The Erosion of the Spirit

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Summary

With the Jedi Order destroyed at the end of the Clone Wars and the Republic swept away, Ahsoka and Barriss must work together to survive and fight back in a galaxy under the Empire.

Notes

Hello and welcome to my attempt to sort through the mass of PTSD, depression, self-hatred, survivor's guilt, regular guilt, stress, anxiety, compartmentalization, and an inferiority complex that is Barriss Offee's messed up head. It's gonna be painful fun!

I figure if the tags and general description of the work don't give you an idea of what's going to be in here, if you're at all bothered by things like war or the myriad psychological problems you'd expect Barriss to have, stick to something else, though I try to be tasteful.

If you just found this fic, took a look at the tags, and are wondering how the hell this is supposed to work out in a way that isn't completely awful, I know, trust me, I know, and I'm taking my sweet time working through every bit of weirdness in this pairing and perform
damage control on that whole mess. Barriss ain't getting off easy or quick.

A note on this fic's relation to canon: I don't really consider this an AU, because I didn't want it to be one, but it became one in spite of my best efforts. I tried to make it line up with the canon continuity as much as possible when I first started writing, which became impossible when the Ahsoka novel came out. Unless I kill off Barriss, or screw with Ahsoka's memories, or some other equally bad solution. Hence the "Formerly Canon Compliant" tag.

When it comes to Legends, I tend to pick and choose elements I like. One thing I need to point out is that unlike in Legends where she's Anakin's age, I treat Barriss as being only one year older than Ahsoka, since she has no canonical age and that seems to be what TCW intended anyway. The events of the Ahsoka novel will have to be ignored, as will anything else that comes out that contradicts me, but I'll still try to make TEotS as consistent with The Clone Wars, Rebels, and everything else as possible.
"200,000 credits for the saber. That’s my final offer, Hondo."

Surrounded by pirates in the uncomfortably dimly-lit base on Florrum, Ahsoka tried to keep a cool head. She’d dealt with these guys enough times to know they weren’t strong enough to handle her, especially without the need to protect others. Besides, it seemed Hondo was in a friendly enough mood to barter with her.

“That is quite a steep price,” he said sardonically before downing a drink, then holding out his glass while a henchman refilled it. For the third time since Ahsoka had arrived. "What makes you believe a simple lightsaber is worth such a fortune?”

“Your willingness to fight me to the death for the crystals inside. I know how valuable they are to the right buyer."

"Ah, yes, that little incident," he said, waving dismissively at her. "Are you still angry about that?"

"And I know how much the Empire is paying for eliminating Jedi, with their lightsabers accepted as proof of death."

Hondo rapped his fingers against the side of his glass, pretending to consider his options before he practically shouted his response.

“I have an alternate proposal! We take you and your lightsabers, accept two separate bounties from the Empire, take the crystals from both of your sabers, and don’t pay you anything!” he said, laughing along with his men and waving them to raise their weapons.

“Well, you’ll run into a few problems with that strategy,” she explained calmly. “The Empire seized all Jedi records, including information on all their lightsabers. They’re all custom built, and imperial bounty officers are using sabers to figure out which specific Jedi were eliminated. They’ll recognize my lightsabers, and won’t pay for me twice.”

Swirling his drink, Hondo's tone became more thoughtful, if still threatening.

"That still leaves the option of turning you in and not paying anything for the privilege."

"The price is 200,000 credits. It’s a good deal, and trying to scam me will cost you a whole lot more."

“And how’s that? Let me guess: you’re holding a thermal detonator?” asked Honda, leaning over and whispering to one of his subordinates. “They always try that, it’s a bluff, every time. I’ve done it at least twice. Maybe three, I was drunker than usual that day.”

“No. I’m holding five thermal detonators,” she said, brandishing the spherical explosives she’d been keeping in her robe, watching the pirates all take a few steps back in the face of enough explosives to turn them all to ash. A few of them successfully managed to inch their way out the door, and started running.

Hondo seemed to be taking the situation a bit more seriously, though he looked unimpressed. He got
off his chair, circling around Ahsoka.

“Always overdoing it, aren’t you, little one? Something learned from your master, I suppose,” he said, watching Ahsoka tense up.

For the most part, she kept looking forward, relying on the Force for awareness so as not to show fear by watching the pirate's every move.

"I'm surprised you'd be so eager to make deals with the Empire."

"I'll admit, I preferred things when the Republic was in charge. It's harder to bribe people now than it was a few months ago. Regardless, the Empire may be conquering worlds, but it's not like they've killed anyone important to me."

"Really? No one? Does that include Katooni?"

