peace offering.

"No, love," said Padmé quietly, still holding onto her, not ready to fully place her at Leia's mercy. "This is Leia. Your sister. Can you say 'Leia'?

"Woo," the singular sound seemed stubborn, somehow. As if Lashmina refused to believe the correction. She wriggled a little, settling herself into Leia's lap.

"Luke isn't here," Padmé persisted. She relinquished her hold on Lashmina's waist, now hovering there just a few inches away. She waivered her hands. "Say hello to Leia. Hello, Leia!"

Lashmina considered this for a moment, looking up at her mother, then to Leia. Finally, she said, "Hi," followed by a deliberate pause, then, "Woo."

Padmé sighed, and Leia said, "Leave her be."

That got a sharp look from her mother, and Leia realized she had automatically used an imperious voice, the kind that ordered around handmaidens or stormtroopers. She ignored the reaction that got and just looked down at Lashmina, speaking to her instead of Mother, because that seemed simpler. Leia had not been around children very much, but anything was easier than conversing with Padmé at this moment.

"She saddled you with quite the mouthful of a name, didn't she?" she said, and her sister just cocked her head to the side, inquisitively. "I mean, it's very important sounding. You have a lot to live up to. I like the alliteration, though. Very consistent. Luke, Leia, Lashmina... gods let's hope you're the last one or we'll have to tack on another syllable for the next."

"Luke likes to use nicknames," Mother said, softly, moving around behind Leia's chair, lifting up her long, loose hair in her hands. It was still in tangles from Leia's brief sleep on the bed in Padmé's old room, halfway undone from the buns she had worn the night before as part of her festival-goer disguise. In Mother's hands the snarls fell loosely apart, succumbing to her magical touch. "She'll grow into her full name, one day."

Leia looked over at Obi-Wan, who was whispering with Sola, Mother's older sister, and her husband Darred. They had come to the Naberrie's home on Dee'ja Peak and were now discussing their exit
strategy from Naboo. Leia knew that she should be doing something about it, not letting herself be led here and there, but she felt rooted to her chair. Lashmina poked at her face and said, "Hi," as Mother plaited a braid into her hair.

"Where are we going after this?" Leia asked.

"Don't worry. We have a plan in place. We'll make a few jumps in case anyone tries to follow or track us," said Mother. It wasn't an answer.

"You know that you are going to be killing a great many people," said Leia. "We are going to be responsible for everyone he executes in retaliation."

Mother's hands hesitated for only half a beat. "I will hear no more talk of returning to the Emperor," she said, in her most imperious voice. Leia's was no match for it.

"Nomo!" Lashmina echoed, waving one chubby fist. Leia had to lean away slightly to avoid being smacked.

Padmé sighed again, and said, "She has grown up listening to too much talk of war."

Obi-Wan approached them. "We're all ready to go when you are," he said, with the slightest bow. Leia could not remember Obi-Wan being so deferential to Mother when she was a child—Uncle Ben had been unfailingly polite and respectful, of course, but their dynamic had always been one of family and friendship. But that was before Mother had become an Ambassador for the Alliance, the Rebel Queen as some had called her. Now Obi-Wan had taken it upon himself to be her bodyguard and seemed to fall back into the behavior of a Jedi and his charge. Or, at least, what Leia imagined the Jedi in the Order had been like, based on what she knew of them from all her research in the archives.

Mother carefully lay Leia's completed braid over her shoulder and came back around, nodding. "The sooner we leave, the better."

"I agree," said Obi-Wan. "I'll feel more comfortable when we are off the streets and in the atmosphere."

"I'll feel better when we're in hyperspace," Mother countered. Then she turned back to Leia and Lashmina. "Come along, girls," she said, holding out one hand in a brusque beckoning motion. She used that tone again, the one which brooked no complaint, and Leia found herself standing obediently, hefting the toddler onto one hip.

Lashmina gripped her shoulder and said, in a breathy half whisper, "Weia!" as if she had a secret to tell.

Leia looked down in surprise, but Lashmina's only response was to burst out into giggles, immensely satisfied by the simple act of getting Leia's attention with her name. She clutched the long braid over Leia's shoulder, inspecting it, and Leia could imagine her judging Mother's handiwork. In truth she looked fascinated; the innocent wonder of someone for whom everything was new and splendid. Even the simplest of things.

"We live in a dangerous world," Leia whispered to her. "A galaxy full of terrible monsters who will steal your innocence and wonder away."

She got no response, just wide eyes and a softly gaping mouth. Round, Leia thought. Round eyes, round curls, tiny O of curiosity. Fat little head on round little shoulders.
She felt a sudden spike of fear in the Force, and at the same time she saw Lashmina cooked to a brown crisp, set on a platter, eyes plucked out, garnish on the side, round red glazed fruit in her mouth, being served to the Emperor for dinner. The picture came into her mind all on its own, without any conjuring, like a scene from scary holodrama. The silverware glinted in his pale clawed hands.

Obi-Wan turned back to them, a furrow in his brown, and he said, "Here, Leia, let me take the baby for a bit."

Padmé paused as well and looked back, seeming as if she would protest, but in an instant Leia saw a change come over her face, a slight nod and press of her lips together. She was deferring to Obi-Wan's judgement, and something had made him decide that Leia was not to be trusted.

Obi-Wan took the girl into his robed arms, and bounced her lightly, making her giggle and smile.

Leia wondered if he had seen the image in his mind as well. It had come from Lashmina's imagination, Leia was sure of it. A projection. How strong she must be in the Force, already, to broadcast so clear and powerful a thought into the minds of others around her.

She had seen Palpatine clearly, and Leia wondered if that was her own contribution, or if Lashmina herself was wise enough to put an exact face to the idea of evil in the galaxy. *She has grown up listening to too much talk of war.*

Obi-Wan took the girl into his robed arms, and bounced her lightly, making her giggle and smile.

Leia remembered the joy she and Luke had felt as children whenever Uncle Ben came to visit. He was such a strange man, different from everyone else they met growing up on Osallao. He always brought them odd little presents. Polished river stones, toys carved from wood, dried berries, and stories about the animals he had discovered in the mountains. He taught them how to whistle like the little birds that nested in the crags of rocks, and to warble like the ones that burrowed into the soft thawing earth during the spring. He taught them how to close their eyes and reach out into the Force, to feel the breath of every living thing… though Leia had always found it easier to keep her eyes open. There was magic in everything he did or said, every trinket he gave them, and all the secrets about the past that he had represented. Strange old Uncle Ben, so joyful, so sorrowful, and for years they'd had no idea why.

*How are you going to fight with your arms full, old man?* Leia thought. Because there was a fight coming. She could feel it—a vibration in the Force, a whisper on the wind that wended its way through the mountain peaks.

The group split into two speeders before heading to the shipyard. Leia, Obi-Wan, Padmé, Lashmina, and Sola got into one. Darred, Pooja, Ruwee, and Jobal went in the other. Obi-Wan resumed his role as the driver, handing Lashmina over to Mother, who, Leia noted, kept the child on her lap rather than offering her to Leia again.

They reached the Dee'ja Peak shipyard to find that it was crawling with Stormtroopers. A shuttle from Theed had arrived, and they were cut off from Obi-Wan's freighter.

"No," muttered Padmé in dismay as Obi-Wan turned away down another street, Pooja in the other speeder following behind. "How did they get here so fast? Obi-Wan, didn't you hide the bodies?"

"I was worried this might happen," said Obi-Wan quietly as they glided along at a slow speed. "There must have been additional support watching the house."

"Then why didn't they stop you before you left Theed?" Sola asked.
"Waiting for us to rendezvous, I suspect," said Obi-Wan.

Mother looked over at Leia. "Did you have any other guards besides the two who were in the house with you?" she asked.

"No," Leia replied. "I would have told you if I'd known about any extra surveillance." The doubt in her mother's eyes hurt, a little. "But I'm not surprised if I was being spied on. Do you really think the Emperor would let me come here and stay with my family if he wasn't watching to see who would show up? You've underestimated him."

"What are we going to do?" Sola asked.

Mother and Obi-Wan exchanged glances. Obi-Wan was still driving the speeder around the shipyard, staying a few streets away, but it was only a matter of time before someone spotted their suspicious meandering. Dee'ja Peak was not a large city and there were not many speeders out that early in the morning.

"We have to get to the Duchess," said Obi-Wan. "It's our only way off planet."

"You'll all be arrested the minute you try to enter the shipyard," said Leia.

"Not if we persuade them to look the other way," Obi-Wan disagreed.

"That's dangerous," said Mother. "All it takes is one person you can't mind trick and they'll sound the alarm."

Leia knew what she had to do, and she knew that her mother wasn't going to like it. "We don't have any choice," she said. "If Obi-Wan's tricks don't work we'll have to just fight our way through."

"But the baby," said Sola, as if Leia weren't fully aware of the fact that they had a fragile child with them.

"Someone will have to protect her," said Leia.

"We could turn around, leave the city, lay low in the mountains for a while," Sola suggested.

"No. They'll start to comb every inch of this planet looking for Leia," said Mother grimly. "We're in no shape to go to ground, especially not with a child. We'll have to get past those troops, one way or the other."

They circled around back to the spaceport entrance, and Leia lifted the heavy, brocaded hood of her travel cloak over her head so that it shielded her face. It was likely a futile gesture, anyway, as the troopers no doubt had holographs of the entire Naberrie family to be on the lookout for.

They pulled up to the troopers guarding the gateway, and Obi-Wan waggled his fingers, smiling slyly as he said, "We're not the ones you're looking for. We're free to enter."

"You're free to enter," the guard said, waving them on. Leia noticed an officer up ahead, a Lieutenant, and suspected that the Admiral assigned to her would be around somewhere. Obi-Wan could lead a few troopers around by the nose, but Leia sensed that the woman Palpatine had assigned to command her Star Destroyer was no weak minded fool. She would just as soon break Obi-Wan's fingers as listen to him, if he went about waving them in her face.

It didn't matter. Leia wasn't leaving on the Duchess with the rest of her family. She knew that now. She had known it the minute she'd seen the cadre of troopers guarding the spaceport. Emperor
Palpatine was ahead of them, had always been ahead of them. Either that or Admiral Sloane had been canny enough to suspect a plot to escape with the Imperial Princess… either way, she took it as a sign from the Force that there was only one path for her, now.

They pulled up near the docking bay where the Duchess sat, and filed out of the speeders. The Nabberries looked around nervously, clearly unused to the overbearing presence of Imperial troops. Naboo was an Imperial controlled planet, but it was not so heavily policed as other planets which were known for unrest and rebellion. The citizens of Naboo had, on the surface at least, ceded happily to the rule of their favorite son and supported his ascension to emperorhood. Like the Nabberries, there was no telling what resentment simmered under the surface.

"Identification and travel permit," said the trooper stationed near the docking bay.

Before Obi-Wan could reply, or befuddle the trooper, a clipped voice said, "Lady Vestre. How good of you show up. We have all been worried on your behalf."

Leia looked to the source of the voice, and saw Captain Parakanis step out beside the Duchess. He was second in command to Admiral Sloane.

Leia squared her shoulders and dropped the hood. "I am escorting my family to their ship," she said. "I would advise you not to do anything you will regret."

"I have strict orders from Admiral Sloane not to let anyone leave this planet," said Parakanis, his arms folded behind his back in a show of unconcern. Clearly he didn't believe any of the rumors he had heard about Tarkin's death, or he would have more fear. "Particularly not any member of the Naberrie family," he added.

"I hardly need remind you that I outrank Admiral Sloane," said Leia. She glanced around, half expecting to see the Imperial whose starship had taken her to Naboo waiting in the wings. Sloane was a woman of about 40, no-nonsense and iron willed. Leia had noted that she had seemed unimpressed by her on their journey to Naboo, but she didn't find that she held it against the Admiral. Leia wasn't very impressed with the rank of Imperial Princess, either. Everyone know who held her leash.

"Yes, however, these orders come straight from the Emperor himself," Parakanis countered.

"So it was the Emperor, not Sloane, who sent you here."

He seemed slightly irritated as he said, "Sloane received orders from the Emperor which she relayed to me when she sent me to monitor the Dee'ja Peak spaceport last night."

Leia raised her eyebrows. "You expected me to come to Dee'ja Peak?"

"All major spaceports are being patrolled," he clarified. "But enough of this stalling. I have orders to bring you back to Theed. M'lady."

"I'll return to Theed after I've seen my family off," said Leia.

"I am to escort all of you back to Theed." Parakanis was visibly exasperated now.

"And how exactly do you intend to do that?"

"Please, Princess. We have you vastly outnumbered."

"You're not going to shoot me. I highly doubt that is part of the Emperor's orders."
"We have leave to stun if necessary," he said coolly.

"I'd like to see you try," Leia replied with a smile, and in one motion threw aside her heavy brocade travel cloak and drew her lightsabers. She heard and sensed the hum of Obi-Wan's lightsaber coming to life, and in her peripheral vision saw that the old Jedi had also cast aside his robe.

Mother drew an elegant silver blaster from her own cloak, and said, "I warn you, mine is not set to stun."

Parakanis narrowed his eyes, then uncrossed his arms and lifted one hand, flicking his wrist. The stormtroopers gathered round fired at his command, but Leia and Obi-Wan easily deflected the blasts. Leia glanced over her shoulder and shouted, "Get in the ship, fast! We'll hold them off."

"Get to the ship," Leia told him. "I'll hold them off."

"You intend not to come with us," he said, flatly, no surprise in his voice.

"I can't."

"No!" said Mother, still firing away. "Leia, you are coming with us. You are coming home."

"Go," Leia replied, with a quick shake of her head. "I have to stay. Too much is depending on me. Worry about Lashmina, about keeping her safe."

"Leia—"

"Help me, Obi-Wan," Leia said, ignoring her mother. "Make her leave. Get her to safety."

"Child, I cannot force your mother to do anything she does not want to," Obi-Wan sighed, even while flashing his lightsaber in front of himself. "And I happen to think that she is right. You cannot do this on your own. You cannot defeat the Emperor from the inside. He will only destroy you and entrap you in darkness."

"I've already made up my mind. Think of Lashmina. You have to protect her. It's too late for me. Now go!" Leia shouted. "I have to take care of this. There can be no survivors—they've seen Lashmina and they'll tell the Emperor about her."

That seemed to at last give Mother pause, and she faltered slightly, her shot going awry and striking a wall instead of the trooper in her sights. Obi-Wan nodded and started to back up, still swinging his saber to deflect the shots peppering them.

"I'm not leaving you!" Mother said, looking wild, with her carefully tied back hair coming loose around her face, her mouth set in a desperate grimace. Her eyes were fierce as she sent another
trooper to his untimely death.

"And I'm not coming with you," Leia told her, then put her back to her mother and charged towards the remaining troopers, swinging her twin blades in tandem, sweeping through the men and feeling their helpless fear as they went down.

She did not know what finally made Mother leave. She suspected it was Obi-Wan reminding her once again that Lashmina needed her more. Leia did not look back. She was too intent on making sure no one who had laid eyes on her younger sister made it out of the spaceport alive. But she was aware when the Duchess lifted off. She heard the hum of its engines coming to life and felt the gust of air propelling outwards, nearly knocking her over.

She paused to look up and watch the freighter lifting into the sky. But only for a moment. There was too much work to be done.

Obi-Wan sank into the pilot's seat, his hands shaking as he maneuvered the controls. Padmé was pacing the cockpit like a caged beast, and from the back of the ship he could hear the child wailing in despair. Her aunt was trying to soothe her, but to no avail. The girl needed the comfort of her mother, but Padmé was in no state to comfort anyone.

"We have to go back. Obi-Wan. Turn back."

"Padmé… Leia will not come with us. Not willingly."

"Then you have to make her," Padmé insisted, her voice ragged and harsh.

"How?"

"I don't know. I don't know! Use the Force."

If he wasn't the one flying the ship he would have sighed and covered his face with his hands. As it was, he just sighed. "I warned you that she might resist us," he said, reminding her of the debate they'd had when they first learned that Leia was coming to Naboo. "It would seem that she has, indeed, willingly entered into the Emperor's service."

"I'm not having this argument again."

"It is not an argument. It is simply a fact. Foolhardy as it may be, there is no changing her mind. She must do what she thinks is right."

They were above Naboo and nearly out of orbit. In a few moments it would be safe to jump to hyperspace. Obi-Wan was concerned about the state of the Duchess, and he pondered the likelihood that the Imperials had anticipated failing in their appointed task to keep the Nabberries planetside, and put a tracking device on the ship as a backup. It was too dangerous to input the coordinates for Yavin IV or Hoth, in case that led the Imperials to the rebel bases. He had to think of another location where they could dock and inspect the ship.

"That's my daughter, Obi-Wan," said Padmé, her tone turned pleading. "Anakin's daughter. You cannot simply abandon her."

"What would you have me do, Padmé?" he asked, shifting to look at her. "Turn around and fly back down into that Imperial trap? Endanger the lives of your entire family? Risk letting Lashmina fall into Imperial hands? All so that you and Leia can shout stubbornly at each other again?"
Padmé rocked back, putting her hands on her hips, clearly looking as if she did not appreciate hearing the truth. He wondered briefly how in the blazes he had managed to put himself squarely in the center of a dispute between two of the stubbornest human beings he'd ever known.

He half expected Padmé to wrest the controls from his hands, daring him to fight her for command of the ship, but after a moment she deflated and slumped into the co-pilot seat.

Lashmina's sobbing from the back was the only sound for a few moments.

That poor child.

It was all he could do to block out the images coming from her though the Force. Whenever Lashmina felt a strong emotion she had a tendency to broadcast fanciful imaginings into others' minds, vivid mental pictures that encapsulated her thoughts and feelings in the moment. At just two years old she was already gifted at Force Illusion.

To effortlessly and unintentionally create Force Illusions was a rare ability that had not been widespread among the Jedi—it was viewed as a special skill, akin to Psychometry or Shatterpoint. Lashmina would be formidable at using the Force to influence others one day, and the things she could possibly do to a person's mind once she learned to control her power was frightening, to say the least. Younglings like her had always been closely watched, as they could, intentionally or not, be very disruptive to those around them. There had often been a particular worry that such gifted students would be more tempted than most to twist the Jedi mind trick into mind control and cause hallucinations and madness in their victims.

For the time being, the youngest Skywalker was just a frightened child, a baby, and the images he sensed from her were fleeting, confused things.

"Go to your daughter," Obi-Wan said, gently, trying to prompt Padmé out of her distress over Leia.

It seemed to work. Padmé got up again and headed towards the door, but then she paused and turned back. "Leia says that Anakin is alive," she told him.

Obi-Wan could not deny the lurch in his stomach, the way his heart soared for a moment, wanting it to be so. But he shook his head. He thought of all the times he had seen Anakin's ghost in the dark jungles of Yavin IV. A morose, reproachful, silent figure that had haunted his steps until he began to shut out the Force to make it go away. He had stopped meditating, had stopped reaching out to Yoda and Qui-Gon, had thrown himself into teaching new Alliance recruits old Republic war tactics rather than teaching Luke the ways of the Force.

If Anakin's ghost had spoken to him he might have felt differently. He might have welcomed the last vestige of his old friend, his brother, his almost son…but he found that the silent, angry ghost only plagued him with feelings of regret and guilt he could barely stand. He had never mentioned the ghost to Padmé or Luke. It would only hurt them, as it had hurt him.

How to tell Padmé now that whatever Leia had said to her was only a false hope? It was just some game the Emperor was playing, no doubt.

"She says that he's been held prisoner on the Death Star," Padmé went on when he was silent.

"Has she seen him? Spoken to him?" Obi-Wan asked warily.

Padmé lowered her eyes. "She didn't say. She said that she was certain, though. Sure that he was alive and aboard the Death Star."
Obi-Wan turned back to the dark of space outside the viewport. He needed to be determining a course of action; plotting hyperspace coordinates, and watching out for the Imperial star destroyer in orbit above Theed, which could turn its lasers on their ship at any moment.

He closed his eyes briefly. Did he dare to hope? What did Leia know? He wished that he’d had a chance to speak with her, but they had been intent upon leaving Naboo, and there had not been time to sit and talk about what had happened to her in the service of the Emperor.

"Leia is confused," said Obi-Wan at last. "Confused and clinging to the hope that she can fix things."

"And have you lost all your hope?" asked Padmé. He gripped the controls tighter.

"We must accept death as a natural part of life," he said slowly, practiced.

"There's nothing natural about any of this."

He shook his head and began to punch in coordinates to the nearest star system that did not have a strong Imperial presence. They would dock there briefly, inspect the ship for tracking devices, and plot their next course of action. First and foremost, the child and the Nabberries had to be taken to safety. Padmé wouldn't like taking them to Hoth, as it was an incredibly inhospitable planet from what they'd heard, but Yavin IV might be compromised.

"I know that both of us would like to believe that Anakin is still alive," he said. "But we mustn't allow ourselves to be led around by our feelings. To be led into a trap."

"I thought that Jedi were meant to search their feelings for the truth," said Padmé. "Isn't that what you've taught Luke?"

"There are feelings, and then there are feelings," he said, reaching up to grab the hyperspace lever. "There is a difference between sensing what the Force has to tell us and using our own emotions as a guide."

"And the Force tells you that Anakin is dead?"

He felt the old familiar tug as they jumped into hyperspace, the sensation of his atoms stretching and bending as the ship was transported into another dimension. This was an accepted fact of living in the galaxy, an experience that non-sensitives and Force users alike viewed as the mundane reality of interstellar travel. But in the distant past before technological advancement it might have been viewed as magic, as impossible, something even more unbelievable than the idea of a mystical energy field that held everything together.

He thought of Anakin's silent, surly ghost.

"It does," he said.

"I think he's alive," Padmé disagreed. "I think that he has to be."

And then she left him alone without another word.

Leia knelt on the floor, her head down. She closed her eyes and breathed steadily, maintaining her calm.

The Emperor circled her in slow, measured steps.

He had kept her waiting. He had not met her right away on her return to Coruscant, had not allowed
her to come before him and had not summoned her for an excruciatingly long time.

Finally, he spoke. "I am eager to hear what sort of story you have come up with in order to placate me."

"Story?" she asked, not looking up. He had summoned her not to the throne room, but to the training room. The one where the remains of Darth Maul decorated the walls.

"Yes, story. A story to explain how and why the entire cadre stationed at Dee'ja Peak was found slaughtered, with blaster fire and lightsaber marks on their bodies. A story to explain why you returned to the Theed Palace hours later than expected. A story to explain why the Naberrie family has disappeared."

He kept pacing in a slow circle around her, seeming to glide across the floor rather than walk, his dark robes dragging silently along the training mat.

"I think that you already know what happened," Leia said, lifting her eyes to meet his. "After all, you clearly sent me to Naboo to set a trap for my mother, so I wouldn't expect you to be surprised to hear the trap was sprung."

He did seem slightly surprised at the boldness of her words, and it gratified Leia somehow.

"If I were to learn that you allowed the escape of your mother I would be very displeased. I want to know everything that happened at Dee'ja Peak."

"It is unfortunate, then, that there are no witnesses left alive to tell you what happened."

He stopped, and stared at her, and she told herself she was not afraid.

"So she was there," he breathed. Then he smiled. But his voice took on a growl when he added, "You admit openly to defying my wishes."

"I admit nothing. And besides, you didn't give me any orders to apprehend my mother," Leia said, keeping very still.

"She is a traitor to the Empire," he hissed. "And you are, as well, if you have helped her to escape."

"Let us not pretend in private that I am loyal to you. It's insulting to both of us."

He bared his yellowed teeth at her. "There are limits to what I will tolerate. I gave you permission to unleash your rage upon Tarkin, but destroying a whole cadre of Imperial troops in order to protect your traitorous mother? That I cannot condone."

"You're assuming that's what happened."

"Isn't it? Enlighten me."

Leia looked back down at the floor. "She had a bodyguard," she said at last. "A Jedi."

"A Jedi? Does this Jedi have a name?"

"Obi-Wan Kenobi."

"And he single-handedly killed all of those stormtroopers? While you just stood by and watched, I suppose? Helpless to intervene?"
She forced herself to look up again. "I have not said that I was at Dee'ja Peak. I really couldn't say what happened."

"I don't believe you."

"It is true that my mother came for me while I was with the Naberries. Obi-Wan killed the guards who had accompanied me, while I slept. But when my family left Theed for Dee'ja Peak, I did not go with them," Leia said, staring at him unflinchingly. "I told them that I was sworn to serve you and that I must return to your side. They complained a great deal, and tried to persuade me for a long while, which is why I returned late to the palace."

"Why return at all if you admit to letting your mother go free?"

"Look here," she said, allowing herself to be angry. "I agreed to this farce in order to protect my friends and family. To save my father's life. That was our agreement and as I recall we were both very clear on where we stood. There was never any promise to hand my mother over to you. Did you honestly expect me to give you her head on a platter?"

"Your devotion to your family will be your downfall," he sneered. "You must learn to shed this sentiment."

"You don't want that. My sentiment is the only tool you have to control me. Without it there is nothing to keep me here."

"Is that so? Is that a threat, my dear?"

"You told me that you wanted me to publicly declare my loyalty to you, and in return you would not kill or harm my father, or the Organas. That was our deal. I have kept up my part of the bargain," she said. "I have acted the part of the loyal Imperial Princess for the entire galaxy to see. But you cannot ask me to hunt down my own family. I won't do it. I will not."

"Perhaps you have outlived your usefulness to me, then," he said, sneering. "Perhaps you would, in fact, be more useful to me if you were to die. After all, you have declared your loyalty; it is preserved forever on the HoloNet. If you were to meet an unfortunate end, were somehow assassinated by the vile rebel terrorists, I would have to mourn you and declare your tragic death a reminder that this insurgency must be stopped."

"You won't kill me."

"Oh? And why not?"

"The same reason you haven't killed my father. You still think that you can turn us to the Dark Side, have us serve you, be truly loyal to you."

He laughed. "And yet you are telling me that your loyalty, your true loyalty, is impossible to obtain."

"My father tried to kill you." She looked upwards. "Along with Maul. And yet only one of them is dead. You won't kill my father. You won't kill me."

He regarded her silently for several unbearable moments. Then, as if coming to some sort of conclusion, he unfolded his arms, his pale hands appearing like claws extended from monstrous paws as he shook the voluminous sleeves back.

"You will learn respect," he said, and suddenly from his hands shot a wave of energy that hit Leia before she could react.
She was flung backwards, knocked off her knees, and sent skidding across the floor until she struck the wall. She tried to scramble up and grab for her lightsabers, which had come loose from her belt and scattered across the floor. But he then unleashed a torrent of lightning.

The pain was immediate and immense. Every inch of her body was on fire.

She remembered the dream she'd had the night her father had fallen to Sidious. The dream that had awoken her with pain and fear and knocked her out of her bed. It was that same feeling, but tenfold, because this time it was no dream, no psychic connection to her father's suffering but her own, very real torment.

Then it stopped.

She lay on the floor, panting, tingling from head to toe with the aftereffects of the shock.

Darth Sidious stood above her.

"I could kill you now, if I wanted to," he said. He raised his hands again and she cowered, hating every inch of herself, of her frailty and helplessness. He lowered his hands back down to his sides.

He turned away and resumed his slow glide around the room.

"Have I ever told you about my old master, Darth Plagueis the Wise?" he asked. Leia couldn't answer, and he didn't seem to expect that she would, because he continued without prompting, "He is, I fully believe, responsible for your very existence. Do you want to know why?"

He paused, glanced back, then shrugged, amused. Leia pushed herself up to a sitting position and tried to work saliva back into her scorched mouth.

"Well, you see, he was a great student of the Dark Side. In his quest for ultimate power, and immortality, he sought to manipulate the midichlorians of the Force to create life. It was around this time that your father was born, and later when he was discovered by the Jedi Order, it was believed that he had been born not of man, but of the Force. Has he ever told you about that?"

She might have said no, because she didn't know anything about any of that, but she stayed silent. She knew a little about her paternal grandmother, Shmi, but had never been told anything about her father's father. She hadn't wondered about that too much, because it was just another part of the all encompassing secrecy that had surrounded her family for as long as she could remember.

"Well, it was this claim that led the Jedi to believe that your father was an answer to a prophecy: the Chosen One, destined to bring balance to the Force. This is why they took him in, despite many misgivings about his suitability as a Jedi. He never had the temperament for it, you see. Too rash, too emotional, too ambitious, too attached to other people. But ah, there's is nothing quite so tempting to the Jedi as the fulfillment of a prophecy. They just could not resist.

"You already know where this is going. They were fools. They courted their own destruction. You see, I knew better than they did about what a child born seemingly from nothing might mean. The Dark Side is a pathway to things that many would consider unnatural. A child with an impossibly high midichlorian count, somehow half human, half Force itself, well… that is a child who belongs to the Sith, not the Jedi. Your father was born of the Dark Side. He was made by the Dark Side. He was made, in point of fact, by the Sith. His entire purpose, the reason he existed, was to serve the Sith.

"And serve the Sith he did, for a brief and glorious moment. I could not have asked for a more perfect apprentice. Raised among the Jedi, like a viper in a rabbit's nest, he was always destined to
destroy those who had nurtured him and return to his true owner. And, as I had long ago killed Darth Plagueis, I inherited your father, so to speak. He was mine, by rights, as the only true Lord of the Sith left.

"Unfortunately, he was stolen from me. Stolen by your mother, of course. She took him away from me, twisted him around into thinking that he was not what he had been born to be, softened his mind, and made him the pathetic specimen he is now. She ruined him. She stole him, and she ruined him.

"You, my dear Lady Vestre, have much of your mother in you. But you are still your father’s daughter, and that makes you mine. That means you are born of the Dark Side. That means that your true purpose is to serve the Sith. It runs in your blood. You will learn to accept it, one day, or you will meet with the same fate as your father. Yes, he is alive, but is he that much different than our friend here?"

He motioned up towards the remnants of Maul.

"Yes, yes, I know that you hope to free your father from his prison… you are a foolish child. But while we are being so brutally honest with each other, I will tell you, it is that foolish hope of yours which makes him worth something to me alive. Yes, your sentiment is, I must admit, useful to me. But when you cease to be sentimental I do not think you will leave my side. I do not think you will try to escape. Because when you lose your sentimentality, you will gain wisdom. You will understand that the Dark Side is the only true power in the universe. And you will know that only through me, through service to your master, will you ever hope to learn, and grow, and harness its great power."

Leia gazed up at him. She wanted to be defiant, but it was difficult with the taste of blood in her mouth.

"Now that we understand each other, there is another matter I wish to discuss," he said, almost conversationally. "The loss of your father was quite a blow to me, and I have been searching for a replacement ever since. But how do you replace the perfect apprentice? You simply cannot. I raised up an entire group of potential Force users, the Inquisitorius, and they served as tools, but only adequate tools. They helped eradicate the Jedi from the galaxy, but of course, as you know, your father killed them all."

Leia remembered it well. She might have shuddered at the memory of the first time she had ever seen someone killed, the first time she had witnessed her father doing the killing, except that it seemed a distant and curious sensation now. How many living beings had she cut down with her lightsabers since leaving Alderaan? The number kept growing. Still, she would never forget that first taste of death. She had understood what she had heard before leaving Osallao, that her father had murdered people, but she’d never really been able to picture him murdering anyone until she saw him kill the Inquisitors. Then she could imagine what it might have been like when he killed the Jedi. She could imagine it quite vividly.

"I had one promising child who I thought might grow into a formidable Sith," the Emperor was saying. "A resilient child, strong in the Force, although no one could ever come close to your father. Still, I had some hope for her. Sadly, she was also stolen from me. By your father, ironically enough. Oh, I expected that he might kill her, but I did not expect him to adopt her as his own and ruin her much the way your mother had ruined him. Life is full of surprises."

"You’re talking about Mara," Leia said, speaking for the first time since Palpatine had shot her through with lightning.

"Yes, indeed. And I have a task for you, if you are up to it. I need you to bring me Mara Jade."
"Why," she said flatly, unable to comprehend why he would send her out into the galaxy again so soon after she had defied and angered him, and he had threatened to kill her. She should just run away this time, make her escape before he fried her brains with his fingertips.

He sighed, and then he reached out towards where her lightsabers had fallen, knocked clean off of her belt when he had shocked her, and he pulled her weapons into his hands. "Get up," he said, tucking them into his robes, "and come with me."

Leia pulled herself to her feet. She did as she was ordered, but a feeling of dread rose up inside of her. He led her out of the training room and they made their way, once more, to the same place where he had forced her to kill the alien musicians. The fact was not lost on Leia, and she started to tremble slightly despite her best efforts.

"You have a decision before you," said Sidious. "Two girls, both dear to you. Only one can survive. I leave it up to you."

"No," Leia said. "Please. I'll do what you want. I'll kill Mara. She means nothing to me."

"Oh, yes, you will bring Mara to me, or kill her if necessary. But first, you must pay for your mother's life."

"No! You can't. There's no reason for it. I—"

"You already made your decision, my dear. Back on Naboo. Now all that is left is to decide who you sacrificed to ensure your mother's freedom. Will it be Winter? Or Princess Astreia?"

They were outside the room, now, where the girls were being held. Ideas ran through Leia's head, thoughts of pouring all her energy into one mighty Force push that would topple the Emperor over, thoughts of grabbing her lightsabers off of him and cutting off his head.

Sidious waved open the door to the Organa's cell, and ushered Leia inside. There were two stormtrooper guards in the cell, and at a slight nod from the Emperor, they went over and dragged each of the terrified girls to their feet, and pressed a blaster to the base of their skulls.

"No!" Leia shouted. It was all she could seem to say, over and over again. She reached out in the Force to choke the guards, to kill them where they stood, but the Emperor brushed her aside with one languid wave of his hand. She stumbled to her knees, feeling the force of his invisible hand holding her down.

"There is no stopping this," he said gravely. "You made the decision which damned your friend already. Which one will it be? Tell me now."

"Never," she hissed, struggling under his control. Her own nascent, untrained powers were no match for him, and she was pinned there, unable to move and unable to reach out with the Force.

"If you do not decide, I will be forced to kill both of them," said Sidious. "This bravado accomplishes nothing."

Leia lifted her eyes and met Winter's gaze.

"Don't you dare," Winter hissed.

Leia looked back at the floor, willing herself to be strong, to be stronger than Darth Sidious. If she was the grandchild of the Force itself, where was her power? Where was it? She still ached and burned from the lightning assault and all the weight of Sidious's will bore down on her, flattening her...
"Say it," Sidious snapped.

"Astreia," she whispered, barely more than a croak. But it was enough.

With one tug of the trigger, the trooper sent a laser blast into Astreia Organa, Crown Princess of Alderaan.

Then he dropped her to the ground, like so much trash, and she crumpled into a lifeless heap.

Winter uttered a long, harsh scream which turned into a keening wail. The guard holding her let her go and she sank to her knees, gathering up her sister's body in her arms. She rocked her back and forth, confusion in her eyes even as she cried, as if she could not really believe that what had just happened could be real, that Astreia could be alive one moment and dead the next.

Sidious released his hold on Leia, but she did not move or make a sound. If Sidious hoped for a display of rage against the guards, he was disappointed. She felt nothing. They didn't matter. They were faceless, they were nameless, hidden behind white masks, plastoid skulls. She could murder every stormtrooper in a mile radius and it wouldn't matter at all. Astreia was still dead, and Leia might as well have killed her herself.

She didn't remember leaving the room, was not aware of the exact moment when Winter's wails were no longer ringing in her ears. But she found herself back in the training room with Sidious, again.

"Now," he said. "You can see that I am quite serious. You let your mother and her family get away, and I have made you pay with the life of your friend. The Crown Princess of Alderaan… it was an interesting choice. The logical option from a strategic standpoint would have been the other girl, the handmaiden. But that is neither here nor there. You will now go and bring me back Mara Jade. Failure to do so, in any form, will result in Winter's immediate death. In case I am not being absolutely clear: if you run away, Winter dies. If you find Mara but let her escape, Winter dies. If you cannot find Mara, Winter dies. If you find Mara, and Mara kills you, Winter dies. If you are captured or detained in any way which results in you being unable to return, Winter dies."

His words were a drone in her ears. All she heard was Winter dies Winter dies Winter dies.

"Oh, and one other thing. You will go alone. This is both a mission and a test of your skill. You have yet to fight anyone else trained in the ways of the Force. Mara has had considerably more training than you, so this will be an interesting challenge for you. When you have her, I want you to bring her to me aboard the Death Star. I must travel there shortly and deal with a problem that has been confounding the crew."

He paused, waiting for a reply, but got none. "Do we understand each other?"

"How will I find her," Leia said dully, staring up at Maul's left arm. "I haven't seen Mara in ten years. She could be anywhere."

"Ah yes, I'm glad you mentioned that. I have had a vision. It leads me to believe that she is in the Dagobah system. Whether or not she will still be there when you get there, I do not know, but it is a start. If you must track her all the way across the galaxy, do so. But do not return to me empty handed."

He took her lightsabers from his robes, and after a moment's hesitation, threw them on the floor and left the room.
Nothing in this World I Wouldn't Do

Hey, Brother! Do you still believe in one another?
Hey, Sister! Do you still believe in love, I wonder?
Oh, if the sky comes falling down, for you,
There's nothing in this world I wouldn't do.

Piloting had never been Leia's strong suit, though she could manage it pretty well with Threepio's help. Still, when they crash landed into the swamp, she wished she'd spent less time allowing herself to be ferried around and more time practicing flying by herself.

Dagobah was like a dream. It wasn't on any star charts, and Leia would have thought that the Emperor was purposefully sending her on a wild bantha chase to nowhere in anticipation of seeing her fail, if she had not remembered the name from long ago—from one important journey when she was a child and Obi-Wan had brought her, Luke, and their father here to meet with the ancient Jedi, Yoda.

It might have still been a fruitless escapade, anyway, if not for Threepio. Leia could remember the existence of Dagobah, but as far as coordinates went, well, that had not been information given to a ten-year-old girl locked away in a bunkroom.

"I always forget that you have decades' worth of information stored up there," Leia said, when Threepio had cheerfully volunteered the coordinates and offered to input them into the shuttle's navigation system.

Most people considered it good security protocol to wipe at least a portion of a droid's memory banks every now and then. This was especially true among members of the rebellion; capture or exposure was always a danger. On Alderaan the Organas had almost had Threepio wiped clean when Father brought him and Leia to hide there, but Leia had thrown herself over the droid and done everything short of hiss at any tech who dared come near. It had been then that, perhaps, Bail and Breha had first fully realized what a difficult child Anakin Skywalker had left in their care. But no one had touched Threepio.

Leia looked back on her younger self with the same pained regret that many people do, cringing at childish logic and foolish things said, or not said, but she felt no regret over protecting Threepio's memories. She remembered the acute fear that he would be taken away and never given back, or returned with a new personality matrix and no memory of who she or anyone else was. This was something she absolutely could not have allowed to happen. Threepio was all she'd had.

Until she had become close friends with Winter.

And Astreia.

"I'm so sorry, Mistress Leia," Threepio said, wading through water that came up to his torso. "Oh my, oh dear, this is dreadful. My circuits are going to short out, I'm getting water in my gears, oh my, if I fall you must go on without me."

"I'm not going anywhere without you," Leia said, reaching over to drag him forward by the arm. The water came nearly to her shoulders and the mud below sucked at her feet, but she pressed on,
refusing to drown with her droid on this Force-forsaken planet.

Well, that old idiom didn't quite fit. The Force was strong here, and contributed to the dreamlike sense of the world. All her senses felt oddly muted and yet strangely heightened at the same time, as if she were deep within a fog but could hear a twig snap a thousand meters away.

They managed to find their way up to something like a shore, though in the swamp the delineation between solid ground and murky pond was often hard to discern. Leia looked back at the half submerged Imperial Shuttle as she shook out her hair and squeezed water from her clothes. Her travel ensemble had been white prior to landing but she doubted that even the most stringent of bleachings would restore it to anything more than a dingy gray.

*Not that I care,* she thought, removing her vest to wring the muddy water out of it. The swamp had permeated the puffy inner stuffing and made it weigh a ton. She threw it aside in disgust.

If Mara Jade was on this planet, as Sidious had suggested, Leia couldn't sense her. The ship's scanners had picked up nothing besides organic life forms on this planet, but Leia didn't rule out the thought that Jade had a cloaking shield over her own ship and was attempting to hide out here.