Hondo stopped his wandering, turning to glare at Ahsoka from behind those goggles. Though he may play dumb and regularly get drunk, Ahsoka was well aware how smart the pirate really was. He knew what had happened. How every last Jedi at the temple had been slaughtered. Including the children. And however much Hondo might talk about business and its effect on his moods, he wasn't eager to make deals with the Empire. Even assuming they'd keep their end.

For a moment, though Ahsoka had a hard time being sure, he appeared sympathetic.

“I certainly hope you make good use of this oh-so-generous sum when you inflict whatever you're planning onto the Empire,” he said, waving to one of his crew. "Bring her the money."

Ahsoka prowled through row after row of starships for sale, taking a look at their size, age cargo capacity, trying to find the right tool for the task. The one that caught her eye was a G-Class Light freighter. Dark grey and black hull for the most part, with a ring of white painted around the round outer edges of the hull. A powerful-looking dual laser cannon turret was mounted on the starboard side, directly opposite the cockpit. In lightly used condition, too.

Fantastic.

And well within Ahsoka’s rather considerable price range.

The Sullustan owner of the depot, Akkere, approached the potential buyer, eager to make a sale.

“Ah, taking a look at the Eclipse, huh? Real high-class ship.”

Ahsoka glanced over and smirked at the salesman, then turned back to studying the vessel. “I bet you say that about every ship here."

“Only because every ship I sell is high-class!”

The inventory here certainly was impressive, she had to admit. Top of the line freighters, a few luxury yachts, and even some discontinued starfighter models from the early days of the Clone Wars. The only ship on display that didn’t look sleek was a piece of junk YT-1300 freighter shoved into the back.
While the G-Class was pretty expensive, it was the best ship of the lot.

"Well? Would you like a look inside?"

Looking around the ship, all the equipment seemed to be in perfect shape. Nothing corroded. A few components looked like they had been jury-rigged by the previous owner.

The quarters was pretty small, only a single bunk in the room along with amenities like a washroom. Everything function, thankfully, and the bed was surprisingly comfortable.

The main hold provided double the cargo space of the Outrider she had, (which she could trade in for a discount).

Ahsoka had expected some kind of scam, but so far, everything was in order. Everything was clean, no exposed or damaged systems, mostly unmodified and easy to repair.

And it's flat profile meant it was still narrow and maneuverable enough to get around the lower levels of Coruscant.

Not to mention what appeared to be some serious upgrades made to the shields. Whoever the previous owner was, they favored durability.

“I'll take it.”

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CC-7, the astromech the ship had come with, was an unusual design she hadn’t seen before. The hemispherical dome head was fitted onto a small platform which branched outward, then connected to a pair of thin wheels held flush together, on each side a circular tool rack rotating to provide the droid with whatever tool it needed to perform repairs. It was a friendly-looking droid, painted teal and white with a few scuffs revealing grey durasteel underneath, rolling towards her expectantly.

The design ended up being oddly cute, and Ahsoka knelt down to talk to it.

“So, you’re my new droid, CC-7, huh? It’s nice to meet you,” she said, the obvious nickname coming to mind. “Can I call you Cici?”

“Beep beeble beep.”

Ahsoka froze, her smile vanishing as she stared down in confusion at the droid.

“Di-did you just say ‘Beep beeble beep’?”

“No,” the droid said, in a mature, feminine voice, “I mean, um, bloop?”

The two of them stared at each other in silence for a few seconds until the droid burst into electronic laughter and began rolling around the cargo hold.

“Damn, I love doing that.”

“You can talk?!”

“You can talk?”
“I-wha-how can you speak Basic?”

“Oh, please,” said the droid as she rolled over to a workbench with some misplaced tools, shoving them into their correct draws with a manipulator arm. “Protocol droids, battle droids, law enforcement droids, all of them can talk. How hard do you really think it would be to install a Basic-speaking vocabulator in an astromech?”

“Then why doesn’t anyone?”

“Because of a combination of patents keeping the primary manufacturers from building us with them, technician unions wanting to maintain the high value and higher salaries of their binary-speaking members, and good old-fashioned special interests bribing large purchasers like the Republic to pay for unintelligible models, it’s practically impossible to legally buy or build an astromech that speaks Basic.”

“But you’re an exception?” inquired Ahsoka, quickly realizing how strange it was that she’d needed to learn a new language to speak to R2 but not C-3PO.

“Oh, FUCK no. I was illegally modified by a previous owner. She had a learning disability when it came to new languages and couldn’t figure out my damn beeping, so she had to upgrade me so we could communicate. Don’t. Tell. Anyone.” She said, rolling slightly closer with each word to add emphasis. “If the authorities learned about me, I’d need those illegal components removed. And I like being able to talk, dammit.”

“If it’s such a big deal, why explain this to me?”

“You seem trustworthy. And, as a Jedi, you probably want to avoid the attention of law enforcement.”

Ahsoka was shocked for a moment.

*How did an astromech droid figure that out?*

“Don’t worry,” said Cici. “My lips are sealed. Heh, ‘lips’. But you should carry your lightsaber around in a container capable of blocking sensors, a clothe pouch won’t cut it. My scanners were able to find and identify the components no problem.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” said Ahsoka, growing increasingly worried as to how close she’d come to being flagged as a Jedi fugitive before now.

“Anyhow, what’s the job, boss? Shipping? Smuggling? Raiding? Building a droid army to conquer worlds and forge a new empire in your own image? *I have a few ideas that could help with that last one.*”

“Nothing like that. Except for the smuggling, but that’ll come later.”

“Then what’s first?”

“I’m going to break someone out of a maximum-security prison facility controlled by the Empire. How does that sound?”

Even though she’d always been taught droids were deaf to the Force, Ahsoka could swear she felt excitement coming from the little ball of metal.

“Sounds like fun. Dibs on controlling the laser cannon!”
Here are a few notes on the connections to the rest of Star Wars: in case it wasn't obvious, CC-7 is based on this concept art of BB-8, which I thought was pretty cool. I've found it best to think of her sounding like "Bill Cipher as voiced by Jennifer Hale". Also, the ship Ahsoka bought is based on the G-Type light shuttle, a ship from the Old Republic era I've always rather liked. The Eclipse is a freighter, so it's much larger (Millenium Falcon-sized, if not bigger) but the general design is the same.
Down in the lower levels of Coruscant, prison guard captain Marcross relished his drink after a long, boring day's work patrolling corridors. Just as he'd done every night for the past month at this dive. Hardly anyone ever showed up here. Just the way he liked it.

A young Togruta, whom he'd noticed loitering at a table when he came in, approached and sat down at the bar stool next to him. She wore a cloak, but with those horns poking through the hood, it wasn't much of a disguise.

"Aren't you a bit young to be in here?" he remarked without even a glance, not particularly interested in interacting with aliens. Though the fact she'd sat down right beside him when there were ten other empty stools put him a bit on edge.

"You work at that nearby imperial prison, right? 'Special Containment'?" she asked, not looking directly at him.

"Yes. Yes I do," he replied, hand slowly moving towards his sidearm.

The Togruta raised her hand, waving it slightly in front of him.

"You will provide me a list of prisoners and their cell numbers. I work for the Empire. You can trust me."

Marcross could barely control his own movements as he pulled out his work datapad, entering his access code to unlock it.

"Of course. I can trust you. Here's the necessary information," he said, handing classified information over to her.

The other took the datapad, connected it to her own, handing it back to him after a minute of download.

"Thank you. You've done the Empire a great service. Don't mention this to anyone," she said with a final wave of her hand before getting up and exiting with the prison layout and roster.

For the next minute or two, Marcross thought through happened, clutching his head in a vain attempt to fight off a splitting migraine, and decided he was definitely going to mention this to someone.

At the time of his assignment to the prison, he hadn't put much stake in spending time training to resist 'mind tricks' or whatever they were called. But after feeling that little brat toying with his head, he felt glad to at least be prepared enough to remain aware. After paying his bill and leaving the bar himself, glancing around to make sure the Togruta was gone, Marcross pulled out his communicator, trying to contact his superiors.

A Jedi was about to break into their prison, and they were going to be ready for her.
Why. Is it always. Heights? thought Ahsoka as she climbed up through a garbage chute, struggling to apply enough force on the sides to avoid falling back to the recently closed hatch. Timing the entrance had been enough of a pain, she wasn’t staying here a whole day waiting for the next trash pickup to get back out unnoticed.

The only way out is up.

No one else was nearby, she could tell that, and one circular hole to the top of the chute later, she was inside Imperial Special Containment Prison One, one of the first creations of the New Order to deal with dissent and pro-Jedi rebels.

Ahsoka cautiously maneuvered through the stark, utilitarian halls, listening for any nearby guards, prepared to duck behind bulkheads or take longer routes. Security was surprisingly low, with only three guards in multiple cell blocks she’d needed to sneak past.

The deeper she went in, the more she realized something was seriously wrong with this place. It wasn’t that she felt something was off, rather, she couldn’t feel much of anything. She’s experience clouding in the Force before. This was more akin to outright suppression of it.

*It's only nerves*, she reasoned.

*My first completely solo infiltration mission.*

*Or maybe it's the idea of seeing Barriss again.*

Silently moving around one last pair of patrolling guards, she neared the correct room, Section 5, cell 20.

One guard was stationed next to it. Not much of a problem. Ahsoka reached out her hand, ready to throw him against a wall to knock him out, something she’d done dozens of times before.

Nothing happened.

Experimentally trying out her telekinetic abilities on her lightsaber, she found she couldn't use the Force at all.