The other possibility was that she was long gone and Leia would be left to try to find Yoda and wrangle information out of him. She doubted that the old Jedi would give up Mara's travel itinerary willingly. She had no idea how she was supposed to force it out of him, either. She had proved no match for Sidious and though she remembered Yoda as a small, curious moppet of a creature, she had spent enough times in archives and listening to Threepio's stories that she knew not to underestimate him.

Leia wondered if Sidious's clairvoyance regarding Mara had given him any inkling that the great Yoda himself lived on Dagobah. She doubted it. If he'd known he probably would have sent the Death Star over to blast the planet from the galaxy.

She was proud of herself for never allowing Sidious to probe her mind and discover that she knew, roughly, where to find the Jedi Master. It might have made her laugh that he hadn't had Imperial slicers mine the depths of Threepio's memory banks for such information. It had never occurred to him that the secret to finding his oldest nemesis lay within Leia's fussy droid.

He awkwardly shook his limbs and tilted his head, trying to get the vestiges of swamp water out of his chassis. "This is a most dreadful place," he said. He hadn't stopped muttering about the horrible wet nastiness the entire time Leia had been contemplating what to do.

"Perhaps not as bad as Tatooine," she said, sitting down on a fallen tree branch and taking her boots off to pour water out.

"It is every bit as bad as Tatooine, though in all the reverse aspects," Threepio said, with a disdainful sniff. It made Leia smile, despite the gravity of the situation. The fact that Threepio went to the trouble of imitating such human noises as snorting, sniffing, gasping, screaming, or tutting, had always made him a very peculiar droid.

"Not a place for droids, this is," said a voice.

Leia jumped up and drew her lightsabers, startled. She stood in the mud with only one boot on, and looking around for the source of the voice.

"Unarmed, I am," said Yoda calmly, stepping slowly out from behind a rock, leaning on his gimer stick.
"Oh, Master Yoda!" exclaimed Threepio. "Do you remember us? Oh my it has been a long time and I don't expect you to remember a humble protocol droid such as myself, but if I may say you are looking, er, spry as ever. I am C-3PO, human cyborg relations, perhaps you recall my former master, Padmé Amidala? I think that—"

"I'm sure he remembers," Leia interrupted. She lowered her sabers but hesitated before switching them off.

"Remember you, I do," Yoda agreed. "Waiting for you, I have been. A youngling you were, the last time these old eyes looked upon you. Grown you have. Bend down so that have a look at you I can without breaking my tired old neck."

Leia sat back down on the log, holding her muddied stocking foot out. She was wary of Yoda, but she tried to seem unconcerned as she forced her foot back into her boot. When she was finished she sat back and looked at him, meeting his enigmatic green gaze. "Aren't you going to ask me why I've come?"

"Searching for me, the Dark Lord has been, and found me, at last. Sent you as a test, he has."

Leia frowned a little as he shuffled towards her. He climbed onto the log and surveyed her seriously, while she said, "No. I don't think so. I'm looking for someone else."

"Hmm."

She felt uncertain, wondering now if he was right and she was wrong. The Emperor had demanded Mara Jade, not Yoda. But if it was Yoda he intended her to find, not Mara, she did not understand the test.

"With your permission, Mistress Leia, I think I need to shut down for a bit," ventured Threepio, his voice sounding a bit slow. "I need to let my circuits dry out a bit... such as they can... in this muck..."

"Yes, Threepio, rest," said Leia, putting a hand on his tarnished metal arm. When he had powered down, she turned back to Yoda.

"The Emperor doesn't know you're here," she said. "I never told him. He'd have blown up the planet by now if he knew."

"But why come, if not to find Yoda, hm?"

"I'm looking for a girl. Mara Jade. Do you know her?"

Instead of answering, he held out one hand, wiggling his three fingers, and said, "Show me, again, your lightsabers, young Skywalker. Very curious weapons, you carry."

"Why?" she said, suddenly self-conscious about her blades. The Emperor had given her back her father's lightsaber hilt, with a corrupted kyber crystal, and she had built the other one herself from the stone she had carried with her ever since Father had given it to her and told her that it was a token from Luke. The Emperor had not shown her how to construct the lightsaber; she had muddied about on her own. She might have taken apart Father's old lightsaber to see how it worked, but she hated it, she hated having to carry it and use it and she hated the baleful red glow of its blade.

She worried now that Yoda would scoff at her amateur attempt at making a saber.
"Very rare, a white lightsaber is, for a Jedi," said Yoda. "For a Sith, unheard of."

Leia held the hilts forward. "This is the Sith blade," she said, indicating the one in her left hand. "It's the Emperor's really. Not mine."

"Your father's saber, it was."

"Just the hilt. Sidious put a different crystal in it. A red one."

"Sure, you are?"

"Well, yes. When Father used it, it was blue." She held out the other one, a little shyly. "I made this one on my own, though. It's mine."

"Showed you how to construct a blade, who was it? Ob-Wan? Your father? The Emperor?"

"No one," she said. "We never got that far in my training when I was younger. Father tried but I… well I didn't want to. And the Emperor just wanted me to use the one he gave me. But I had this crystal and it just seemed like… I should."

She didn't tell him that she had made the second blade only because the crystal had come from Luke, and she had thought that the new blade could protect her in a way the old one—her father's blade corrupted by the Emperor—could not.

"See it again I would."

Leia stood up and turned it on, and he nodded and hummed in approval as she moved it back and forth in a few slow, exemplary swings, performing the basic maneuvers that she had first learned long ago with a stick in a mountain meadow on Osallao.

"A strong and steady blade, this is. Unique, and precisely made," he declared. "A rare talent you possess, youngling."

"Thank you."

"Why keep your father's blade if so hate it, you do?" Yoda asked.

She opened her mouth to say that the Emperor insisted, but she knew it was a lie. "I'm keeping it for him. For when he needs it again."

Yoda said nothing.

"He will need it again," she insisted, sensing doubt and thinking he did not believe her father would live.

"May I?" said Yoda, holding out one hand, palm up.

Father's lightsaber, made for a human, would be far too large for Yoda to wield with any sort of accuracy. Leia herself had difficulty with it, being slighter than her father and having much smaller hands. Still, she wasn't sure that she should give him a saber, because what if the Jedi Master decided they must duel? But it seemed foolishly antagonistic to refuse. So she held it out, bending down so she was closer to his level. It felt like crouching to give a present to a child.

Yoda didn't take it with his hand, not physically. Instead, he floated it out of Leia's grasp, turning his empty hand and rotating the hilt in a slow circle midair. She thought, for a moment, that he might turn it on, but instead he closed his eyes and twisted his mouth a little, concentrating. When he
opened his eyes again the hilt began to dismantle in the air.

Leia watched as it came apart, each small metal, rubber, and glass component sliding away from each other, until it revealed the crystal within.

It glowed a malicious blood red, like an angrily beating heart.

"Corrupted by the Dark Side, it is," said Yoda. "Poisoned by the malice and hatred of Darth Sidious."

Leia hated to look at it. It made her think of Father, in his cage, floating there in torment while Sidious laughed. Though she wanted to turn away, she also felt compelled to reach out, like she had reached out to touch the cold transparisteel walls of the tank.

The crystal floated to her, reacting to the pull of her mind, though she had not thought consciously to hold it. Without the crystal, the rest of the saber was just so much scrap, not really a lightsaber at all. It was the kyber at its heart that mattered, that gave life to it, and Sidious had taken the heart of it and replaced it with something vile.

The crystal fell into her palm, and she half expected it to burn a hole through her hand.

But it didn't.

It lay there, still glowing red, until it started to flicker.

It bled from a bright, ruby red to a magenta, then pale pink, then purple, till finally it settled on a bright, clear, blue.

"It's my father's kyber crystal," she said, gaping at it. "The Emperor didn't put a new crystal in it, he just... ruined the old one."

"Yes," said Yoda. "The Sith make nothing, only take what others have created, turn them, twist them, corrupt them. The shadow is nothing without the light."

"But the brightest light casts the darkest shadow," said Leia, curling her fingers around the crystal.

"And that," said Yoda, "why the Emperor seeks to destroy you, it is, young one." He still held the pieces of the lightsaber hilt in the air, floating around each other like planets orbiting a star. The center of the mechanical galaxy was a hole, an empty spot where the kyber crystal belonged.

"I'm just a pawn to him, a game piece," said Leia. She opened her hand and pushed the crystal back towards the rest of the pieces. She could feel Yoda letting go, and she caught them in an invisible hold. She could feel where the crystal belonged, where it wanted to be, and she let the pieces fall back together, swiftly, until there was a completed lightsaber hilt in her hand again.

She turned it on. The blade burned blue, like it had when her father had wielded it.

Leia ignited her other blade again, comparing them side by side. Her blade and its crystal had always carried with it a pearlescent shimmer. Next to the blue of the other blade, however, it seemed a pure shining white. Yoda hummed again, seeming to approve.

However, when he spoke it was not to congratulate her on a job well done, but to say, "Come to demonstrate your lightsaber craftsmanship, you have not. Sent you here, the Emperor did. A choice, you must make."
"You never answered me, before," she said. She lowered her blades to her sides again, but didn't
turn them off. The tips made the mud sizzle near her feet. "About Mara Jade."

He frowned, his ears twitching. He was about to answer her, perhaps with something useful or
perhaps with more elusive vagaries or distractions, but he didn't get a chance.

Leia suddenly stiffened, sensing a presence she had not felt in ages. She had almost forgotten the
shape of it, the signature fading from her consciousness, except in dreams, but now it cut through the
fog like a beacon of light.

"Leia!"

She turned around, and saw her bother emerging from the trees.

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Luke was dozing in a bunk inside the Millennium Falcon.

He had spent the afternoon training. He sparred with Mara, then practiced moving rocks and fallen
trees with the Force. They ran laps together around the Dagoban wilderness, though it was starting to
look a little less wild and a bit more familiar now. There wasn't much to do on Dagobah, so every
day was the same routine. Now, after a shower in the Falcon's cramped refresher, he rested alone in
his bunk and could hear faintly the sound of Mara and Han battling each other at dejarik in the
common area nearby.

There was only so much dejarik and sabacc a person could take without going mad, or feeling
compelled to create something new. Han was teaching them a game he called Corellian Catch, an
athletic challenge played outdoors with sticks and balls. He claimed the sport went back millennia,
predating the time of fancy computerized games. Luke suspected he was making it all up on the spot
with junk he pulled out of the Falcon's hold. Not that he minded, and he was glad to mix things up a
bit, even if it did mean Solo constantly complaining that they were cheating and using the Force. But
it rained more often than not on Dagobah, so they still spent most of their time inside the ship,
listening to the steady drumming of the elements on the hull. Sometimes the wind picked up and
vegetation lashed at the viewports, and that was what passed for an exciting anomaly in the swamp.

The only other activity was to hunt the native wildlife, which Chewbacca complained was too easy
because nothing had any fear of sentient beings and their technology. Not like on Kashyyk, where
the wildlife and the wookiees had spent eons evolving to hunt each other. Just the day before, Luke
had overheard Han snipe at Chewbacca to go off and find a monster to wrestle with his bare hands
because his whining was getting on his nerves. Clearly, the smugglers' patience with their stay here
was wearing thin.

Luke felt his own patience slip more and more lately.

He tried, daily, to reach out and contact his father's spirit, to ask for further guidance, to understand
why he was to wait here for Leia rather than seek her out wherever she was. He feared that she was
suffering, out there, that she needed him to go to her. If only he could ask Father more questions.

"Away your father slips," said Yoda when Luke asked him for help understanding the
temperamental nature of the Force vision. "Conversations I had with him, not so long ago, spoke
with him as I speak to you now. But…."
"Is he getting weaker?" Luke asked, concerned.

Yoda chuckled enigmatically and said, "Maybe I who am getting weaker, it is. Old, I am. Rest, I need." Then he had shooed Luke away so that he could nap, even though it was the middle of the day.

Luke had tried to reach out to Leia, to see if he could commune with her through the Force as he had managed to do with Father, but where she was concerned he met a wall, as if wherever she was she was keeping her mind and heart closed to all outside probing.

Now, Luke left his mind open to the Force as he dozed, not reaching out to anyone or anything but keeping himself in tune to the energy of it all, feeling the ebb and letting it flow through him, as Obi-Wan had taught him.

Leia.

He sat up with a jolt, knocking his head on the top of the bunk, but he hardly even felt it.

He got up and ran out into the common room, shooting past Mara and Han on his way to the cockpit.

"What's going on?" Han asked.

"She's here, I can feel it," Luke shouted over his shoulder, not pausing. He landed in the co-pilot seat and started flip switches in a mad rush to get the sensors online.

Han and Mara both followed him, leaving their dejarik game running.

"Hey, what are you doing, you need to keep the ship cloaked," said Han.

"It's cloaked," Luke replied absently, watching the screen as the ship slowly scanned the heavens above for other ships or celestial objects. "I'm just turning the scanners on to check for other ships entering orbit."

"What makes you think—"


"You shouldn't have to ask anymore," Mara said dryly. "It's the Force."

"Uh huh, well do you sense anything?"

"No," Mara admitted. "But then, she's not my sister."

Luke tried to ignore their casual sniping at one another, focusing on reaching out towards the faintest flicker of a familiar presence that he could feel drawing near.

Suddenly, the ship's computer beeped and a pinprick appeared on the screen. It was coming around on the opposite side of the planet and the Falcon's sensors could barely pick it up.

"There," he said. "It's her."

"Well it's something alright," said Han, leaning over to look at the screen. "It's an Imperial Shuttle. We don't know who's aboard it, though."

"I'm going to signal her," Luke said, grabbing for the headset.
"Like hell you are," Han protested. "That's an Imperial ship. You have no idea who's aboard, if it's
your sister or who she's got with her. We're not about to flag it down."

"Han, it's her, it's Leia, just accept that I know it's her."

"She's too far away, you'll never get a clear enough signal anyway," Mara pointed out. "And Han's
right, you don't know who she's with. We don't want them to find the *Falcon*. I say we wait for them
to land."

Luke crossed his arms and leaned back in the seat, not taking his eyes off the little blip of green that
represented Leia. Artoo wheeled into the cockpit, pushing his way past Han, and beeped
inquisitively.

"Track its progress, Artoo," Luke told the little droid. "Log the coordinates when it lands."

Then he got up out of his seat and went to put on boots and a jacket, since he had been lounging in
the bunkroom in just an undershirt and pants. He tried to keep calm, moving with the measured steps
of a Jedi, but Mara, trailing behind him, wasn't fooled.

She said nothing, but he could feel her concern. She was worried about him rushing to investigate an
Imperial shuttle, but she would not say it, because they had argued about her being too protective of
him, before.

He shrugged into his jacket and grabbed his belt off the floor, while Mara quietly went about draping
her shawl over her shoulders. There was no question that she would be coming with him. Mara
might not feel his sister's presence the way he did, but unlike Han she knew not to doubt the truth of
what he sensed.

He saw her checking her blaster and hooking her lightsaber to her belt, and when she caught his eye,
she said, "There's bound to be guards with her, or stormtroopers. This won't be easy."

"I know," he said, taking a steadying breath. He remembered his father's instructions, the ominous
decree to kill anyone who might get between him and Leia, and wondered if he could do it.

Luke had never killed anyone, besides the dragon on Mirial, though he might have killed Maul if the
others hadn't arrived in time to stop him. But still, he felt now that he was going into his first real
battle, his first true fight against the Empire, to free his sister from her captors… whether she wanted
to be freed or not.

Mara just nodded and pulled her long shawl up into a hood up over her head.

They were ready.

Back in the cockpit, Han was still monitoring the Imperial ship on the scanners, and Artoo was
plugged into the computer ready to download the coordinates of its landing spot. Han glanced up
when they came back, and said, "The ship had some trouble coming into orbit."

"What?"

Han gestured to the screen. "It landed not too far from here, but sensors indicate it was a crash
landing."

"Artoo, do you have the coordinates?"

The droid beeped affirmation and pulled away from the computer.
“Then let's go.”

Han stood up, and Mara said, "You're coming? Shouldn't you stay with the ship?" Han gave her an incredulous look, and she added, "It's going to be dangerous. You might want to get out of here and save your own skin if things go south."

"Are you… Is she serious?" Han turned to Luke. "I'm not hanging around here twiddling my thumbs. Let's go."

Luke didn't have time for any of this. Leia had just crash landed on the planet. He ignored their bickering and jogged down the landing ramp.

It wasn't raining out, for a change, but the constant mist still made his clothes damp as he ran, jumping over boulders and other obstacles as he made his way through the dense trees, towards the coordinates Artoo had transferred to his comlink. The droid turned on his thrusters and flew behind Luke, unable to wheel over the unreliable marshy terrain.

Han had described the crash site as "not far" but it turned out to be far enough away to take a good long while to reach. What I wouldn't give for a landspeeder or swoop bike right about now, Luke thought. Leia could be injured from the crash, or worse.

The glow of the lightsabers was the first thing he saw, from a distance through the trees. They lit up the gray mist in a brilliant, pulsating blue and white. Their steady hum was the only sound.

Luke broke out of the trees into the small clearing near a murky pond, where the Imperial Shuttle stuck halfway out of the water. Leia was at the water's edge.

She stood with her back to him, her hair coiled round her head in a braid, and it was for a moment like nothing had changed, ever. It was the same back of the same head, the same crown Mother had used to braid into her hair, the same stance as when she had stood in the meadow with a stick in her hands.

Only this time, instead of standing over him and laughing after knocking his feet out from under him with a wooden staff, she was standing over Yoda, holding an ignited lightsaber in each hand. The old Jedi Master looked up at her with a pinched frown on his face, but seemed otherwise unconcerned, sitting on a log with his gimer stick dragging on the ground.

"Leia!"

She turned. He came to a halt, suddenly, stopping for the first time since he'd hit the ground running from the Falcon's landing ramp. The eyes that met his were that of a stranger's.

This stranger was much older than his sister. This was not the girl who lived in his memories, round of face, cheeky of disposition, always meeting his sideways glances with a knowing look. This was a woman he did not know. Her face was thin, almost gaunt, not just a result of aging but of a harrowing, as well.

Her eyes were too big for her face, too dark.

"Luke?"

And with that, the moment passed.

Her eyes lit up.
She smiled.

She was Leia, again.

Both lightsabers switched off, and she ran towards him, slipping and sliding ungracefully in the slick mud. Luke, shook out of his momentary stupor, ran to meet her, and when they reached each other Leia nearly knocked him back off his feet by launching herself at him in what might have been a hug, or an attack. He caught her and spun her around before putting her feet back on the ground.

"What are you doing here?" she asked in a gasp, stepping back but still gripping his arms as if she couldn't believe he were flesh and bone and not just an apparition.

"Where else would I be? You told me to come here and find Yoda," he said, "Remember?"

"You got my message."

"I did."

She hugged him again, burying her face in his shoulder, to hide the tears that were in her eyes. Then suddenly she pulled away again and said, "You're taller than me. You were never taller than me."

Her tone was so indignant that he couldn't help but laugh.

It was a relief that she could still be so petty.

She glanced past him and stiffened, taking a step back. He turned to see Mara and Han, who had fallen behind him as he ran on, determined to get to his sister. They had caught up, and Artoo was with them, beeping excitedly as he trundled towards Leia.

She held out her hand and ran her fingers over the round topped dome and said, "Artoo Deetoo," softly, wondrously, as if seeing an ancient wonder of a civilization long past. The droid squawked and trilled out a greeting. But her attention was not held by him.

Han stepped forward. "Well, Your Exaltedness, I came through, didn't I? Bet you're surprised to see me."

Leia's attention was not on him, either. She was looking at Mara, who hung back and simply nodded at her in return from under her shawl. At Han's words, Leia's gaze slid to him, but Luke knew something was going on; he could feel the tension that seeing Mara had instantly created.

"I am," Leia responded. "I asked you to deliver the message but I figured you'd be on your way after that."

Han shrugged and smiled awkwardly, kicking at a dirt clomp. "I found your brother for you and then figured, hey, there's profit to made in the Rebellion, so I stuck around."

"That is not how it happened at all," Mara spoke up, unable to remain silent while Han took any credit for their alliance. Leia gave her a sharp look. "We found you and—"

"Details, details," Han said, waving his hand. "It was all part of my plan."