*It's not nerves.*

Ahsoka considered turning back. This was strange, even for her her experiences. The situation too uncertain, too dangerous.

*Barriss is so close...*

She’d figure it out later. One guard was not going to make her run away, she’d come prepared and well-equipped, and one expertly-thrown electrical grenade shocking him into unconsciousness before he could even react.

As she rummaged through the guard's pockets and took his key card, Ahsoka took a deep breath, opened the cell door, and saw her peer for the first time in almost a year.

A year since she and Barriss stood in that court, surrounded by soldiers, senators, and Jedi. Barriss made her speech, but Ahsoka hardly heard any of it as she'd tried to shut things out and make sense of the disaster around her. The Jedi council, the Republic, her own soldiers, and her best friend all turning against her and each other in this mess the war had created.
While not expecting a warm reunion, she couldn’t have predicted what she would see.

Barriss looked absolutely kriffing awful.

Her disheveled hair had grown well past her shoulders, she was paler, and looked like she hadn’t slept in days. A large imperial crest was emblazoned across the chest of her otherwise featureless grey prison uniform.

And she was even thinner than before. Ahsoka would never have thought that last change was even possible.

Ahsoka could understand her appearance being a shock, but Barriss looked completely out of it. Like she could barely even focus on Ahsoka, dizzily trying to concentrate on her surroundings.

“Barriss—”

As soon as Ahsoka spoke, Barriss snapped to attention, her eyes narrowing and focusing, her demeanor becoming more resolute.

“We need to get out of here, now. Do you have an escape route?” she asked with eerie calmness while swiftly moving around Ahsoka to begin stripping the weapons, helmet, and vest off the guard.

“I, um, yeah, there’s an escape ship waiting for us in the sewers beneath the base. I know the way back, follow me—”

“We can’t go back that way. Every guard will be waiting for us. If we want to get out of here alive, we’ll have to go deeper into the facility.”

Ahsoka was taken back. “What? Why?”

“It’s—hold on.”

Barriss slipped the stolen helmet onto her head, rolled up one sleeve, then took one of the guard’s combat knives and made as precise an incision as she could into her own arm. Ahsoka was aghast, about to stop her from hurting herself more until she realized what Barriss was doing as she extracted a tracking device from her flesh.

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Those things aren’t just trackers, they measure vital signs and have a remotely-triggered tranquilizer injection. If it’s still inside a living body, it may fool security for a few precious moments. Now, we need to get to the heart of the facility if we want to escape,” she explained, grabbing Ahsoka’s hand and pulling her further and further away from the extraction point.

“Why? Barriss, what is going on?”

With a few knives, grenades, and a blaster in hand, Barriss looked back at Ahsoka, expression shielded by the helmet. “Ahsoka, you don’t understand what you’ve done. Did you think you could break me out this easily? This place isn’t a regular prison, it’s where the Empire is sending any Force-sensitive or sympathizer they catch. The second you breached the perimeter, silent alarms triggered, they allowed you to go deeper into the facility, and now they’re waiting for us to try and escape out the way you came in. It’s a trap. An entire facility dedicated to ensnaring any Jedi coming
to the rescue. Haven’t you felt something wrong about this place? Can you even use the Force here?"

*It’s not a problem with this place, not with me. Good.*

“How is this possible?” she asked, becoming a bit more panicked as she ran after Barriss down the corridor, realizing how bad the situation really was.

“I don’t know the specifics of how it works, but I know the cause. Do you have any incendiary grenades?”

“Yes!”

“Good, get them out!”

Looking around, Ahsoka realized how expansive the prison was. There must be hundreds of people in here, if not more. Or there soon would be if the Empire kept cracking down on the smallest acts of defiance.

“If these cells are full of people who oppose the Empire, shouldn’t we break them out? They could help us,” she asked.

“I don’t know how to open them, who’s inside, what they did, or which ones are even occupied. There’s no time.”

Ahsoka ignited her lightsaber, slashing through the control panels of several cells, then looked back as she ran, expecting other prisoners to emerge.

Nothing happened.

“Ahsoka, destroying the control panels won’t open the doors!”

“But I thought-”

“Hand me the grenade!”

Ahsoka was about to ask what the target was, but got the idea soon enough as Barriss lead her to around the corner to an atrium, with a single, enormous tree situated in the center. As they approached the room, the disruption to the Force Ahsoka felt became more and more intense, like a static inside her head.

*Why is there a tree inside a prison complex?*

*What is this place?*

Barriss yanked a grenade from Ahsoka’s belt, hurling it at the plant and watching it catch fire.

“Why did you do that?”

“Because of those,” replied Barriss, pointing at the tree with palpable hostility in her voice.