Luke cleared his throat. "Are you alright?" he asked, drawing Leia's attention back to him. There would be ample time for Han and Mara to snipe at each other about motivations and plans later. "I've been worried sick about you. We all have."
"I know," she said, and her mouth twitched up in a bitter smile. "But I'm fine."

He knew that she wasn't.

She turned away, looking back towards the water, to Yoda. The old Jedi had scooted down off the log and was standing there, lips pursed in that old thoughtful way of his, leaning on his stick as he watched them.

"You're going to take Yoda back to the Alliance," Leia stated.


She said nothing. Her eyes shifted to Mara again.

"Do you remember Mara?" Luke said, though the answer was already obvious. The last time either girl had seen each other had been even longer ago than the last time the twins had been together, but Leia's troubled glances indicated to Luke that she had not forgotten how Mara had been sent by the Emperor to disrupt their lives.

"Yes," said Leia. Her tone was icy.

Mara stepped forward and lowered her shawl away from her face. Her hair was permanently frizzy in the humid Dagoban air, and she ran a hand through it, seeming self-conscious.

"It's been a long time," she said. "A reintroduction is in order, I think." She held out her hand. "Mara Jade."

Leia hesitated, then stepped past Luke and took Mara's hand. "The Emperor's spy," she said.

"Not anymore." Mara looked down at her hand, just a little, but enough to indicate that she had expected Leia to let go of it already. "I'm with Luke, now."

"It seems we've changed places."

"Not exactly," Mara said, not breaking eye contact even as Leia gripped her hand.

Leia broke the handhold abruptly, and Luke saw Mara flex her hand as she drew it back into the folds of her shawl. She was trying to hide her discomfort, but not well enough for it to escape Luke's notice.

"We're taking you back home," said Luke, drawing Leia's attention back to him. "Well, to Mother. To the Alliance base."

"No." Leia shook her head. "Didn't you pay attention to my message?" she asked. "You did give him the message, didn't you?" she shot over at Han.

He lifted his hands. "We all got the message, Princess. But I don't think your brother liked it much."

"You understand that Father is still alive," Leia said, reaching out to grip Luke's arms.

"Yes."

"He won't be for long. The Emperor is journeying to the Death Star and if I don't meet him there I'm afraid of what he'll do."

"Palpatine is going to be aboard the Death Star?" Luke echoed in shock. The Emperor was well
known for never leaving his heavily guarded palace on Coruscant.

She nodded. "He told me that when I was finished with my current mission I should come to the
Death Star. He'll be there waiting for me."

"What is your current mission?" Mara asked.

Leia didn't answer, didn't even acknowledge the question, and went on, "If I don't meet the Emperor
onboard the Death Star I'm dooming Father, and Alderaan, and..." she broke off, shook her head,
and regrouped. "He won't hesitate to kill everyone I love if I disobey him."

"You can't stop him by obeying him," said Luke, returning her pleading look with an earnest one.
"Leave this game behind; you can't beat the Emperor as his pawn."

"I know," she admitted. "It's all gone wrong. Every time I go against the Emperor, people die. He's
too powerful to fight. I've experienced it firsthand." She looked at the ground. "I'm not strong
enough to stop him. But I can't just leave."

"Then what is your plan? Just let him use you? Slowly destroy you?"

"I don't know anymore." Her face scrunched up as if she might burst into tears, but then as quickly
as it came over her she thrust it down and said calmly, "I'm taking it one thing at a time, now. I have
a mission, and I must return to the Death Star, and see what happens next. I—I'll be closer to Father,
then. If I can free him somehow...."

"What is your mission?" Luke asked, echoing the earlier questions from Mara that had been ignored.
He looked at Yoda, who was quietly keeping his distance, and said, "Did he send you after Master
Yoda?"

"I don't think he knows about Master Yoda living here."

"Then...?"

She took a deep breath but was still unable, or unwilling, to spit it out.

"It's me," said Mara.

"What?"

"It's me," she repeated. "In the cave. It was real. He found me. Now he sent Leia here to bring me
back, or kill me. Isn't that right? Which one is it?"

Leia gave her a hard, appraising look. "Preferably alive," she said at length. "But dead if necessary."

"Now wait just a minute," said Han, interrupting them even while his hand moved uneasily towards
his blaster. "Are you saying the Emperor knows where we are and sent Leia, all by her lonesome, to
capture Red here? You didn't tell me you were on the Empire's Most Wanted list," he said,
accusingly.

"I didn't think that I was."

"This is a test of my abilities and loyalty," said Leia, addressing Luke. "It's always is. He could have
sent troops or bounty hunters if getting Mara back was of the utmost importance to him, but that's not
what it's about. He wants me to prove myself, prove I can beat a trained Force user. That's why I'm
alone."
"I'm not going to fight you," Mara said. She crossed her arms, balling her hands into fists as if to show that she would not reach for her lightsaber. "I've been helping Luke try to save you."

"Then you'll come with me willingly?" Leia asked, skeptical.

Luke answered before she could. "No. Absolutely not. If you do that," he protested, "he'll just make you fight each other anyway."

"It's true," said Leia, her voice dull, as if the prospect of dueling Mara did not faze her at all. "And I'm sure that if he knew that you were here, as well, he'd want us all to fight it out and see who is the strongest."

"To see who can earn the honor of being his slave? No thank you," said Luke.

"I can't run away and I can't go back to Palpatine without Mara. He told me specifically that he won't accept any kind of failure. He will kill Winter Organa. He already killed the Crown Princess, so I know he is serious."

"I won't say that I want to go, but I think that I have to," said Mara. She looked to Luke apologetically.


Both girls looked at each other in silent appraisal. They had no answer. His heart sinking, Luke knew what must be done. There could be no escape.

"We can't play by his rules. So, if running away isn't an option then there's only one thing that is, as far as I'm concerned," said Luke. "Either no one goes to the Death Star, or we all do. Together. And we don't fight each other, no matter what."

"I don't like where this is going, kid," said Han.

"Neither do I," Leia agreed.

"I'm not leaving you again," Luke told her. "We're not children anymore. It's time to stop letting other people decide our fates. You can either come with me, or I'll go with you, but we're staying together from now on. I won't accept any other plan."

She shook her head. "I don't want another captive whose life I have to be responsible for."

"I have no intention of being a captive. I've been training for this for the past ten years. I feel like I've been preparing to face the Emperor my whole life." He nodded to himself and added, "If I fail, I die, but I'll never serve the Emperor or be his prisoner."

"We die," Mara corrected. "I've been preparing for this, too. I've always known I would have to return to the Emperor, one way or another."

She reached out. Her hand was cold when he took it in his, and he gave it a warm squeeze.

"We'll all die together holding hands, is that it?" Leia said, gulping.

"Or we'll kill the Emperor. Maybe you can't take him alone, but all of us together?" Luke smiled. "He doesn't stand a chance." He hoped Leia didn't notice the bravado and took his confidence at face value.
Han groaned. "Oh hell, count me out of your teenage suicide pact," he said. "You are all crazy. I say we get in the *Falcon* and book it to the furthest planet we can find from all of this mess, see if we can discover a new star system with a nice, habitable planet populated by friendly but stupid cattle."

"You don't actually think that," said Luke dismissively, not even bothering to look at Han.

"Oh yeah?"

He nodded, then tilted his head and gave Han a sideways glance. "You'd get restless, like you are now. No amount of Corellian Catch could keep you from going crazy."

"Fine, then get in the *Falcon* and keep flying, only stopping planetside long enough to refuel. Anything but go where the Emperor and his big murderstation is located."

"You can do whatever you want," said Mara, brushing her hair back over her shoulder. "We can take Leia's shuttle."

"I'm not sure about that," Leia said. Her mouth twitched up into a grim smile. "It's actually wrecked pretty bad. I had a hard landing." She jerked her head towards the water, where only part of the shuttle poked crookedly above the surface.

"I can see that," Han said. He hooked one thumb into his belt and rocked back. "Guess you're all stuck as my passengers, then. And as the Captain of the *Millennium Falcon*, I'm saying no to going anywhere near the Alderaan system."

"We'll get the shuttle out," said Luke. He put a reassuring hand on Leia's shoulder, then walked past her over to the edge of the pond. He glanced at Yoda, who ticked his ears up and said nothing. He wondered if Yoda even remember that time years before when he had challenged Luke to lift the *Duchess* and watched him fail.

Luke closed his eyes and reached out in the Force, feeling the essence of the shuttle and the space it occupied in the Force, its planes and edges and curves of metal and transparisteel. He breathed in and envisioned it lifting in his mind, sailing lightly over the ground and coming to rest on the stone and moss beside the water.

When he opened his eyes the ship was sitting right where he had put it. He exhaled and lowered his arm, feeling a psychic weight drop from his mind as the ship settled fully on the ground.

"Ready to face the Emperor, you are," Yoda said after a moment, walking towards him slowly. "Ready, at least, as ever you will be."

"Will you help us?"

Yoda shook his head, then lowered it. "Come with you, I cannot. Hinder you, my presence would. Sense me, the Emperor will, let me aboard the battlestation he will not. Go alone, you must."

Luke nodded. He had given up on expecting Yoda to accompany them, though he'd had to ask one last time. He turned to Han. "Han, will you go to the Alliance without us? Someone has to tell them what we are trying to do."

"Oh, so you want *me* to go and tell your mother that you've decided to go kill yourselves aboard the Death Star?" Han said, putting an indignant hand to his chest.

"I don't know what will happen," Luke said seriously, ignoring the ire thick in Han's voice. "But if we do fail I don't know what sort of lies the Emperor will spread about us. I don't want it to be like
when we thought my Father had died, or when Leia was taken. I don't want my mother to find out from the HoloNet broadcasts."

Han nodded, apparently having nothing biting to say in response to that.

The moment was interrupted by the sound of beeping and clanking from over by the log, and they turned to see that Artoo had wandered away, over to where a protocol droid was leaning against a tree, seemingly completely inert. Artoo had extended one of his utility arms and was thwacking the other droid.

Leia jumped. "Artoo, don't do that," she said, running over to them. "Threepio is fine he's just drying out."

Luke stared. It had been ages since he'd seen his mother's old protocol droid, and Threepio looked much the worse for wear. In Luke's memories of him from childhood, Threepio had been a polished pale silvery blue color, but now the droid was a tarnished and scratched up gold underneath a layer of mud.

He was surprised to see that Leia still had him with her, after all these years, even while in the Emperor's service. He watched her as she pulled Threepio upright and switched him back on. The droid's eyes flickered on and he jerked his limbs, saying, "Oh, still here in this horrible swamp, I see. Well, I… what? R2-D2 is that you? My stars! My little friend, I haven't seen you since— What did you just say? How rude! Well, excuse me! What?! How dare you! Apologize at once you insolent pile of rusty scrap metal!"

He went to kick the astromech but slipped and abruptly fell forward into the mud. Leia laughed, looking instantly ten years younger, and bent to pull him back up. Threepio was now covered in mud all down his front side, and Leia picked up a discarded item of clothing from the ground, trying to wipe him clean. She ended up just rubbing the mud around on the hapless, protesting droid, all the while Artoo blatted in satisfaction.

"Luke," Han said, his voice low, stepping up beside him. "You know you don't have to do this. You get your sister aboard that shuttle and just conveniently input the wrong coordinates, wind up back at the base on Yavin with me instead of Alderaan. Then let the rest of the Alliance handle it from there."

Luke would be lying if he said the idea hadn't already occurred to him. But he shook his head. "I couldn't do that," he said. "I couldn't betray Leia's trust like that, it'd be the same as kidnapping her and she'd never forgive me if people died because of it. Besides, she would know I was planning to dupe her; believe me, I never could keep a secret from her."

Mara added, "It's probably our only chance to infiltrate the Death Star and kill Palpatine, as well. None of this will end until he's dead, and no one else is in the position to just be welcomed aboard that battlestation and given access to the Emperor like this. We have to take it."

Han sighed. "You're all gonna get yourselves killed, and for what? So you don't have other people's deaths on your consciences? Forget that. There's no honor in martyrdom, no matter what the holodramas tell you."

"I don't intend to be a martyr," Luke said, and walked away from him, towards the dripping Imperial Shuttle. He was going to have to get to work repairing it or they were going to be having a very different sort of argument. "If you want to help repair this shuttle, you're welcome to lend me a hand, and I'd appreciate it, but I can't pay you," he said over his shoulder to Han.
"Kid," Han said gruffly, slapping his holster and reluctantly following after, "trust me, I've figured that much out by now. There's no money in martyrdom, either."
Mara settled back into a corner, with a datapad in hand that she wasn't actually looking at. There were five of them on the shuttle and she was the odd one out. No one pushed her out, but she chose to remove herself.

Luke and Leia hadn't seen each other for half their lifetimes, and she let them have their long overdue reunion. The two of them sat up in the cockpit, talking quietly to each other, and she decided to keep a respectful distance. There would be things the three of them had to discuss, but later, when they were nearing the Alderaan system and had to get ready to carry out the plan.

This would be the only time the two of them had to just talk to each other about their lives, before they might be over.

She felt a pang of loneliness that she tried to subdue. She was well aware that this might also be the last time she had to spend with Luke, and it made her want to slink back into the cockpit on the pretense of getting ready for their mission, but she was determined not to.

She'd had two years with Luke.

She should, she felt, be happy with that.

It was, perhaps, more than she deserved.

She found herself missing Solo and Chewbacca. Chewbacca mostly, as he was better company, but even Solo would have been an acceptable companion on this journey. At least they could be awkwardly on the periphery of the twins' reunion together. But the smugglers were gone on a separate mission, having agreed to head directly to the Alliance and alert them of the current situation.

The other two inhabitants of the shuttle were the droids, R2-D2 and C-3PO, who seemed to be enjoying a reunion of their own. The little astromech was beeping out so much excited binary that there was a steady stream of robotic chatter from that side of the shuttle, punctuated by the protocol droid uttering a few shocked and scandalized oh my's and how extraordinary's while at the same time insisting that his life had been just as rife with adventure and excitement. Mara found herself listening in on his side of the conversation by default, since she couldn't actually concentrate on reading her datapad and was trying very consciously not to eavesdrop on Luke and Leia through the walls.
Threepio started to tell Artoo all about how for the past couple of months he had been living in the Imperial Palace, which was actually the old Jedi Temple, and Mara felt a pang of... what? Not homesickness, surely. She had only spent about five years of her life there. It had not been "home" for a very long time.

Home was the cottage on Mirial. Home was the inside of Ahsoka's starship. Home was the various Alliance bases, the barracks and mess halls filled up by rebels. Home was the hot, dry, krykna infested expanses of Atollon, the more hospitable grasslands of Dantooine, and the jungles of Yavin IV. Home was with Ahsoka and Barriss. And Luke.

Home was not the corrupted halls of the old Jedi Order, the vast and inhospitable emptiness of Palpatine's conquered palace, the coldness of those rebuilt rooms from which the lingering stench of death and betrayal could not be scrubbed. The scorch marks, blood, and dead bodies had been removed long before Mara had been born, perhaps even before her parents had left Naboo, but in the Force all remained.

When she had been a child, even a child strong in the Force, she could not have understood fully what had happened in the Palace and how the Dark Side had overtaken it, could not have really known how it permeated every facet of her developmental years. Even with the darkness Sidious showed her and the other children, the fear he used to earn their loyalty (until the last), she could only understand it in retrospect. Only after a lifetime removed from the darkness could she name it for what it was.

They weren't travelling back to the Imperial Palace, true. They were going to the Death Star, a place Mara had never set foot, but somehow she knew that it would be the same there. Palpatine would be there. He carried the darkness with him. Palace, Death Star, Palpatine, home....

No, she pushed the intrusive thoughts away. Not home.

Not home.

"Mara?"

She jumped, hand going instinctively to her saber, before relaxing a little. It wasn't like her to be unaware of someone approaching, but she had become so tangled up in memories of the Emperor that she had retreated inside herself. Foolish.

It was Leia who stood there, and Mara thought it strange for only a moment that it wasn't Luke who had come to get her. But she quickly figured out that Leia was the one to come back to find her because Luke wanted it that way—it had been obvious to Mara since encountering her on Dagobah that Leia didn't really trust her, and surely Luke had noticed as well.

And there needed to be trust.

Besides the fact that Palpatine wanted Mara, there was the unresolved issue that the last time Leia had known her, she had been a fanatically loyal agent of the Emperor bent on destroying their family. And she had succeeded. Looking back, Mara could say, with no small regret, that her mission had turned out just as the Emperor probably wanted it to, in the long run. The Skywalkers were thrown into chaos, Leia and Anakin were in the Emperor's clutches, and Padmé was pretty much a disgraced figure within the rebellion.

Mara did not know the exact nature of the Alliance's current politics, since she had left with Luke soon after Leia was revealed as Palpatine's new heir... but she had been closely monitoring all the underground broadcasts from the Alliance. Padmé, who had once been the face of the Alliance, their
Ambassador, their Rebel Queen, was conspicuously absent. Instead Mon Mothma had been issuing the updates and speeches, and while she sought to rally the rebel forces around the galaxy and call more to arms, she said nothing about Leia or Padmé. And that told Mara all that she needed to know. If she had wanted to ask, she might have tried sending a covert transmission to Ahsoka, but she had not wanted to risk it. Ever since leaving Yavin IV they had maintained strict radio silence with the Rebellion, lest it blow their cover as the bounty hunters Celina Marniss and Benjen Starkiller.

Now the final pieces of the puzzle were flying straight towards Palpatine. Mara could not shake the feeling that they were doing exactly what he wanted them to do.

"Yes?" she responded, pocketing her datapad and looking up at Leia expectantly.

"We're nearing the Alderaan system," said Leia, her voice cool; not hostile but certainly not warm or trusting.

Mara didn't know what she could do to convince Leia that she had changed, beyond what she had already said on Dagobah. She didn't know what she could do to atone for her past as a tool of the Emperor besides exactly what she was doing now, which was to going to the one place she dreaded more than anything.

She nodded and stood up. "Good. I'm ready as I'll ever be. What about you?"

A smile twitched at the edge of Leia's mouth. "You know," she said. "You don't have to try so hard."

"What?" Mara was caught off guard once more, and looked at the other girl's face with confusion, searching for the meaning behind her words.

"To prove yourself to Luke. To impress him with your loyalty."

Mara wasn't sure if Leia was questioning it or trying to assure her that she was trusted. So she continued to be wary as she responded, "I do have to try hard. I don't know any other way to be."

"You're afraid," said Leia, with all the authority of someone who could see past her defenses and into her soul. And perhaps she could. She had grown in her strength and was, truly, someone the Emperor would be eager to claim as his servant, but loathe to have as an unfettered enemy.

"So are you," was all Mara could muster in response.

"Maybe so. But I'm doing this to protect the people I love. Not for myself."

"So am I."

There was a moment where Mara thought that the arch of Leia eyebrow and the quirk of her mouth expressed doubt. But her eyes, still so dark and solemn despite the hint of amusement she had shown, were locked on Mara's for a long moment before she nodded slightly. She reached out to put her hands cautiously on Mara's shoulders, sensing how wary Mara was of her and how likely she was to bolt from any touch, and surprised Mara further by brushing each cheek with an airy kiss.

"I suspect that if we survive this, you will be my sister one day," she said, with the dignified sincerity of sealing a pact. "So I'll call you Sister, now."

It didn't really matter, in that moment, if Leia had decided this on her own or if Luke had asked it of her. Mara felt caught suddenly like a small vulnerable animal in a bright light, but it was not the light of a hunter but that of love, and friendship, and family. It burned through her like starlight. One more
word of kindness and she felt she might disintegrate into a useless crying child.

But she gathered her resolve, nodded curtly, like a soldier saluting her commander, drawing herself up with her back ramrod straight. *I would die for you, for both of you,* she thought, but did not say, and she wondered if the Emperor would ever have anticipated *that* when he made the Skywalker twins her mission.

"We will survive," was all she said, almost even believing it. "Sister."

"The what system?" Han said, looking down at the little green man who was his latest charter. (He insisted on thinking of him that way because, well, admitting that he had fallen in with a group of idealists was harder to admit outright than stubbornly thinking of them as his… clients. Passengers. Yes. Han's Jedi Transport Service. Fast. Efficient. Accommodating. Affordable.)

"To the Hoth system, we must go," said Yoda, cocking his head to the side as he gazed implacably back up at Han.

"The rebels are on Yavin IV," Han said, patiently.

Yoda shook his head. "Meditated, I have. To Hoth, we must go."

"Oh, meditation, of course, my mistake."

"You should listen to him," said Chewie, leaning in the doorway, his long arms hanging casually from a bar on the ceiling.

Han rolled his eyes. Chewbacca was always taking the Jedi's side these days.

Before Dagobah, he'd never known about Chewbacca's role in helping the Jedi Grandmaster escape the Battle of Kashyyyk at the end of the Clone Wars. He'd known that Chewbacca had been at that battle—it was not long after that event that the Empire had enslaved his friend and the wookiee had stayed under their yoke until Han had met him years later and freed him. But Chewbacca had never talked much about the war, and Han had respected the silence of a soldier who was still haunted by a crippling defeat. And so his first mate had kept the Jedi's secret faithfully for years.

But now that the secret was out, Chewbacca used it to constantly express the notion that he was an expert on the Jedi and their ways and knew a lot more than Han. Well, fine. Han had always respected his friends' wisdom; after all, Chewie had two hundred years under his belt, versus Han's meager twenty-nine.

Still, he rolled his eyes and waved one hand, having no argument but not wanting to concede.

"Find Ambassador Amidala on Hoth, you will," Yoda said, clacking his stick on the floor panels with finality, then he turned to shuffle back towards the bunks, probably to meditate and commune with purgills or something.

"Where is this Hoth system? Doesn't ring a bell. Not on any star charts or trade routes I know of," Han shouted at his retreating back.

Yoda paused and shuffled back around. "Best smuggler in the galaxy, I thought you were."

Han barked a laugh in surprise. Before he could formulate a snarky reply, though, the ancient Jedi told him:
"In the Anoat Sector, find it you will. Just past Bespin on the Corellian Trade Spine, it is."

First came the Emperor, slinking aboard the Battlestation like a snake slithering up a tree.

Then came the children, bright pinpricks of light in the darkness.

They called to him.

_Are you still there?_

_Are you alive?_

He was far away, his consciousness roaming the galaxy, reaching out as far as it could. To focus on what was happening aboard the Death Star was like falling from an impossible height, a meteor rocketing towards a planet.

The troops and officers stationed aboard the Death Star breathed easier when his mind was elsewhere, his consciousness stretched thin and his grasp of reality tenuous. They were able to go about their work without that menacing presence following them around, testing the power of its invisible hand, reaching toward them in the Force to wrap ghostly fingers around their throats….

If only he could have reached all the way out to the Emperor's palace on Coruscant and throttled him from an adjacent star system. Then maybe he would have lived up to the lofty title Qui-Gon had cursed him with, all those years ago.

In his body he was somewhat lesser. No longer omnipotent, unbound by time, but trapped in the flesh and bone of a mortal being, after all just a man. The closer he got to himself the weaker he felt.

And the pain, the pain.

It was good, though. The poison that sustained him while at the same time holding him captive was all around him, infecting his skin, dulling his mind, paralyzing his limbs. But he could feel it like fire enveloping him, burning his flesh to the bone and melting him, though that was merely an illusion. The gel only seemed to devour him endlessly as he floated there in the tank, the sensation of being destroyed neverending because he was still there, still intact.

He let himself feel it.

It was how he knew that his body still lived. That Anakin still lived.

He could feel that his children were near, could feel them in the Force. The closer they came the more alive he felt, and the worse his pain, like when Leia had stood before his tank and whispered _Save your strength_, except now there was no such admonishment from her.

The dragon shrunk and coiled around the man and became the man once more.

Closer, he felt the presence of someone whose name he struggled to remember. Not Ahsoka, but someone who reminded him of her, somehow, someone that traced in his memory back to his padawan… who was a padawan no longer.

_Mara?_ He settled on the name. Yes, it was her. _Mara Jade? Is that you?_

She heard him. There was a faint glimmer of recognition in the Force, and the tiny spot of light that was Mara started to come closer. She was alone, no other living being with her. His children were on this station but they were further away, and the Emperor was with them, his Darkness enveloping
them. Anakin could not reach out to them.

That section of the Death Star was long since deserted, but if anyone had still been monitoring the room, they would have heard a faint thunk. And, within the bacta tank, they would have seen one arm moving through the gel, feeling the curved walls of the transparisteel cage.

The tank was etched all over with spiderwebbing cracks. The floor below it was covered in a thin film of liquid that seeped from the tank, from the edges where synthetic glass met metal, bolted to the floor, where the tubes from the outside fed into the tank, and where the lid clamped down, hydraulically sealed. On the floor there were bodies, bodies that had been left there to slowly rot, because others had stopped coming to that place even to retrieve the fallen.

He had not moved his limbs in a very long time.

Distantly, he remembered a day when he had been drained of the Force, when he had returned from the future to his younger self on Mustafar and used up all that he had. Then he'd realized just how much he had been relying on the Force to keep himself strong, and without it he had collapsed.

His limbs held no strength of their own now. For how long had he been floating in this prison? How atrophied had his flesh become?

But the Force was with him today. The suppressing bacta was weak and he was strong.

He curled one hand into a fist and slammed it against the glass.

"Master Yoda," Padmé gasped in surprise.

She had been called to the briefing room "on urgent business" and headed there with weighted steps, feeling a strong sense of dread.

The Alliance had welcomed her back, of course; this is where they had wanted her to begin with, sequestered away on Hoth, hidden in a cave where they could keep her safe but also out of the way.

It had pained her to have to return here in defeat, without Leia. She had dragged her whole family into this mess with her and now instead of being in their homes on Naboo they were stuck here on this ice planet with her, wanted fugitives.

Obi-Wan was there, stroking his beard thoughtfully as he gazed at a holoimage projection showing the rebel fleet. Mon Mothma, Ahsoka, and other Alliance leaders were also gathered around. There was a man she did not know and a wookiee she didn't think she had seen on the base either, though it was more than possible that she had simply missed noticing them, since she had kept to her quarters and tended to Lashmina since arriving.

When she laid eyes on Yoda she came up short.

"Padmé," he said, smiling up at her. It was odd to hear him use her first name. He had always been so formal, calling her Queen or Senator as the circumstance dictated. He reached out one hand, and she took it, kneeling down so that their faces were more on the level.

Even though Yoda had been centuries old before she had been born, Padmé was struck by how much more he had aged in the past twenty years. She wondered if she looked much changed in his eyes.

"Good to see you, it is," he said. "Well, you look. Makes my heart glad, it does."
"Why have you come out of hiding?" she asked. "Why now?"

"News, we bring," said Yoda, twitching his ears towards the man and the wookiee.

The man took that as his cue to move forward. "Han Solo," he said, holding out his hand. Padmé stood up, looking him over, then took his hand. "I've heard a lot about you," he said.

Most people in the galaxy had heard a lot about her at this point, so Padmé just furrowed her brow and said, "Oh?" with ingrained politeness.

"I'm a friend of your kids. You look an awful lot like her. Leia, I mean."

"I know," Padmé replied, hiding the stab of pain that went through her heart just at the mention of Leia's name. "How do you know my daughter?"

"Call me a contact," he said, shrugging and smiling. "Just a smuggler, found myself helping her try to put one over on the Emperor."

"Why?"

It sounded absurd the way he said it. _Try to put one over on the Emperor_, as if Palpatine was a petty gangster or small time crook. As if he were doing this on a lark.

He looked nonplussed by her blunt question, and rocked back on his heels, chuckling nervously as he looped his fingers through his belt.

"What news have you brought us?" Mon Mothma asked, putting an end to the introduction. "Now that Padmé is here, we can begin."

"You were waiting for me?" Padmé asked, surprised. She had be debriefed about her encounter with Leia on Naboo upon her arrival on Hoth, but it had done nothing to restore her place in the Alliance Council. Quite the opposite.

"Well yeah," said Han Solo. "You've the one we came to see. Luke and Leia sent us to tell you that they're going aboard the Death Star and they're going to try to take out the Emperor."

There was more, but Padmé didn't hear it. She could only hear a ringing in her ears as the room went a little fuzzy. She wavered and then leaned heavily against the holotable.

"Oh dear," said Mon Mothma quietly.

"What about Mara?" Ahsoka asked, stepping forward. "Is she with them?"

"Red?" said Solo. "Yeah, she's with 'em. Crazy kid. I'll say one thing for her, she's loyal, I think she'd follow Skywalker into a volcano."

"How you could let them do this?" Padmé said to Yoda, harshly, the room snapping back into focus. "How could you let them go alone?"

Yoda dipped his head. "Failed, I did, against Darth Sidious. Time for others to fight, it is," he said quietly.

Obi-Wan cleared his throat. "Did they tell you what exactly they were planning to do?" he asked the smuggler.

"Not really. Just that they have the best chance to get close to the Emperor. I guess they plan on a
"Three against one. Not bad odds."

"Three children against a Sith Lord and an entire moon sized battlestation full of stormtroopers," said Padmé.

"Oh, and your husband," Solo added, as an afterthought. "They're going to try to rescue him."

"We need to help them," Padmé said. "Mon, we can't just let them do this themselves. We need to deploy the fleet."

"About that," said Mon, slowly.

All eyes turned to her.

"We have been preparing an operation," she said. "Contingent upon our successful emigration from Yavin IV to Hoth."

"The infiltration mission to rescue the Organas," said Ahsoka. "Yes." She turned back to Padmé, explaining, "I have a team that's been preparing to run the Imperial blockade and liberate Bail and Breha before anything might happen to them or Alderaan. I've been working on it ever since you left for Naboo."

"Not that mission," said Mon. "Although it is still certainly a top priority. No, I'm speaking of the Yavin Trap."

Ahsoka frowned, clearly bothered that she had been left out of the loop. It had happened to Padmé and Padmé had hoped that Ahsoka's close ties to her and her family wouldn't cause the Council to push her out, but apparently that hope had been in vain. Mara abandoning the base to go off with Luke had probably not helped, either.

"Do tell," said Obi-Wan, crossing his arms.

"The base there is all but evacuated. We are going to purposefully leak the location to the Empire, in hopes that the Death Star leaves its current position above Alderaan to target Yavin IV. We have left just enough troops and spacecraft there to fool Imperial scouts into thinking they have found our main base. Once the Death Star has been redirected, we will attack the Imperial blockade above Alderaan with all of our remaining forces.

"And what if the Death Star does not leave the Alderaan System?"

Mothma shook her head. "The Emperor would be foolish to pass up an opportunity to obliterate the Alliance base. He will send the Death Star. We can only hope that he will remain aboard it himself, in his hubris."

"That is your plan?" Ahsoka said incredulously. "Send the Death Star on an errand and hope it doesn't get back in time to wipe out our forces above Alderaan?"

Mon shook her head. "We have assembled a team to infiltrate the Death Star beforehand. Our plan is for them to destroy the Battlestation from within before it reaches Yavin IV. We hope to destroy it while it is in hyperspace."

"How do you plan to destroy the station?" Obi-Wan asked.

"We recently liberated a scientist who had been forced to work for the Empire against his will," said General Draven, speaking up from the corner. "He was part of the team that built the Death Star. He
provided us with some valuable schematics. We've sent in a small team to go undercover and target a weakness he built into the station's reactor core. Once the core has been compromised it will trigger an explosion that will blow up the entire station from within."

"This sounds like a suicide mission," Obi-Wan observed.

Draven nodded curtly. "Our team knows what must be done."

"You cannot go through with this knowing that the children will be on board," said Padmé, then added, "And Anakin."

"Intelligence has already received word that Emperor Palpatine is expected to be onboard the Death Star right now," Mon said, passing a hand wearily over her forehead. "That's why we have already begun the first part of the operation; infiltrating the Death Star." She glanced at Ahsoka. "We certainly had no intention of leaking the Yavin IV location and beginning our attack on the Imperial fleet without discussing it with the full council, however—"

"You were going to be ready to go," Ahsoka finished, and Mon nodded.

"Well, don't go," said Padmé. "This changes things."

"I don't think it does," said Draven bluntly. "They have no real plan and are likely to fail. Even if they do assassinate the Emperor, they don't have the Death Star schematics or the inside intelligence of our scientist, and they don't know about the weakness which we are planning to exploit."

"Will that matter if the Emperor is dead?" Ahsoka asked. "Without the Emperor we'll have control of the battlestation and can decommission it on our own time. No need for suicides."

Draven waved a hand dismissively. "Even if they succeed, they have to subdue an entire station, otherwise killing the Emperor will just result in their swift executions and the Death Star being in the control of the Grand Admirals."

Han Solo shifted uneasily and said, "This team that is infiltrating the Death Star, are they already onboard? Can't we just have them communicate with the twins? Alert them to the impending destruction?"

"I'm afraid that would be too risky," said Mon. "We cannot contact them now. It would endanger the mission and risk them blowing their cover before they have a chance to access the reactor core."

Padmé was clenching her fists, though they was hidden under the thick, fur-trimmed winter cloak she wore to guard against the bone deep chill of the ice planet. Even in the heated caves that comprised the base, such clothing was required. "My family is onboard that station, my children, my husband."

"Mara," said Ahsoka, sadly, softly.

"Yes, and Mara too. You can hold off on this mission until we've learned of their fate," said Padmé.

Mon looked thoughtful, as if she were considering it, though Draven was shaking his head with obvious irritation.

"If we wait we allow the Emperor to slip past us," he said. "We risk the destruction of Alderaan. If this assassination attempt fails, there is a good chance the Death Star will target Alderaan in retaliation. Would you risk an entire planet?"

Padmé looked at him coldly. "Do you have children, General Draven? A husband or a wife? Would
"Forgive Draven's bluntness," said Mon. "He's a soldier, not a diplomat. I'm sure he does not take joy or satisfaction in the thought of any of this. Regardless, it is not up to him or you to decide." She squared her shoulders. "I believe in democracy. We will put this matter before the entire Council."

Padmé exchanged glances with Ahsoka. They both knew that the rest of the council wasn't any more disposed in their favor than Draven. Anakin had long been considered dead and was an easy sacrifice to make, since his survival was only hearsay anyway. Leia was a public traitor, and Luke and Mara had run off on their own rogue mission several weeks ago. Whatever they were doing now would just be seen as getting in the way.

She didn't have the power or influence to stop this.

"Master Yoda, you are silent," she said. "You sent my children on this mission. What are your thoughts?"

All eyes turned downward to the Jedi Master. Yoda had indeed been very quiet, but his eyes had been bright, his ears alert, as he watched them debate.

"Trust the Force, we must," he said after a long pause. "Trust in the young Skywalkers. Our only hope for the future, they are."

Draven kept shaking his head, but Mon said, "Master Yoda, out of respect, I will allow you to speak before the entire council, give your advice, and then we will make our decision."

"Young Skywalker. We meet at last."

Luke gazed silently up at the old man. He was seated on a throne, backed by a viewport through which could be seen the distant gleam of Alderaan, floating like a blue and green jewel in the black of space.

His throne room was comprised of many platform and catwalks, located high above the rest of the Death Star, as if he liked to be at the core of it. Luke had assessed the room and found it not ideal for an attack, the various gaps and cavernous drop-offs making it hazardous at best and a death trap at worst.

It was probably a part of the Emperor's defensive plan, to seat himself on a dais surrounded by pitfalls.

The Emperor was draped in heavy robes and a hood which concealed his face, but when he lifted his chin to peer down at them the light hit him and Luke could see the yellow gleam of malice in his eyes.

When he got no reply from Luke, the Emperor turned to Mara. "Well done, my young apprentice," he said. "At last you have returned to me, and brought the Skywalker twins before me, just as I asked."

Mara swallowed and Luke could sense her fear, but she sounded flippant when she responded, "I was under the impression Leia was the one bringing us to you."

"Yes, well, from a certain point of view," he said with a smile, and he stood up very slowly, hoisting himself up from his seat by pressing his gnarled hands to the armrests. "Leave us," he said, waving away his crimson robed guards.
Leia was to Luke's right, Mara to his left, and all three of them took a collective step back as the Emperor descended the stairs from the dais. "I sense your thoughts, young Skywalker," he said. "You are preoccupied with your father, you have come here wishing to free him. To save him."

Luke, who had been very carefully shielding his thoughts and feelings from the Emperor, faltered a little at how easily Palpatine saw through him.

"Don't look so surprised. I could be as blind to the Force as a petrified log and know that you want to free your father. Your sister thinks of little else, day in and day out. I don't blame you, of course. What good son would want to see his father locked away in perpetual torment, hm?"

"I'd like to see that he's alive for myself," said Luke.

He got a laugh in response. More of a cackle, really.

"Of course you would. I'm afraid that area is off limits at the moment, however. And besides, you may play coy but I know that you believe your sister. I can sense it. You trust her utterly." A sly smile spread across his mouth, the only part of his face now visible. "Strange, considering how little you know about your sister. Do you really think she is the same child you once knew?"

"Don't bother trying to turn us against each other," Luke said bluntly. "It won't work."

"I brought you Mara, as you asked," said Leia, drawing his attention. He had mostly ignored her this entire time, speaking to Luke and Mara but barely sparing her a glance since they had been escorted into his audience chamber.

"Yes. And Luke, even though I did not," said the Emperor, turning to her at last. He held his hands up in front of himself in a curiously birdlike stance, the long white fingers hanging limply there, and Leia eyed the cracked and yellowed nails with unease.

"Well, what now?" she demanded, fidgeting nervously.

"A question I should be asking you, should I not?" he hissed. "When will you make your move? Who will be the first to strike?"

They were all silent.

"Oh, don't be bashful," he admonished. "I'm no fool. I can see what is on your minds. You wish to take your sabers and strike me down. It is what you have planned; to murder me together. Why do you hesitate? Why do you edge away? What, my children, are you waiting for?"

This goading only made them hesitate further. Their plan had been to start by taking out his guards and sealing the doors to the chamber, but the fact that he had dismissed them himself made Luke wary.

The Emperor cocked his head, tilted it up, revealing those glimmering eyes again. "You await a trap? An electromagnetic field, perhaps, like the one I used to ensnare your father? Or do you suspect a squadron of stormtroopers to rappel down from the ceiling at any moment? Oh, I assure you, it is only me."

"Why?" Luke asked. Leia and Mara began to spread out as they slowly tracked Palpatine, Luke moving back away from his creeping steps, the two girls widening out to encircle him until they had formed a wide triangle with him at the center.

"Why? Because I wish to test you, my young apprentices. To see which of you is most worthy of
continuing as my protege."

They drew their sabers, still holding back, carefully watching Palpatine rather than leaping to strike. The laser hum of the four blades filled the room, the sound like the thrumming of their nerves, echoing down and throughout the vast pits below.

"Yes, an impressive display of unity," Palpatine jeered. "Who will strike first?"

He got his answer when all three of them leapt towards him as one.

The Emperor reacted with impossibly fast reflexes, spreading out his arms to shoot lightning at Mara and Leia, while fixing Luke with a stare and a maniacal smile as he Force pushed him and sent him flying across the room.

Luke landed with a bone jarring impact on the metal plating of the floor, and his mind was still reeling at how quickly the Emperor had reacted. They had thought that he would be able to take two of them out at once but that the third would slip in, overwhelming him with their numerical advantage, and yet without any sort of gesture Palpatine had knocked Luke back as well.

His lightsaber had flown from his hand and landed with a clang some feet away from him, and as he scrambled to his feet he reached out to pull it towards him before it slipped off an edge and was lost. But before he could grasp it once more, the impact of Sidious' Force lightning struck him.

Leia had warned him about it, had told him about the immense, incapacitating pain of it, but he was still not prepared. He lost all connection to the Force, unable to move or think or pull his saber to him. Palpatine had abandoned both girls in order to shoot a full blast of energy into Luke.

Suddenly, the assault ended, and Luke could see that Palpatine's attention was diverted by Mara, who had gotten back up and was charging him with her lightsaber held high. He shot lightning at her, and she managed to catch it with her magenta blade, but the force of the impact halted her advance, throwing her back, and now all her energy was devoted to just staying on her feet and keeping her defenses up.

Leia came at him then, holding only one saber now, the white one, and he diverted one crackling stream of lightning towards her, lessening the flow towards Mara, but not enough for her to be able to run towards him. They were locked together that way, Palpatine holding both girls at bay. They needed to figure out how to divert the energy back at him, but they did not know how, they had never been able to train against something like this.