Spread throughout the branches, Ahsoka noticed a large number of yellow, lizard-like creatures clinging to the tree, none of them fleeing from the spreading flames, strangely. Many of them were being consumed by the fire, only the ones on the lower branches avoiding smoke and immolation, though the fire would spread and consume them eventually.
Barriss wasn’t willing to wait, running up to them with her knife drawn and beginning to cut open every creature in reach.

Ahsoka ignited her lightsaber, hesitating to follow the prisoner’s lead until she realized it was the creatures which were suppressing her connection to the Force.

“What are these things?” asked Ahsoka as she bisected the furry lizards one by one, using her free hand to wave smoke from her face, and noting how their claws were embedded in the wood of the tree, too deep for them to ever move from that spot again.

So that’s why they aren’t trying to escape.

“I don’t know what they’re called, but the Force suppressing bubble they produce encompasses the whole prison. If we’re to have any hope of getting out of here, we need the Force, and we need every last one of them dead,” explained Barriss as she dispassionately gutted the last one within her reach.

“I take it you’ve tried to escape before?”

“Several times, but without weapons, tools, or the Force, there’s no hope, and I was always recaptured before getting far. With all of those things, however, we have a chance,” she said as she used the Force to break the lock on the security door, revealing a squad of guards and droids beyond it. Barriss started shooting immediately, gunning a few down before they could retaliate. “And one way or another, I am not going back!”

As the guards opened fire with stun guns, Ahsoka kept Barriss covered using her lightsaber as the two worked their way towards a niche to provide some defense, but the prison guards were gathering reinforcements and readying to storm the room.

Barriss pulled a thermal detonator from Ahsoka’s bag and propelled it through the air with greater speed than any normal person could possibly throw it, maneuvering it between enemies, and triggering it as it lay in the center of the opposing group, incinerating them all.

The footsteps of dozens could be heard. Coming down every corridor.

Barriss pointed to the corridor they needed to go down, providing cover fire with her blaster Ahsoka pushed both her hands forward and threw the approaching guards down the hall, knocking them off their feet as the two bolted past them.

One guard grabbed Barriss’ leg, causing her to drop her blaster and nearly knocking her down to the floor with the others, letting go only after Ahsoka tapped his shoulder with her lightsaber, painfully burning though a few centimeters of muscle.

Another two got to their feet thanks to that delay, drawing vibroswords and engaging to two fugitives.

Barriss kept on the defensive, avoiding the enemy swordsman while taking the occasional swing with her knife.

Ashoka grinned as she swung her lightsaber at her opponent, expecting to cut through their sword like paper.

Her green blade bounced off the metal, completely ineffective.

Cortosis. This place really is a death trap for Jedi.
The guard was surprisingly difficult to hit, being much more agile than opponents in heavy armor, or clanking droids. The armor they wore appeared to consist of flexible padding rather than solid plates, leaving them with much greater flexibility.

Regular armor was little use against a lightsaber, and this left them much more capable of dodging in a close-quarters fight.

The Force, however, proved too much for the guy, with one push sending him back out of Ahsoka's path.

Turning to help Barriss in her duel, she saw the Mirialan plunge her knife into the screaming guard's forearm, remove it and slice open his neck, then levitate his vibrosword and launch it at the pursuing guards, grazing the side of one and stabbing another through the heart.

Barriss pulled the blaster from the wounded guard's hands and shot him with it.

Ahsoka, too preoccupied trying to escape to waste time being horrified, ran over and cut open the door to an elevator, revealing an empty shaft going all the way down to the lowest level of the facility.

"Hold onto me!" she shouted to Barriss over the blaster fire as she jumped across the shaft, holding onto a small ledge with one hand while embedding her lightsaber into the wall with the other.

This worked for Ventress, it can work for me.

Ahsoka barely got a solid grip in time to withstand the force of Barriss landing on her back, getting a hold on Ahsoka with her legs and left arm while her right kept firing back through the broken door at the guards.

Once stable, Ahsoka let go, the metal walls of the elevator shaft providing enough resistance onto the lightsaber blade to slow their fall until they reached the bottom floor.

"I can't believe that worked," said Barriss.

"Yeah, well you know what they say---dammit, move!" Ahsoka grabbed Barriss' hand and cut through the new door, getting them both to safety a few seconds before the elevator descended from above with a new squad of guards.

Before they could react, Barriss used the Force to throw another grenade into the the middle of the group, then pulled the doors shut. A few seconds later, they were blown back off.

Not wasting any time, one by one, the other five elevators activated, bringing more and more imperials down to stop the escape.

Ahsoka and Barriss managed to keep ahead of the growing swarm of enemies, Barriss leading the way while Ahsoka deflected volley after volley of blaster bolts.