Luke needed his saber. He searched for it, casting his mind about the room to get his bearings. He felt like a piece of overcooked meat, his nostrils were filled with the acrid odor of his own singed hair and flesh, but he shook this distractions away. Focus. He must focus!

He felt the comforting weight of the lightsaber hilt as it flew to him and landed in his palm. He hauled himself up to his feet and sprinted back towards where Palpatine, Mara, and Leia were still locked in an excruciating stalemate. This time Luke made sure to keep his shields up, so he couldn't be push off his feet so easily. Palpatine would have to divert his focus away from at least one of the girls in order to prevent Luke from slicing him in half with his blade.

Sidious surprised them once more by leaping up and somersaulting over Luke's head. He landed behind him and cackled with glee as he shot Luke's undefended back with lightning, propelling him forward in a disgraceful lunge that caused Luke to slam into the floor on his chest, sliding dangerously close to a railing that lead to a dark drop-off.
"Is this all that training with the great Master Kenobi has taught you?" he taunted. Then he turned quickly towards Leia and Mara, who were charging at him again, and Luke watched in helpless horror from the ground as Sidious picked Mara up with the Force and flung her far across the room like she was so much nothing. At the same time he pushed Leia away, and she stumbled backwards, but remained on her feet.

He dropped Mara and she disappeared past the edge of the floor, falling from their current level to unseen depths below. "Pathetic," he said, dismissing her.

"No!" Luke shouted, scrambling up, his heart pounding. He could feel Mara's fear and panic as she fell. There was a pain, too, that he felt almost as if it were his own, when she landed.

He could sense that she was still alive, though, and it was the only thing that kept him from losing it and flinging himself at Palpatine once again.

The Emperor waved his hand and from the voluminous shadows of his sleeve there came a lightsaber hilt, and he ignited the blood red blade.

"Come," he said, "demonstrate what you have learned. I expect you at least not to disappoint me with the blade, Lady Vestre, for after all I have devoted myself to your training these past months."

"Wait," said Luke, pulling his dropped saber to himself again.

Leia held her defensive stance, glancing warily from Palpatine to Luke.

He could tell that she wanted to keep at it, to eventually wear Sidious out until he could not hold off both of them at once and one of them managed to slip past his defenses, just as they had originally planned when there were three of them. But Luke didn't like the look of that blade. It was one thing to get hit by a Force push or even a burst of Force lightning; that they could survive for a time and bounce back. Even now he was still assured though their bond that Mara was alive, wherever she had landed, though she was separated from them now.

But one slash of that waiting blade and they would be dead. He would not risk it, would not risk losing Leia like that, even if one of them falling to Sidious' blade created an opening for the other to strike the Emperor down. He didn't want any of them to die. Not if he could help it.

"Do you yield so easily?" Sidious sneered. "Are you cowardly, now?"

"I have a proposal," Luke said carefully, his eye on Sidious' movements in case the Sith Lord decided to strike first for a change. "You said that you wanted to test us? Well, I have a better test than this."

"Oh?" There was an undeniable glimmer of interest in the Emperor's eyes.

"Yes," Luke said, taking a steadying breath and glancing quickly to Leia. He could only hope that she would understand his silent communications, the way they had so effortlessly done when they were children.

"You want to know which one of us is stronger than the other. Fighting us like this won't tell you that. You'll kill us both and have nothing to show for all your plans. I know you don't want that. So, I suggest that we stop this fight, and Leia and I will duel to see who can beat the other."

That should, he thought, buy them some time, and distract the Emperor long enough for Mara to return… or for him to think of some other strategy than just flinging themselves time an again at Darth Sidious.
The Emperor smiled viciously. "I know what you are doing," he said, cocking his head to the side and up, thoughtfully. "And yet, I am intrigued."

Mara limped through the deserted halls of the deep storage level of the Death Star.

She had been struck with dark energy, shot through with Force lightning, lifted like a doll to be flung across the room and tossed into an abyss.

But she was not done fighting yet.

She had cushioned her fall with the Force, stopping herself from being dashed to pieces upon impact. Her body still ached from the fall, from glancing off the walls on the way down. The Emperor's throne room was built high up, with long shafts leading down into the lower levels, and she wondered at the unsafe design. Had the Emperor demanded just such a room to be built, anticipating its potential deadliness?

It did seem like him.

At first she had only one thought, to get back up to Luke, to Leia, to stop the Emperor from hurting them. To return to the fight. She found her lightsaber, which had fallen alongside her, and gripped it with determination, looking back up and considering the climb.

But then she heard something, or perhaps she only felt it in the Force. A flicker in her consciousness. A question.

_Mara...? Mara Jade? Is that you?

There was a reason, she realized, why she had not encountered any stormtroopers, imperial officers, or even any maintenance workers going about their business since she had fallen. These halls were marked with a signature that was hostile and alive, a force she recognized.

She had found Anakin Skywalker. She knew at once that Luke would want her to find his father, now that she was freed of the Emperor for the moment. But there was no time to lose. She lumbered as quickly as her screaming limbs would carry her, giving her pain over to the Force and focusing all her energy on searching until she found him.
Mara crept slowly down a deserted hallway, and soon she could see a ruined door up ahead. From the door leaked a clear, slightly gelatinous substance which looked like bacta. She crept towards it, though it filled her with an unnamable dread. The bacta gave off no smell, but nevertheless Mara felt as if she could sense a phantom odor, something nauseating and sickly. She bent down to inspect it, brushing her fingertips lightly across the skrim on the floor.

She regretted it instantly. It burned her skin like acid. She drew back with a sharp hiss, half expecting to see her fingers burned away to the bone. But there was no mark, no redness, nothing. She frantically wiped her hand back and forth along her pant leg. The pain subsided a little, but now she felt dizzy. Her fingers were tingly and numb.

Undaunted, she approached the leaking doorway, but with more caution now. There was some kind of horrible biohazard in this room, which would make a sensible person run in the opposite direction, but the draw from the Force was unmistakable.

The door was buckled and curved outward, as if a force from inside the room had exploded and the heavy security door had just barely withstood the blast. Mara used every ounce of strength—physical and Force enhanced—to pry apart and push aside the broken, warped panels, enough to create a narrow space she could climb through.

More of the clear substance leaked from the doorway, oozing into the hallway. Her boots made a sloppy sucking sound as she climbed through the crumpled door panels into the room. It was a good thing they were made of sturdy synth leather and came up to her knees, otherwise she would have worried about stepping in the stuff. Any shoe that let in even a little dampness would probably result in burning feet.

A tall bacta tank stood in the back of the room. It was shattered, a jagged hole in the transparisteel where it looked like something had burst forth from the tank. The contents of the tank had flooded the room, some of it still dripping from the ragged edges of the glass, but Mara could still make out the shapes of bodies lying all around, half submerged in goo and giving off a putrid, rotting stench that had not extended out into the hallway, but was strong and thick in the close air of this room.

This place was a tomb. It was not the bodies that had been the cause of her unease in the hallway, though. Of that she was sure. It was the substance itself, and she wondered if it had been the cause of their deaths, or if they had been lying there before the tank burst. If she had cared to know she could have investigated further, but the fates of the hapless imperials were not her concern at the moment.

Mara walked carefully through the slippery gelatinous liquid, which came about halfway up her calves. She approached the tank, warily looking around for its escaped prisoner.

She no longer heard the whispers in her mind, but she was more sure than ever that this was the place from which the call had emanated.
Various workstations, computer banks, and large pieces of medical equipment stood arrayed around the room, providing ample hiding space. She sensed movement and drew her lightsaber, spinning toward the source of the disturbance.

There he was. Far in the back, near a second exit door. Crouching, but in the act of straightening up. She tensed, not sure at first what or who she was about to face.

Anakin Skywalker had seen better days.

He was nearly naked, wearing only the standard medical underwear designed for patients who were to be fully submerged in bacta. And he was coated in it, in the bacta, his long hair and beard soaked and matted to his head and face. He was gaunt, his ribs and joints standing out starkly underneath his ghostly flesh. Clearly this was a body that had seen no sun or exercise, nor proper nutrition, in years.

About two of them, to be exact.

She wouldn't have even recognized him if it were not for the Force. He was nothing at all like the person she remembered leaving Atollon.

He was swaying dangerously as he stood, seeming a little drunk and unsteady. He only had one full arm, the other ending handless just below the elbow. There was an inhuman, feral look about him, but his unsteadiness and malnourished frame was less than threatening.

"Mara," he said, in a voice that cracked with disuse.

She lowered her saber, relaxing her stance. But she did not say anything. She didn't know what to say, shocked to see him in such a state. She wasn't sure what she had expected, knowing that he had been trapped here for two years, but his presence in the Force felt so strong, so forbidding, that she had imagined him as he once was. Not this broken visage. What did you say to someone like that?

When she didn't respond, he crouched back down. She saw that he was bending over the body of one of the fallen science officers. He turned the body over, seeming to not even notice the slimy bacta that covered it, and reached into the pocket of the white lab coat, removing the dead man's access code cylinders.

Mara, now over her initial shock and readjustment, took a step forward, saying, "Luke—Leia—he has them. You have to come quickly."

He straightened again, laboriously, and turned away from her, staggering to the still intact door. He unlocked it with one of the cylinders, and moved into the hallway beyond. Mara followed, seeing that the exit led to a back area, a small network of offices, labs, and ascetic living spaces. This place was a small but fully functional laboratory, and Skywalker had been the prized rat.

It was deserted now. No one but the rat had survived the maze they had made for him.

"Please," she said, as he was going the exact opposite way that she needed him to be, "there's no time."

He didn't respond, dragging himself along the wall down the hall past a few of the rooms. The bacta that had flooded the main room seeped through the doorway after them, almost as if the malicious substance was following its prey.

Mara trailed after him, impatiently, her worry for the twins mounting. They had been with the Emperor for too long already. It would take a long time to ride the elevators back up to the throne room, even without taking into account the fact that they would have to fight off stormtroopers and
red robed royal guards to get back in. So many terrible things could happen to Luke and Leia in that time.

"You have to hurry," she said, repeating, "there's no time!"

Still he ignored her, all his focus on dragging himself along. He looked half-dead and useless, but she knew otherwise. The Force told her otherwise. There was power inside him still, power enough to overwhelm the Emperor, if only they could get to him.

Mara reached a hand out to reclaim his attention, but before she could lay a finger on his shoulder, he pushed her away with a burst of the Force. She stumbled backwards, her feet slipping out from under her, and landed on her ass on the slick floor. Automatically she put out a hand to brace her fall, and that hand now burned with the intense phantom acid sensation. She shouted in pain and yanked her exposed flesh away from the floor, cradling it in her lap.

He turned around, said harshly, "Don't touch me." But then when he saw her holding her wrist (gingerly, careful not to get any of the burning slime on her other hand) he faltered, and, leaning heavily against the wall, said, "Don't... let it... touch your skin." His voice was still raspy and whispery, like a violin out of tune, brittle strings snapping under the weight of use.

Mara leapt back to her feet, doing a quick twist to jump up without using her hands, and nearly fell flat again, because the bacta was slippery and clung viciously to everything it touched—walls, floor, boots. She managed to get her footing, though, and stood panting angrily.

"Well thanks for shoving me into it then," she snapped, both her pride and her hand wounded. She hoped dearly that the synthetic leather of her trousers was enough to keep the wetness out, because the last thing she needed was this stuff on her ass. She winced, fighting away nausea caused by the intense, sustained pain. "It burns," she said, feeling as if all her skin was flayed off and the substance had penetrated deep into her tissue, dissolving the muscle, eating away at the bone. But her hand still looked perfectly fine. She gazed down at it and realized with horror that she couldn't move it—couldn't flex or even wiggle her fingers.

"Need to wash it off," was all he said, and he started back down the hall. She followed without complaint this time.

"Were you... in that tank? In this stuff?" she asked, as he entered a large, communal refresher room. She knew this must be the case, of course, but being submerged in this hellish substance was hard to imagine. Hard to imagine surviving, anyway.

He didn't answer, just left the door open behind him.

There was a large round sink in the middle of the room with several spigots for people to wash their hands, and rows of showers along the back wall. Mara went straight for the sink and stuck her hand under a spigot, letting the motion sensor turn on a spray of water. Real water, thank Trikara, not a sonic sink, she thought gratefully. She wasn't sure a sonic rinse would work on this stuff.

Skywalker dragged himself to one of the open shower heads and stood under the water. Mara's hand was in such pain that she barely paid attention to what he was doing after that, as she tried to scrub and repeatedly rinse her hand clean. The pain dulled, but the mobility of her hand did not return, and she fought down a wave of rising panic. How was she supposed to fight with one hand? Her off hand, at that?

He was standing next to her before she realized it, which unnerved her, because no one snuck up on Mara Jade. She nearly jumped out of her skin and kicked him in the face, but stopped herself just in
"Are you ready," he said, the rasp graduating to a gravelly sound. He had grabbed a lab coat off a hook on the wall, and looked almost comical now. If the situation hadn't been so grave, she might have said something snarky.

"I can't use my hand," she said, keeping her voice calm and curt—as if losing the use of her dominant hand was a minor inconvenience. "How are you even standing?"

"Long time." Skywalker paused, swallowed, and then said in what almost sounded like his normal voice, "I'm used to it. Come." He turned, a bit more spry now that he had washed the substance off. "Hurry. We don't have much time."

She followed, holding her hand in the other, her lightsaber clipped at her belt, and muttered, "That's what I've been saying."

Leia remembered a time long ago when she had dueled her brother for practice in the mountain meadows of Osallao, under the watchful and appraising eyes of Obi-Wan and their father. This was not so different, and yet it felt all turned around and inside out, a dark mockery of their childhood sparring sessions.

The Emperor watched with gimlet eyed malice, though his lips were twisted in a smile. Luke, who had been so easy to agitate and throw off his concentration as a child, stood across from her like a pillar of deadly calm. She knew that his thoughts were still trailing to Mara, but he was far less agitated by his girlfriend's violent fall than she would have expected. Leia thought that Mara must be dead somewhere, crumpled and bloody on a cold metal floor below the perilous room with its catwalks and platforms and pitfalls. But Luke was still plotting, still trying to beat the Emperor, to outsmart him, somehow.

_You can't outsmart him, I've tried_, she thought, but if he heard or sensed her he gave no indication. He bowed slightly, his lightsaber at the ready, and she took a deep breath, resolving to trust him.

They circled each other warily, formally, swinging their sabers with no real intention to land a blow or disarm the other… just feeling the other out. Leia remembered how Luke had fought as a child, but that was a long time ago. She knew nothing of him now. Nothing, except, that he would not hurt her. She felt this with clarity, as if he were projecting it to her. If she were to decide, madly, to betray him and cut him down she would succeed, he would let her, rather than strike back with a killing blow.

She would never know a true victory against her brother, even if she had wanted it.

She didn't know why that thought even occurred to her, at a time like this. The old competitive instinct, maybe—the drive she had felt as a child to be the best. If they hadn't been separated, if nothing had changed, no Mara Jade and no Emperor and no unfortunate truths about their father, they might have fought bitterly in their training, trying to outdo the other as they grew in stature and in the Force. Or perhaps Luke would have conceded and turned his attention to other things, like flying, or following their mother into politics. But that was a life they had not lead, an adolescence they had not experienced, a rivalry that had died years ago.

Now, as they sparred, she felt a small thrill to have a real opponent again. Not a training ball or droid, not a hapless stormtrooper, but her brother, a Jedi. Even though the fight was not in earnest, she began to take more risks, and smiled a little when he outmaneuvered her and met her blade with each
Luke was not smiling, and did not appear to be enjoying this even a little, and she wondered what he was scheming behind his icy eyes. She felt their old close bond but it was not enough to outright read the thoughts in his mind, just the feeling, just the need he had for her to trust him and go along with this sham as long as it took.

Darth Sidious could sense his old apprentice coming. It delighted him.

It was so long since he had truly felt challenged.

So many apprentices had been a disappointment, or had reached their full potential but predictably only been useful as a sacrifice.

He could have killed Vader—Anakin, as he insisted on being called, still—and many of his advisors had said that he should have.

He could have tacked him up in pieces on the wall alongside Maul. It would have been fitting, a testament to what happens to former servants of the Emperor who try to betray him. Their unity had been short lived and pathetic.

It was true, Vader made for an excellent tool to control his children. Bait and blackmail all in one.

But he needn't deny, at least to himself, that the uncanny defiance of his wayward pet thrilled him. Vader had proved himself uncontainable, ravaging the Battlestation even from within a specialized prison designed just for him. Vader's talent for murder was truly remarkable.

Gone were the days when he dreamed of harnessing that talent for his own devices. He knew that he must put an end to Vader at last.

But oh, what a challenge it would be!

"Enough!" he said, clapping his hands.

Vader's twin spawn ceased their lackluster sparring and looked at him warily.

"I grow tired of watching you play at fighting," he said. "You show me nothing. But I have something to show you,"

The boy—a fresh faced sandy haired blue eyed baby pretending to be a Jedi—took a step forward and asked, "What is it?"

Sidious removed a holodisc from his robes. He had meant to show them earlier, before they had been so suicidally eager to attack him. But now that the twins had wisened up and realized they could not fight him, he could take the time to revel in his victory.

Using the force, he floated the disc to a holoprojector pedestal and switched it on.

An interrogation session filled the space between him and the eager young Jedi.

Some rebel scum of little consequence was screaming. He had been injected with psychotic drugs that enhanced and transformed his physical torment into something even more unimaginably horrifying than it already was.

"This is a rebel operative who was discovered having infiltrated this Battlestation shortly before you
arrived. He and the others of his party withstood an impressive amount of torture before giving us what we needed."

He smiled at the naked looks of horror and disgust on the faces of the twins. They were filtered through the transparent scene of torment between he and them.

Sidious sped up the replay of the footage, saying, "He told us everything, in the end. The plan to sabotage the Battlestation from within, to destroy it in hyperspace. And he told us the true location of the Rebel base."

He slowed the footage again at the exact right moment, so that they could hear the dying man's anguished voice say, "Hoth. They're on Hoth."

He had hoped to elicit immediate dismay, but instead sensed confusion and doubt. Neither of the twins seemed to know about Hoth, or they were more capable of deception than he gave them credit for.

"Oh, I know about Yavin IV," he crooned, reveling in the satisfying spike of fear he felt in the Force. "We received intel that was simply too easy to obtain, compared to the years of fruitless chase. I must credit Grand Admiral Thrawn for heading up the exploratory force sent to ascertain if the intel was correct. A lesser officer may have become excited and not done his due diligence before returning, but Thrawn explored Yavin IV thoroughly and brought back word that only an illusory skeleton crew remained on the moon of Yavin.

"Those who had remained on the old base were interrogated and disposed of, thus exposing the duplicity of the Alliance and their true intentions and whereabouts."

"And now?" said Leia, her dark eyes getting darker.

"Now?"

Vader was coming ever closer. He made a trail of fear and death that radiated like a beacon in the Force. He would be here soon. Sidious relished the taste of it.

"Soon the Rebellion will descend en masse upon the Alderaan system, in an attempt to break the blockade and liberate the planet. They hope the Battlestation will be lured away to Yavin IV."

"That's not going to happen, is it," Leia stated.

"Oh, no indeed," the Emperor said with a grin. "Instead, the rebel fleet will be treated to a show—the complete and total destruction of treasonous Alderaan."

"No," cried Leia. "You can't! What purpose could that serve? You have the location of the Alliance base… why waste an entire planet with so many valuable resources? On that you already have under total control?"

He laughed, a great gleeful cackle which blended with the recorded shrieks of the hologram. "Are you begging? Pleading for Alderaan? Do you wish for the annihilation of the Rebel Alliance instead? Trust me, the rebel forces will be ripped apart and once we are finished with Alderaan, the Hoth System will be our next destination."

At that moment, the door to the throne room burst open, in an entirely unnecessary show of Force. Sidious stood, welcoming the intruder with a rictus grin.

"Finally," he cackled. "You grace us with your presence. I have been waiting for you."
And now, he thought, you shall die while your children watch.

Vader stood in the doorway, a ridiculous sight in a stolen lab coat that hung loosely on his emaciated frame, like a white version of the Jedi robes of old.

Mara Jade was beside him, her pink lightsaber drawn. There was a wild joy in her eyes; she had tasted blood, he knew. He knew all too well the mark of it—that triumphant high glow of a predator in the Force. She stood to the right of Vader, near to the right hand he lacked. Sidious thought it ironic. The girl thought she was fulfilling her destiny at last.

But he gave her little thought beyond that. It was not her destiny which concerned him, but Vader's.

He summoned his guards to deal with the children while turned his full attention to Vader. It was time.

Outside the Death Star, a space battle raged. The full might of the Rebel Alliance descended upon the Imperial blockade over Alderaan.

They did not take the Imperials by surprise, as they had hoped, and many a heart sank to see the Battlestation fixed in the same orbit around Alderaan as if had been for the past two standard years. They knew then that the Emperor had not taken the bait, had not left for Yavin IV. No one knew if their operatives on the inside were still alive or if they were still poised to sabotage the weaknesses Galen Erso had laid out for them. No one knew if the rumors that had circulated on Hoth about a new generation of Jedi storming the Death Star were true, and if they were true, they did not know if these young Jedi would succeed or if they had already failed.

They could only hope that somehow all was not lost and that this was not a trap. Not a last stand against total annihilation. Because there was no turning back now.

Luke had known that his father and Mara were coming. It was the only thing that mitigated the horror of Sidious' plans for Alderaan and Hoth.

Still, when the door burst open and he saw his father alive and in the flesh for the first time in two years, he could barely believe it. Physically, Anakin was a wreck, but in the Force he was strong, and he was fixated on the Emperor.

Palpatine should have been terrified of the vengeful ghost which stood before him, should have trembled to see his former apprentices come to end him, but instead he actually gloated.

Then he activated a comm and called for the guards he had earlier dismissed.

Luke noticed how Mara, right beside his father, was holding her lightsaber in her left hand while keeping her right hand curled defensively at her side. He didn't have time to wonder how she had injured it—probably the fall—or fret over how it would affect her ability to fight. It seemed that she was doing just fine. He could sense excitement and triumph radiating off of her, even along with a sense of terror as she saw Darth Sidious.

Sidious called for his guards again.

"They're not coming," said Mara. There was almost a giddiness to her as she said it. Luke saw her adjusting her grip on her lightsaber, lightly swinging it to and fro at the ready.

His own saber was still ignited from dueling Leia, and now he turned to his sister, who had stepped
up to his side. Leia's brilliant white saber was pointed at the Emperor. She blew a loose tendril of hair out of her eyes and glanced at Luke, nodding.

Anakin silently and slowly walked on bare feet across the steel floor, towards Sidious.

"No matter," Sidious said with a sneer. He raised his hands, and Luke could feel the echo of the lightning in his bones, could taste it coming the same way you could feel a storm coming planetside. His powers had been a surprise before, a literal and figurative shock, but even the most powerful attack becomes a predictable trick if you use it enough.

Sidious directed a full volley of lightning at Father, but Anakin caught it in his one hand and it fizzled out. He did not break stride or say a word, still slowing stalking towards his former master. Sidious sharp yellow eyes were calculating as he looked around at the foes advancing upon him. He smiled as if he knew a secret they all did not, as if he still had some sort of trick—beside a lightsaber—hidden up his sleeves.

"It's too late," he said. "The order to destroy Alderaan has already been given. You are wasting your time here with me. Your precious Rebel friends are dying as we speak."

The smile did not fade, but Luke was struck suddenly with the conviction that there was nothing behind it. He wanted them to run away, to hurry towards the control room to stop the firing of the laser, to leave him.

"And what will become of your Empire when you have died?" asked Leia, a cold rage under the calmness of her voice. "The Rebellion will live on, even if your forces kill everyone in this star system, even if the remainder of your Moffs and Admirals chase the remnants of our forces from Hoth. You will die here and there will be no victory for you."

He laughed, backing away. "You will die, all of you," he said, "and that will be victory enough," but now it sounded to Luke like the ineffectual hissing of a scared tooka cat backed into a corner.

Sidious sent a pair of lightning blasts towards Luke and Leia. They each caught the energy in the blades of their sabers. It was powerful, no less so than it had been before, but Sidious' focus was divided, conscious of Mara and Anakin coming towards him, and they were able to absorb the blast and maintain their footing. Soon it was over, and it had accomplished nothing. If Sidious had not known fear before, surely he must doubt himself now.

"Well, Vader, your little army of children are determined to die for you," he taunted. He summoned his lightsaber to his hand and leapt towards the twins, but suddenly, he was sent flying backwards, knocked off his feet and slammed into a post.

Father was there, beside Luke. His hand was outstretched, holding Sidious down as the Emperor struggled again him.

Still locked in an invisible contest with the Emperor, he turned to Leia and spoke for the first time since entering the throne room. "Go," he said. "You need to stop them from firing the laser."

"But how—"

"You're the Princess Vestre Palpatine," he said. "Order the Imperial forces to stand down."

She shook her head. "I have no real authority, though. No one will listen to me."

"You have as much authority as you believe that you have," he said. "Make them obey you."
Leia turned towards Luke, and he told her, "He's right. You have to stop them, you're the only one who even has a chance to end this before it's too late."

"You must go with her," said Father.

"And leave you?" Luke said, shocked. And yet he knew, even as he said it, that he had to.

Father didn't even respond to him, instead closing the rest of the distance between himself and Palpatine.

Mara was close on Anakin's heels, intent on the Emperor. So intent that she had no words for anyone else. Luke was torn about leaving her, about leaving Father, while Sidious still lived, but he knew that he and Leia needed to act quickly, if what the Emperor said was true and he had already given the orders to obliterate Alderaan and the rebel forces. He had to help his sister and trust in his father and Mara to do the rest.

"Come on," he said, turning towards Leia, reaching out to take her hand. "We have to hurry. Father has this under control."

Leia was looking at the fallen Emperor, gripping her lightsaber, as if she wanted to march over to him and cut his head off with it. But then she looked to Luke and her eyes changed, the realization that to linger here might mean the doom of Alderaan coming into them. She nodded and they turned and they ran, not daring to look back.

Anakin stood over the Emperor, holding out his hand, closed into a fist.

Sheev Palpatine was choking, a mad anger in his eyes as he fought against the grip. Anyone else would have been dead by now, lying in a puddle of their own spittle.

Palpatine reached up one hand, the other clawing at his own throat, and shot lightning at him. It struck Anakin—there was not much he could do to block it without releasing the grip he had on the Emperor. But if Palpatine had thought that it would knock him off his feet he was wrong.

The force lightning pulsed through his body, a deadly energy designed to fell him. But he was not the man he had been two years ago. He had felt this same sensation so many times before in his tank that even as the currents ran through his blood he only felt it as an unpleasant buzz that soon ran its course. He released it all into the Force, and did not let go of his quarry.

Sidious eyes held true fear now. Anakin thought that he should say something, that he should tell Palpatine exactly how he felt as they struggled against each other in the Force. But what was the point? Palpatine already knew. So he said nothing. He ignored the wheezing of the old man as he fought for breath and he refused to listen to the voice in his head that said, "Anakin, my boy... you have reached your full potential. I have made you strong. At last. You are truly my finest creation... this has all been a part of your training..."

That internal voice was silenced when suddenly a shaft of magenta light shoved its way into the heart of the Emperor. Anakin was almost surprised. For a moment so was Sidious, before he went silent in the Force, the yellow color draining from his eyes along with his life. His face was frozen in a scowl, his teeth clenched with the effort of holding Anakin off.

But even a Dark Lord of the Sith was made of flesh and bone, and when pierced with a lightsaber, no amount of power in the Force could keep a human heart beating.

Mara knelt next to his prone body on the floor, holding her saber, her hand shaking violently as she
disengaged the blade. She sat back, dropped the hilt, looked down in disbelief at her own victory. She had been scared to do it, he realized. Scared to kill the Emperor even though she had already felled several stormtroopers on their way up to the throne room.

If she had just left him to it, he would have worn Palpatine down, he was sure. But it didn't really matter. The man was dead, they had killed him, and he left nothing but emptiness behind.

"Does it make you feel better?" he asked, after a moment.

"Yes," said Mara, shaking her head, "yes. Yes. No? Yes it does. It does."

She had lived in terror and awe of the Emperor for so long. They both had.

"It's not over," he said, as much for himself as for her. "This station is still crawling with people loyal to the Emperor. We must help Leia get it under control."

She nodded. He held out his hand to help her back to her feet.

Leia stood looking out the giant viewport of the Death Star's main control room.

Alderaan floated in the distance. It was surrounded by a fierce space battle, streaks of laser blasts and explosions creating a fireworks show to put the Festival of Light to shame. Her heart was pounding, though outwardly she remained calm.

Her father and her brother were beside her, and that gave her strength.

"The Emperor is dead," she said in a cool voice. "You will obey my orders or face destruction."

There was a holoimage to her right, but she did not look at it as she spoke, her eyes still focused on the view outside the Battlestation. The Chiss to whom she addressed answered, "Your orders are to stand down and let the paltry Alliance forces claim victory. I fail to see how that is an action becoming to the true heir to the empire. You are no true successor to Emperor Palpatine, no matter what he may have declared publicly. Those of us who were close to him know the truth."

"And what truth is that?"

"That you have always been a rebel at heart."

She smiled.

"Nevertheless, Grand Admiral, I have assumed control of the Death Star. You have already seen what it can do to Star Destroyers who do not comply. Its laser is pointed at you, now."

"I am quite aware."

She folded her hands together in front of herself, and said, "Failure to obey my orders will be taken as treason. You and all of your forces will stand down."

There was a moment of silence. Out of the corner of her eye she could see the red eyes watching her profile, could almost feel the wheels inside the mind of the Grand Admiral turning.

"Very well," he said at last. "It seems that you have me at a disadvantage, Princess. Whoever controls the Death Star controls the galaxy. And so... the galaxy is yours. I wish you well."

Leia raised an eyebrow, and turned a little to look at the holoimage in full, but the Grand Admiral
ended the transmission before she could. No matter. He would comply rather than die. That was the one thing she could count on with the Imperial forces. They did not have the need to fight to the death the way the rebels did. At least, not yet.

The very stormtroopers who had been terrorized by her father for many months now were lined up standing at attention, looking at him with a sort of awe through the black slits of their helmets. At least, she thought she could sense awe. Outwardly they seemed impassive, but inwardly she thought there was a twisted sort of adoration, as if they were worshiping him like a god of death. Or perhaps they were just terrified and would obey whichever deadly power was in charge, be it Emperor Palpatine or those who had righteously destroyed him.

She didn't have time to think about that now, though. She had the entire Imperial Navy to try to bluff under her control. People like Grand Admiral Thrawn and Admiral Rae Sloane who had seen her as exactly what she was under the thrall of the Emperor who would not view her with respect or loyalty now that the Emperor was dead.

"Your Highness," said an officer whose name she did not know. "It appears that the Chimaera has leapt to light speed. They fled the system."

Leia clenched her folded hands into a fist, but consciously relaxed herself and lied, "I expected that he would," hiding the dismay that she had let him escape by trying to argue sense with him while he was already preparing to flee. "Contact the Vigilance."

"Yes ma'am," he said, crisply, no hint of doubt or question in his voice. A model Imperial officer.

"He'll cause trouble," said Mara, frowning and shaking her head. Clearly not the ideal Imperial.

"We'll worry about him later. Our first priority is the safety of Alderaan and the cessation of this current conflict."

She glanced at her Father, to see if he was going to disagree, but Anakin said nothing. He looked tired, leaning against a bulkhead. They'd found some clothes for him to wear, a dull grey Imperial uniform, but it hung off of him, as nothing was tailored for so gaunt a frame. One sleeve was tied off in a knot over the stump of his arm. His hair and beard were long, with ample streaks of grey shot through like lightning, giving him a harrowed, wild look.

Luke put a hand on her arm. "We have to get him back to Mother," he said quietly.

She nodded almost imperceptibly. There were many things she had to do, now.

She had saved Alderaan, seizing control of the Death Star, but there was still a battle to end. There was a Rebel Alliance High Command to negotiate a peace with. There was her mother, and her sister, and the rest of her family out there in the galaxy. There were a pair of smugglers she was indebted to.

There were the Organas… safe and alive on Alderaan, but she had failed to protect Astreia. The Princess was dead because of her. She had failed to keep the promise she had made to Breha, had failed to safeguard her daughters. She felt heavy hearted every time she remembered that. Winter was still a prisoner on Coruscant. She would have to get back to Coruscant before it fell under the control of some rebellious Imperial sect who might refuse to recognize her authority there.

And even if she managed that, she was not sure Winter would ever look her in the eyes again.

She told herself it wouldn't matter, as long as she was alive.
She steeled herself against the overwhelming crush of all that was before her, and concentrated on the matter at hand.

Chapter End Notes

Hey readers. It's me. Your author. I don't usually do author end comments but I thought I should apologize for taking so long to update. The reason is simple, I hate writing action sequences, they get in the way of my true passion of having people stand around and talk about their feelings. Also endings are hard. This isn't The End but the rest of it will just be wrap up stuff, reunions and people standing around talking about their feelings. So hopefully it won't be another six months before I decide that I don't care enough about it being good and just write it. TL;DR I suck but here have a chapter and thanks for reading if you haven't unsubscribed by now!
Mara leaned against the boardwalk railing and looked out over the gentle lapping waves against the sandy shores of Kaadara beach. The sun was bright and the air smelled of sea salt and sugar. She turned her head at the sound of a seabird’s call.

Luke stepped up beside her, holding two plastic dishes of ice cream bought from one of the vendors. He handed her one. His was chocolate, hers was "sweet vanilla blue," which tasted vaguely of tropical fruits.

"Well," he said, looking out towards the water with her. "Is it everything you expected?"

"It's a beautiful city," she said, turning away from the water. The ice cream was cool and refreshing on this hot Naboo day. It was already melting down the edge of the dish, each spoonful softer than the last.

The town was bustling with tourist activity, rich Naboo citizens enjoying the ocean water and the various vendors hawking their trinkets and treats. It was so different than the empty, eerie streets and quiet ocean of her vision. This, she thought, was the Kaadara her mother must have remembered every time she shook the starfall globe. This was the Kaadara were Sheev Palpatine's family had summered in his youth.

She felt no kinship with it, though. No inherited memories. It was just a place, and it left her feeling empty. Whatever fullness she had been searching for when she scoured the galaxy for globes, it was not here. But she was not unhappy; it was impossible to be so with Luke by her side.

Luke slipped a hand in hers and they walked down the boardwalk onto the beach.

She pointed to a far off palm tree in a grove that was devoid of other sunbathers, no children building castles or people playing smashball and limmie in the sand. "I'll race you," she said, then took off running before Luke could react.

They ran along the damp sand at the edge of the water. He chased her the whole way, and when she reached the tree she placed a hand on its smooth bark and laughed as she circled around it.
Luke arrived just after her, breathless, protesting, "You cheated!" He grabbed her by the waist and spun her around, laughing, "I demand a rematch," before they both tumbled into the sand.

She kissed him and he kissed her back.

This is what she would think of, when she thought of Kaadara, in the future.

They did nothing all day but swim in the ocean and lay in the sun. It was restful, peaceful. This is what vacationers came here to do. Mara was always restless in repose, but they deserved this, she thought. They deserved a carefree afternoon.

"We should be going," she said after awhile, as the sun began to dip down towards the horizon. "It's a long flight to Varykino."

They were standing in the water, in the shallows off the beach, with the waves lapping at their waists.

"Mara," he said, "I've been wanting to ask you something. Before we go back; I… I just wanted to get it out."

"Oh?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

His eyes were as blue as the water around them but his cheeks were as red as the fast approaching sunset. She watched him struggling to get the words out, and she just smiled a bemused, expectant smile.

"I feel very close to you." He reached out and took both of her hands in his.

She nodded. "Uh-huh."

Flustered, he shook his head. "You're not making this any easier."

"Making what easy?"

"I… never mind."

"No, no, I want to hear this."

He took a deep breath, but said nothing, holding it and the breath in until she thought he was suffocate.

"If it makes it easier, the answer is going to be yes," she said, relenting.

"Will you marry me?"

"No."

"What?" he said, dismayed.

She laughed, said quickly, "Yes, yes of course," and kissed him before he could say that had been a cruel joke. He hugged her tightly as the water swelled around them, a wave threatening to carry them away.
They were pulled apart by the water, but still gripped each other's hands. "You didn't even need to ask," she told him. "I thought it was a given."

"I didn't. You scared me for a moment."

"After everything… I thought you knew. Knew that I wanted to be with you."

"I thought maybe you still wanted to go away, off on your own, no ties to keep you down," he said. "Not that I want to keep you down. I don't. I want to travel, I want to see the galaxy, still. I want to learn more about the old Jedi, help train new Jedi, I want… well, I want to do it all with you."

"Having ties isn't a bad thing," she said. "Having ties… can be good."

He pulled her back, kissing her in wordless happiness, and they clung to each other in this way until they finally relented to the insistent sea and made their way back to shore.

They made their way up the beach, and walked hand in hand through the city, heading toward the spaceport where they had parked their ship. On the way, Mara paused before the glass window of a souvenir shop. She looked in at the shelves and racks of tchotchkes, at the childrens toys and worthless bits of cheap paraphernalia. Outside the door was a small display, designed to lure shoppers inside. She picked up a starfall globe with the skyline of Kaadara at night, the collection of round domes that gave way to a seashore dotted with palm trees.

"Do you want it?" Luke asked.

"Yes," she said, turning it over in her hand, watching the artificial heavens rain down upon the city, "and no."

It represented a past she'd never truly be able to connect to, because the people it represented were dead. Gone. She had other people, other family, and it was better to turn towards them, then look back at what might have been.

Still, she had collected a whole madwoman's treasure trove of these things back in Mirial and there was a finality to be had in finding the one she had wanted. She could look at it, and remember that there was an end to some searches, even as new ones were always beginning.

"I'll get it for you," he said. "Think of it as an engagement present."

"Alright," she said, and when he went in to buy it, she impulsively plucked an oversized stuffed veermok from one of the shelves inside, and told him, "I'm getting this for you."

"Why?" he said, with a laugh.

"It's new," said Mara. "It's not connected to anything but this place, this time. Right now. It'll remind you of this day, nothing else."

"I don't think I'll need anything to help my remember today," he said, smiling.

"You might," she said, smiling back, "you might."

Up in the mountains, in the lake country, Anakin Skywalker was floating his daughter's toys in the air, watching her cackle in glee as she reached out to try to grab them. Someday soon she would be able to do this, and more, but for now the trick delighted her three-year-old senses to no end.

The first time he had seen her, in the flesh, she had clapped her hands together and said, "Dada!" and
reached out to him from Padmé's arms.

Padmé had been surprised, of course. She thought Lashmina would be afraid of him, how wild and aged he looked after escaping from the Emperor's prison, but his daughter had known him. She had seen him in the Force many times before, and that is what she recognized when he came limping into the Alliance base; his essence, not his beleaguered body.

Even though she had reached for him, he hadn't been able to hold her, with just the one arm.

He had two arms again, a new robotic limb courtesy of the Alliance's med-droids. It took awhile for him to be able to upgrade and re-spec it to his liking, but he'd had plenty of time to do that. Padmé insisted on taking him to Varykino to recuperate, and he had been there ever since.

It was hard, at first, to get back into the habit of living. Of eating, sleeping, waking, dressing, walking around and talking. He had moved through the days in a ghostlike trance, slowly relearning how to be human.

Things were strained with Padmé, and he knew that it was because he had put her through hell by going and getting himself captured. He had tried to reach out to her through the Force, to let her know he was alive, but it hadn't worked and she had thought him dead. And so she had grieved him but she had been angry, too, because he had not trusted her to tell her that he was going to face Palpatine.

When are we going to learn to trust one another?

Her chestnut curls had gray in them, now, and he felt like he had put every gray strand there. He knew that he had.

He'd done this before—broke her heart—but in a very different way. The aftermath felt similar, though. Trying to win back her trust. Trying to atone for destroying everything.

That event, leaving without telling her what he planned, seemed like ages ago to him. It had only been a couple of standard years, but in the tank the time had not passed like it did on the outside. His wandering spirit had felt like it aged decades.

He could remember why he had done it, but it all seemed meaningless now. Trivial things like why Anakin Skywalker did what he did didn't affect the Monster in the Deep. But he remembered that he'd thought that he had to face Palpatine himself, to right all the wrongs, and he didn't want anyone telling him he should not, didn't want anyone counselling him with caution, or holding him back. He was desperate to reunite their family, and the only way, it seemed, to be able to do that and keep them safe was to strike at the Emperor and end him.