High-frequency screeching blasted through wall-mounted speakers, momentarily deafening Ahsoka as she tried to concentrate and find a way to block out the noise. Barriss, with the guard helmet protecting her ears, was unaffected. Unfortunately, the enemy helmet design didn’t take horns and lekku into account when it came to fitting, leaving Ahsoka to try and power through with high pitched whining grating at her even though she could easily steal one.

One of the guards raised her weapon to shoot Ahsoka, who would be too disoriented to block effectively. Barriss raised her hand to Force-choke her, but whatever training these guards received
must have included resisting distractions like that, because she started wildly shooting regardless.

Barris twisted her outstretched hand. The guard’s head twisted along with it.

The fresh corpse floated in midair and functioned as a shield from the incoming fire as Barriss crushed the speakers projecting the noise.

Deciding one body didn’t provide enough cover, two more guards joined their comrade while Barriss pulled Ahsoka to safety, the latter deflecting shots from their pursuers once again, heading to an access hatch reserved for subsurface patrols.

“This is the only way out into the lower levels.”

Ahsoka brandished her lightsaber. “I’ve got this,” she said, preparing to cut apart the blast door, then instinctively ducking out of the way of a blaster bolt to the head.

“I’ve gotten some practice disabling locking mechanisms. Keep me covered!” said Barriss as she reached out to the door, the internal components audible straining as she applied force.

Keeping between Barriss and the guards, Ahsoka deflected blasts while also stopping incoming knock-out gas grenades in midair. The gas was probably selected to be filtered out by the guard helmets, and even if the grenades were stopped, the fumes would eventually diffuse towards her.

Barris, having taken a helmet for herself, would be perfectly fine. Fine, and left to either abandon her rescuer, or hopelessly try to defend her unconscious body.

Struggling to hold her breath, the thought of that scenario did not fill Ahsoka with confidence.

“Got it!” shouted Barriss as the door slid open, freeing them from the increasingly toxic air of the prison perimeter and exposing them to the marginally less toxic air of the Coruscant lower levels, finding themselves on a small landing platform, with police speeders lined up in rows ready to be taken out to patrol the skies.

Unfortunately, none were active and their security would be too good to hot-wire quickly.

Ahsoka whipped out her wrist communicator, trying to signal the Eclipse to come pick them up.

“Come on, come on,” she said as her comm tried to penetrate the jamming of the prison. “Cici! We’re on level 1313, heading north! We need a pick-up!”

Only static came through the commlink.

“We’re still within range of the prison’s jammers,” explained Barriss. “We need to get out before we can get away.”

After putting the commlink in homing beacon mode to free up her hand, Ahsoka looked around, eventually finding the singular means off of this platform.

The only thing between the two former Jedi and freedom was one flimsy, unprotected, fifteen-meter access ladder connecting the prison’s foundation to the lower level.

"We can't go that route, it'll take too long to get down. We'll be gunned down in seconds,” said Barriss, her voice sounding completely exhausted. Given her physical state, Ahsoka figured she'd been running entirely on adrenaline this entire time.

"I have an idea. Climb down the first few rungs. Trust me!”
Barriss, with some reluctance, obeyed the command as Ahsoka followed her and remained at the ladder’s top, then cut through the welds holding it to the prison landing platform, the ladder bending under their combined weight and tipping over, sending the pair over to the other side of the chasm dividing this lane of the Coruscant underworld and dropping them onto a rooftop.

Exhilarated by that success, Ahsoka was about to shout something mocking over to the guards, then realized they were all right next to their speeders, whereas she and Barriss could only move on foot. They’d be surrounded in moments.

Ahsoka prepared to cut her way into the building beneath them and hope for the best, then heard the distinctive hum of the Eclipse’s engines as the light freighter hovered down through the city, blaster turret blowing apart enemy speeders in a series of impressive explosions before they could take off as it turned and lowered the boarding ramp.

Running through the ship as fast as she could, Ahsoka took control away from the auto-pilot while Cici was undoubtedly getting her time with the gun turret, steering it as fast as possible given the confines of the surrounding structures around the congestion and into the upper levels. Too far away from the prison for its anti-air defenses to reach, they were nearly in out of danger, but still in the heart of the Empire. Ahsoka gunned it, flying straight up into the atmosphere and out of range before the orbiting warships could send any fighters in pursuit.

Hyperspace coordinates were already punched in, Ahsoka having planned the escape path ahead of time, allowing them to jump right past the orbiting battle cruisers the second the Eclipse broke orbit.

“We’re clear!” shouted Ahsoka jubilantly, staring into the bright blue light of hyperspace with satisfaction, heart pounding, turning around to find herself unexpectedly alone in the cockpit.

Cici rolled her way into the room, using an actuator to motion for Ahsoka to follow.

The droid led her to find Barriss, sitting at the boarding ramp, the guard helmet still hiding her face, clutching her knees to her chin. As she stepped closer, Ahsoka could hear her softly repeating something to herself over and over while shaking and looking down at her blood-stained uniform.