The fact that it had backfired and made things worse, well, that was something he had been apologizing endlessly for after his release. Everyone wanted to know why they, specifically, had been kept in the dark. Obi-Wan, Ahsoka, Padmé, Luke. The only person who did not ask, was Leia.

All he wanted to do when he got out of the tank was to fight. But, he shipped away to Varykino while the Alliance set about working with Leia to restore the Republic. For months they had fought with lingering remnants of the Empire who were loyal to Palpatine and refused to abide by the reforms Leia wanted to put in place, the power she wanted to give back to the Senate, the crackdown on corruption. There seemed little place for him in this struggle his eldest daughter had made for herself. He was a killer, a soldier, not a diplomat or a politician. If she needed another old general to command a star destroyer for her, he could have been there, but all Leia seemed to want was for him to "get better."
What exactly "get better" meant was beyond him. He let them trim his hair and shave his beard, put him in clothes and feed him. They were always feeding him, like they thought he needed a good fattening up, though to what purpose he didn't understand.

Padmé, would want to be in the thick of things, he'd have thought. But she refused to leave his side, staying on Naboo to play nursemaid.

He didn't object to her care, not exactly. She was soothing, and her love was what he had wanted for as long as he could remember, down through two timelines. But he also didn't like her to see him like this; disorientated, obsolete, not really himself anymore. That tank had taken something out of him. Something he wasn't sure he would ever get back.

He'd had to relearn how to be human once, and he could do it again. But it was different now. Before he had worked hard to keep his private hell on the inside, where Padmé and Obi-Wan and the children couldn't see it, but now… now he felt like they could all see it, all the time.

He and his wife shared the same bed at night, but so far all they had done was sleep. This was another part of relearning to be human and free of the tank that he was having a hard time with. He didn't know if he wasn't ready, or she wasn't ready, or if maybe she wasn't about to let him back in so readily, after all that had happened. She had willingly volunteered to spend all her days just taking care of him, but he didn't know, maybe once she thought he'd been fattened up enough she would say it was over, he could take care of himself, and she didn't want to ever be put through hell again, and she just couldn't trust him anymore, and how many times could he expect her to forgive him for making her cry until she was sick?

He thought about these things at night, looking at her dark hair with all its new gray, spread out on the pillow next to him.

Most of his time, though, was spent with Lashmina. Playing with her, reading to her, telling her old stories he'd heard from his mother that weren't written down in any datapad that he knew of… all of that was better medicine than whatever the anxious med-droids who inspected him constantly prescribed.

And prescribe they did. They kept trying to get him to take things for malnutrition, for stress, for anxiety, for depression, for this and that and every other thing. The Jedi in him scoffed at it all—Jedi didn't need treatment, they had the Force—but because he wanted to please Padmé he would go along with the daily or monthly injections. Obi-Wan would probably disapprove, but Obi-Wan wasn't there to give input. He was busy on Coruscant with Yoda, trying to take back the old Jedi Temple through diplomatic means, petitioning the newly empowered Senate to give back what Palpatine had taken and made into the Imperial Palace.

Anakin didn't know why they bothered. That place would be forever tainted by the Dark Side, after all that had happened there. Anakin for one never intended to step one foot back into those halls. Not that he would be welcome to, of course. He was still the man who had marched through those halls slaughtering his brethren. He would always be that man, no matter what atonement he made, no matter how many decades passed.

Perhaps that was another reason why it was better for him to be here, out of sight, out of mind.

Yoda had said that he proved himself a Jedi once more, but he didn't want to be a Jedi.

He just wanted to be Anakin, in a way he had not been since that day long ago when he had left his mother behind.
Luke was the one who wanted to be a Jedi. That was down to letting Obi-Wan have him all those years, influencing him, Anakin knew. That was fine, though. Let Luke want to be a Jedi. Anakin would love to see Obi-Wan or Yoda try to explain to him that his relationship with Mara was forbidden.

The two of them were due to arrive back at Varykino that evening. Everyone was coming, in fact. Padmé had invited her entire family, Leia, Ahsoka and Barriss, even Obi-Wan, to come celebrate Lashmina's third birthday. Luke and Mara hardly needed to be invited, since they were often at Varykino. They flew back and forth between Coruscant (or wherever Leia and her New Republic needed them) and Naboo regularly.

The upcoming party made him a little anxious, though he looked forward to it as well. It would be the first time in months that he had been around so many people at once. He knew that they would be inspecting him and whispering to each other about whether he looked "much better" or still "so dreadful."

Leia arrived first, early in the day, and the first thing she did was lay her head in her mother's lap and start to pour out all her problems in a torrent. The New Republic, the "Imperial Loyalists" (those remnants of the empire who refused to go along with her), the crime cartels, the star systems that wanted to split away and declare independence, the conspiracy theorists who said Palpatine was still alive and a prisoner… all of it was too much for her.

Anakin knew what it was like to feel like the entire galaxy rested on your shoulders at the age of nineteen or twenty. After all, that's how old he had been when the Clone Wars broke out. He'd gone from padawan to commander to general to mentor in a matter of months and it had made his head spin. But even he hadn't taken on as much responsibility as Leia had tried when she took control of the Death Star after Palpatine's death.

Leia was not calling herself Empress or Imperial Princess these days. She had declared the Empire dissolved, and signed over full power to the Senate, reinstating the Republic. Still, she had felt duty bound to stay involved—as "the former Imperial Princess"—to see the Empire transition back into a Republic "smoothly."

"I'm not going back," she declared, as Padmé stroked her hair and made sympathetic noises. "I'm going to run away and be a smuggler. I've been offered a spot on a crew. I'm all set."

Padmé laughed at that.

"Stay here," said Anakin. She didn't have to do any of this. She had done enough when she stopped the Death Star from firing on Alderaan, she should be allowed to rest, as he was being allowed to rest. She should allow herself to rest.

He knew she wouldn't. She had not yet reached the point where she could see rest as a good thing. Rest would mean letting it all catch up to her.

"You should come back to Coruscant," she said, ignoring his suggestion. "I need you there. There is so much to do."

Not Coruscant, he thought. He could go just about anywhere, besides Coruscant, or Tatooine. Anywhere.

He liked Naboo. He knew they couldn't stay sequestered up in the lake country forever, but there were other places on Naboo… like Theed. He could stand Theed.
"We'll talk about it later," was all Padmé would say.

Other guests trickled in across the afternoon. The Naberries came in waves, first Padmé's elderly parents with their youngest granddaughter, the one who was a senator, and then Padmé's sister and brother-in-law with their older daughter.

He was glad that their attention could be taken up mostly by Padmé, Leia, and Lashmina, because he knew the Naberries had yet to decide whether they were willing to forgive him for stealing Padmé from them for the past few decades.

He was happier to see Ahsoka and Barriss, who were next to arrive. Ahsoka had already scolded him roundly for going after Palpatine with Maul and leaving her out of the loop, but she had gotten it out of her system early and had clearly decided to just be happy that he was alive after all.

Obi-Wan appeared around late afternoon, and wisely kept talk of rebuilding the Jedi to a minimum. The way he looked at Lashmina and spoke of her early signs of Force talent told Anakin that they had some very tiresome arguments ahead of them, but for now, there was peace.

When he had first seen Obi-Wan again, the first thing he had said was, "I never want to hear you tell me to trust in the Force again, Old Man, because I tried so hard to reach out to you and you shut me out every time."

Obi-Wan, with a stricken look, had told him he'd thought he was a ghost.

Now, as Obi-Wan walked into Varykino, months later, Anakin asked him, "Do I still look like a ghost?"

He'd decided to never let him live that one down.

"No," Obi-Wan said, surveying him thoughtfully, "no, old friend, you are looking much improved. This place has done you some good."

Luke and Mara wandered in after nightfall, late for the party, for dinner, and far past Lashmina's bedtime. She had refused to sleep until she saw "Woo" because she had been promised that he was coming and cared nothing about anyone else.

They were sunburnt and laughing, trailing sand in through the front door and hanging off of each other as if they had made a vow never to not be touching. They made up for their lateness by giving Lashmina more presents than anyone else, showering her with stuffed animals and toys that had clearly been bought in Kaadara, the seaside resort they had departed for early in the morning with promises to be back by dinner.

Lashmina feel asleep wedged between Luke and Mara on a couch, and then Padmé picked her up and carefully carried her off to bed, trying not to wake her. When she returned, Luke and Mara exchanged glances, then Luke said, "We have an announcement to make. We're engaged. We're going to get married."

This elicited various congratulatory remarks from Padmé's family, joking and approval from Ahsoka and Barriss, and genuine surprise from Padmé. She tried to hide it, covering with smiles and enthusiasm, but Anakin saw it in her eyes. Luke was still her baby boy and even though his relationship with Mara had been clearly serious, marriage seemed to make it all the more concrete that he was grown up. (Or at least, that he considered himself grown up).

Leia got up and hugged them both individually, then together, and though she looked happy, she trying to hide some private sadness. Anakin could tell.
Later, when all the guests had been put to bed, packed away in guest rooms, Padmé lay snug against his side in bed, her curls on his shoulder, and said, "They're still so young to be getting married. Too young, don't you think?"

"Luke is twenty now," he said. "He's older than I was when I married you."

"I still feel like he's ten years old," she murmured in disbelief.

"He'll be fine. They'll be fine. They'll do better than us," he said.

The arm she had draped across his chest tightened a little in response, but she said nothing.

"It's Leia I worry about," he went on. "I wish I could make her stop trying to fix the galaxy. I know what Sidious did to her, what he made her do. It's not going to fix her but she thinks it will."

"She's like you."

"No, she's like you."

Once, he'd thought he could put the galaxy in order, make things the way he wanted them to be, but that had been a long ago dream that had died with Darth Vader. For a long time now he'd just wanted his family to be safe, to make the galaxy a place where they were not hunted by Palpatine. It was Padmé who Leia took after, throwing herself into fixing the galaxy because she thought that only she could make it right, that it was her responsibility.

The only reason Padmé wasn't out there trying to fix the galaxy still was because she had seen the state he was in when he was returned to her and decided to throw herself into fixing him. He still wondered what would happen when she decided she had done all she could.

"I worry about her too," Padmé said when he was silent. "But she never listens to me."

And Leia definitely didn't listen to him. He'd spent so much energy while in the tank on telling her not to try to save him, not to make any deals with Palpatine, not to sell her soul for anyone else's sake. Now he was saved and he should thank her, her and Luke and Mara, for coming to rescue him. But while it seemed to strengthen Luke and Mara, to have saved everyone, to have killed the Emperor, he knew that what had happened to Leia would weigh on her forever. Just like the things he had done weighed on him.

It was the exact thing he had never wanted for her. The darkness had touched her. The darkness had gotten inside. And it was because of him that it had.

He just had to believe that it was not the end for either of them.

"Ani?" came Padmé's voice in a whisper.

"Hm?"

"Nothing, you were just so quiet. I wondered where you went."

"Nowhere," he said, running a hand through her hair. "Just thinking."

"Good," she said with a yawn, snuggling deeper into his side, clutching at him with both hands, as if to keep him from fading away. "Don't go anywhere."

Leia was awake after everyone else had gone to sleep. She curled up on her bed and watched the
HoloNet from a small disc laid on the mattress before her. She scrolled through the news feeds for various different sectors and star systems, unable to pull herself away. She read reports sent to her by former Imperials and Alliance members.

She replayed a news report from Alderaan over and over and over again, freezing it and spinning it back even though she knew she should stop.

The royal family was standing together outside, waving to the crowds. Winter Organa was formally being declared the Princess, the Heir to the Royal House of Organa, months after being released from a lengthy imprisonment that had claimed the life of her sister, the former Heir Apparent.

Leia didn't see or talk to the Organas anymore. Not after what had happened to Astreia.

She had last seen Winter when she was releasing her from prison. The cold look in Winter's eyes had said she would never forget. Even if others hailed Leia as a hero, talked about how she had saved Alderaan, sparing it from the Death Star's obliterating beam, or praised her for recognizing the inhumanity of the Battlestation and ordering its laser dismantled and decommissioned, re-purposing the vessel itself into a "refugee station," Winter knew better.

She had seen her worst moments.

The alien band.

Astreia.

She would carry those moments in the banks of her eidetic memory. Forever.

Leia didn't want her to forget.

The gratitude Bail and Breha had expressed when Winter was returned to them was like ashes, burning her as it fell upon her. They thanked her for saving Winter, as if they did not know that she had condemned Astreia. Perhaps they didn't. Perhaps Winter had not told them.

She wished that she had told them, so that they would not thank her.

She switched the news feed off at last and sat on the bed with her knees drawn up to her face. She thought about Luke and Mara, so happy and full of love. She was happy for them. She really was. But it made her feel lonely.

She had just gotten Luke back, but he was Mara's Luke. He'd always be Mara's Luke, from here on out. She had missed those years when it would have been just the two of them, The Twins. And she didn't have a Mara of her own. Perhaps she never would, because she would always be infamous, the girl who had been the Princess Vestre Palpatine. The girl who had saved Alderaan, who had brought back the Republic. The girl who had done dark, unforgivable things because it had been the only way to survive and bide her time as Palpatine's pawn.

Since she still could not sleep, not even in peaceful Varykino—a place her mother claimed could cure even Father's haunted soul and ravaged body—she switched the holo disc back on and used it to dial out on a personal frequency.

"Well, well, hello Princess," said Han Solo. He was in the pilot seat of his spaceship.

"Oh, sorry, I must have dialed the wrong frequency. I was trying to reach someone else," she said, lying freely, easily, like a politician.
"Too bad, I felt kind of important for a moment there."

"Where are you?"

"Oh, I'm docked planetside," he said, then named a place she'd never heard of.

"And you're just sitting in your ship?"

"Hey, no better place to be," he said. "Why shell out credits for a hotel when I've got this palace?"

"Palace," she said with a snort. "You know, with all the money you made off of me, you could afford to buy a better ship."

"A better ship?" he echoed, putting on a great show of being incensed. "There is no better ship than the Millennium Falcon, sister." Then he gave up the pretense and said, casually, "So, where are you?"

"Naboo," she said. "It's my little sister's birthday. The whole family is here. Oh, and my brother just announced that he's getting married. Married."

"Wow. He's way too young for that," said Han, "Isn't he? What is he, like, fifteen?"

She laughed. "He's the same age as me."

"Oh, is that how twins work? I forgot."

She heard wookiee noises from somewhere outside the view of the holo, and Han said, "Chewbacca says hello. Wants to know when you're gonna give us a new job to do. I guess he spent all his money already."

"You know the New Republic is always looking for recruits, people to fight against the Loyalist Remnant. There is a new initiative being set in place to track down and arrest former Imperial officers who were being investigated for war crimes committed under Palpatine's rule... who have now run away. But that's more a bounty hunter job, really."

Solo grunted. "Well, I should let you go, you know, to talk to whoever it was you were really trying to call."

She just nodded, her chin still propped up on her knees.

"Tell Luke and Red congrats, for me. I assume that's who he's marrying. They're gonna make horrible, dangerous babies someday."

"I'm sure you'll be invited to the wedding," she said, though she wasn't, really. She didn't even know if Luke and Mara were going to have a big wedding with guests or were planning on a quiet family affair. It was too early and from what she could gather, they didn't have any concrete plans yet.

"If there's going to be free food and drinks, we'll be there, won't we, Chewie?" This was followed by an affirming roar.

She couldn't think of anything else to plausibly keep the conversation going, so she said goodbye and watched as Han gave her a little half wave, half salute, before switching off the transmission.

She tried to sleep, but couldn't, so she turned the news feeds back on, watching the chaotic galaxy and all its troubles swim by.
There came a knock, a soft tapping at her door, and she got up to go see who was up at this hour. When she waved open the door, she saw Luke and Mara there together.

"I noticed your light was on," said Luke. "We're going for a morning hike up to the meadow to see the sunrise. Want to come?"

Mara added, "We used to always get up before sunrise and jog around the base at Atollon, then watch the sunrise before breakfast. It's tradition."

"I… no. You two go ahead, you don't have to invite me," Leia said.


Leia looked over at Mara, who made a motion with her hands as if ushering her out of the room.

"Oh, fine," said Leia. "Just let me change my clothes."

She left a note on flimsiplast for C-3PO, who would awake from his nightly shut-down cycle and surely wonder where she had gone. She kept him with her almost all the time; he was her right hand assistant. He had been looking forward to this visit, chattering happily about seeing the other Skywalkers, but most of all, R2-D2. When he did finally see the other droid, (whom Luke had left at Varykino when he and Mara set out for their day-trip to Kaadara) he immediately started arguing with Artoo's insolent binary beeps.

They left the villa and took a path along the lake up towards the mountains, using glowrods to light their way in the pre-dawn darkness. It was about a half hour hike up to the meadow. Leia didn't need to ask which meadow. It was the one their mother always talked about as her favorite spot in all the galaxy, a bright expanse situated on a plateau hedged in by a series of waterfalls that fell into the lake which surrounded the estate. Leia had been there before, on one of her previous visits, and so apparently had Luke and Mara, as they knew the path to follow already.

They got to the meadow just before the sun crested the horizon. They switched off their glowrods and sat in the tall grass, their backs to the upper waterfalls, facing the drop off which led down to the lake.

She couldn't help but remember the mountains of Osallao, where she and Luke had first trained at lightsabers with their father, and Obi-Wan, (whom they had always thought of as Uncle Ben). It was different, of course. The Osallan mountains were colder, taller, more jagged and frost covered than the landscape in this part of Naboo. The Osallan mountains were more like the mountains of Alderaan, another place she had called home. It was warmer here, lusher.

Luke, as if making the same comparisons, put an arm around her shoulder and asked, "Have you ever thought about going home, just to see what it's like, now? To see who's living in our old house, to see if Uncle Ben's cave is the same as it used to be?"

Leia had never thought it possible to go back there, truth be told. None of her family lived there anymore, so it was only a place, less a home than a distant memory of when she was a child. But she could see that Luke liked the idea, so she said, "Maybe. Maybe we could go for a visit, sometime. I'd like to walk by Father's old junk shop, see what's there now."

"Go see the races in the Shalla Canyon," Luke suggested.

"Maybe you just want to drop by and see if Miss Ognoy is still teaching fifth grade," said Mara, teasingly, and he rolled his eyes.
"I like it here," Leia announced. "I can see why Mother missed it. I'm glad she was able to come home."

The meadow was revealed in the sunlight, now, with its bright green grass and the multitude of colorful flowers that thrived in the temperate climate. The waterfalls were sparkling in the early morning sun, small rainbows shining in their spray. Herds of shaak were making their way into the meadow, slow moving, placid creatures come to nibble on the grass and drink from the upper lake.

"Father seems better," said Luke. "At least, he looks more like himself, now."

Leia nodded. It had taken a while. She had checked in on her parents, and Lashmina, every day via hologram since they had gone to Varykino and she had decided to stay in Coruscant. She monitored from afar as her father went from a skeletal vessel of rage and vengeance kept alive by the Force to something like the human man she remembered. He needed Mother and Lashmina close by him to convince him that he required something other than the will of the Force to stay alive.

They wanted her to stay here, with them. They asked, constantly. But she couldn't just turn her back on the galaxy she had helped throw into chaos. She wasn't ready to give herself that break.

She did take a moment to allow herself some small joy, here on her mother's home planet, on a beautiful morning in a sunlit meadow with her brother and her soon to be sister-in-law beside her.

She rested her head on Luke's shoulder and thought about Father and Mother and the others in the villa down below, waking up and greeting the day, making breakfast. There would be pancakes, rashers of shaak bacon, and shuura fruit salad waiting for them when they got back, along with bantha milk, and hot caf or chocolate brewing.

They would gather together, and eat, and talk, and laugh, and be a family again. Whatever came next, she would carry that light within her out into the galaxy.

It would have to be enough.

(end)

Chapter End Notes

I want to thank crowleyshouseplant for beta reading the vast majority of this enormous fic, and for encouraging me to post it in the first place. It's the first real fanfic I wrote and without their enthusiastic response to the first 10 or so chapters I shared privately, I wouldn't have thought I had anything to add to the prequel fic community after so many years. Thank you!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!