“I had to do it.”

Chapter End Notes

For those of you unfamiliar with Legends, those Force-blocking creatures are "ysalamiri", which first appeared in The Thrawn Trilogy. I highly recommend reading it, as those novels are easily the best books in the old EU and the characters which appeared there will be missed. A moment of silence, please.
How did this become my life? thought Barriss as she looked at herself in the mirror, drying her hair off with a towel before grabbing a pair of scissors.

Although her hair wasn’t exactly clean, there being no shampoo on board, it was at least manageable enough to cut down to a more comfortable length, ending up barely gracing her shoulders.

It still appeared messy and uneven, and after a few minutes of snipping away at it, Barriss had to admit defeat.

Changing into the civilian clothes Ahsoka had provided for her, Barriss took a look at herself. They were a decent fit, if a bit looser than she’d prefer, and appeared to have been picked out based on her outfit as a Jedi. Black boots, dark grey pants, lighter-but-still-dark grey long-sleeved shirt, and a long, navy blue jacket with a hood.

Her eyes occasionally glanced over at her discarded prison uniform and guard armor, which were sitting in the corner and really stinking up the place with the smell of her sweat. And the blood from the guards.

Your most recent victims.

She tried to pull the hood up, get back to looking like her old self, fiddling with it until it was apparent it was made for cold weather protection, too small and inflexible for be kept up constantly.

Feeling exposed like this was only slightly more comfortable than dealing with that hood.

She just needed to keep herself under control. She could do it.

No, you can’t.

She felt like smashing the mirror.

Dammit, she can’t see you like this. So disheveled, so unreliable. She won’t trust you.

Then again, she’ll probably never trust you again no matter what you do.

Barriss clutched her head, trying to stop herself from trembling.

Pull yourself together, you idiot.

Ahsoka cautiously knocked on the washroom door.

“Barriss? You’ve been in there a while, are you all right?”

The door slid open instantly, Barriss stepped out into the hall.

“I’m fine.”
She was certainly in better shape, Ahsoka had to admit, hair looking nice cut down to chin-length, and wearing the new clothes Ahsoka had bought for her. It wasn’t much, but she was starting to look like her old self. Plus, she didn’t stink anymore.

“Um, great, I have some food ready in the kitchen, if you want it-”

Her appetite overtaking her usual politeness, Barriss oriented herself in the new environment and headed down the hallway, following the faint smell of food to the small kitchen, eagerly taking one of the meal packs Ahsoka had heated for them and eating vigorously.

Even though the packs had a mostly bland flavor, Barriss gulped it all down like it was the best thing she’d ever eaten, Ahsoka eating along with her, slightly amused by the uncharacteristically poor table manners.

It was good to see some of the green returning to her complexion.

About halfway through the meal, her appetite finally settling, Barriss started to appear a bit uneasy as she realized how impolite and ravenous she must have seemed, slowing down and finally picking up the fork she’d failed to notice.

The two of them sat in tense silence at the table, eyes flitting back and forth between each other and any nearby object, each waiting for the other to bring up the obvious topic of conversation they’d been putting off. Eventually, it was Barriss who managed to work up the nerve.

“Ahsoka, why did you rescue me?”

Ahsoka stopped eating. It was a reasonable question, one she’d been asking herself at every stage of planning the breakout, and one she still didn’t have a particularly satisfying answer to.

*Why did I save her?*

There was the obvious, practical reason: she knew Barriss was alive, and she knew where she was.

That was more than she could say about anyone else.

The clones had been split up and shipped off across the Empire, and probably wouldn’t be friendly if she could find them.

All the Jedi she knew of were dead or missing. The council, the padawans, the generals and commanders in the field, all gone. All dead. Even if she could figure out where others were hiding, it would probably be best to avoid contact right now and not endanger them or herself.

She wanted to believe Obi-Wan and Master Skywalker couldn’t have been killed so easily, though there was no way for her to know for certain.

Padmé was buried on Naboo. Ahsoka watched her funeral procession in person to be sure.

The other senators she was on good terms with were under close observation as a result the Empire’s changing power structure.

Hell, she would’ve even taken help from Ventress, but she’d dropped off the face of the galaxy, too. Rumored to be dead, not that Ahsoka really believed it.

“We’re all that left, Barriss. Believe it or not, I didn’t want you to die wasting away in some imperial prison,” she said bitterly.
And it’s hard to stay angry after you’ve suffered more than I’d ever want you to.

The matter settled, at least for the moment, the two of them went back to quietly eating until they were finished.

After that, they sat in another tense silence for a while until Cici rolled in and broke it.

“Well? Aren’t you going to introduce me, boss?” she said in a chipper tone, much to Barriss’ alarm.

“Right. Barriss, this is CC-7, or Cici, my astromech. Cici, meet Barriss Offee. She was a Jedi padawan the same time I was.”

“Um, it can talk?”

“It can hear, too, lady,” replied Cici petulantly, dome head jerking to look at her.

Trying to be hospitable, Ahsoka got up to prepare another meal.

“If you want more food, I’ve got plenty more of these rations. I’ve heard things about imperial prisons, and figure one meant to house Jedi would be even worse.”

"You know," began Cici, "I may not eat, but I don't spend my time working to maintain the appliances in this kitchen so you can chow down on crummy MREs every night. Look at this girl!" she said, rolling over to Barriss. "She's all skin and bone! Cook something!"

Thanks, what a great first impression you've made.

"Cici, go make sure we're have enough fuel."

Grumbling something about 'meatbags', the droid rolled out of the room and down the hall.

Well, at least she livened things up, thought Ahsoka as she handed Barriss another food pack.

“What have you been doing since you left the Jedi?” asked Barriss in between two large mouthfuls.

“I worked a few odd jobs on Naboo until the end of the war. Since the Empire took over I’ve been making money running supplies under the noses of the imperials to planets that need them.”

“You’re a smuggler?” asked Barriss, her voice containing the first hint of amusement Ahsoka had heard since they’d reunited.

Work with that.

“Well, I’m a criminal,” she said slouching in her chair, pretending to act tough. "With the Empire in control, I’ve been making shipments to different groups trying to resist their authority. Be a thorn in Palpatine’s side."

“Classic you.”

“Well, it was either that or join the circus, and I’d rather not be entertaining the Ohnaka gang again.”

“Not the occupation I would’ve expected after…” that small grin forming on Barriss’ face vanished as she recalled exactly why Ahsoka wasn’t a Jedi any longer.

Dammit.
“Let me show you around,” said Ahsoka, trying to switch gears and pulling Barriss by the hand around the ship.

“What we’re flying in is a G-Class light freighter. It cost a bundle, but I couldn’t break you out with the older model I was flying. Not fast enough, too old and unreliable to evade the Empire.”

“How did you pay for all this?”

“By selling off my short lightsaber. The crystal alone is worth a fortune, and the Empire accepts the hilt as evidence to receive generous bounties for killing Jedi. It makes things easier for me if the Empire thinks I’m dead.”

“You sold your lightsaber for me?”

“It’s not like I’m left unarmed without the shoto,” said Ahsoka, downplaying the act and tapping on the main lightsaber attached to her belt, leading Barriss into the cockpit, “and this ship is a huge step up, anyway. I can haul more cargo in less time with it.”

“Who do you work for, anyway? Not to sound unimpressed, but I doubt you could be negotiating contracts for illegal shipments to rebelling planets all on your own. You're not Black Sun, are you?”

“The organization of smugglers I work for is keeping their heads down. I get contacted, I get jobs, I do them. And they know my preferred clientele. I’ve only been taking work for the last two months, and their leader isn’t eager to show his face to newbies like me with the Empire hunting down any opposition.”

As she’d described her employment situation, Barriss appeared to be getting more and disconnected from what was around her, lost in her own thoughts.

"Is something wrong?"

The other’s eyes glanced up, not angry, simply exhausted with everything.

“You know there is. We’re going to fly around the galaxy, and we’ll do what, exactly? Act like everything’s okay? You want to ignore what happened? What I did?”

Well, I knew this was coming.

There are more important things right now.

“Barriss, I need help against the Empire. The whole galaxy needs help,” Ahsoka explained as she waved out to the stars outside the canopy, dreading the topic even though she knew it had to be brought up eventually. No choice except to power through it. “You hurt me, Barriss. Horribly. I haven’t forgotten. But I don’t have the luxury of giving a damn right now. Planets are being ground down by the Empire, everyone else I know is either dead or out of reach, and a Sith Lord now rules the galaxy. You want to sulk? Pick a drop off location, because you’re not staying on board. You want to be punished? I’ll take you back to Coruscant, and you can go back to your cell. You want to fight back against someone who deserves it this time? Then come with me. Believe it or not, I’d be glad for your help. Each time I get weapons or resources to people who need them, it turns south fast and I wind up alone trying to escape from the Imperial Navy. Eventually, my luck will catch up with me. I need a partner, and most smugglers qualified for the position would sell me out to the Empire if they found out who I was.”

After a moment of consideration, and while still visibly uncomfortable at the whole prospect, Barriss sat down in the copilot’s seat and buckled up, much to Ahsoka’s relief. “Fine. I’m in. What’s our first
job going to be?"

“A shipment of five thousand kilos of bacta to the Umbaran militia. They retook large portions of their planet after the Republic was usurped, they need medical supplies to hold the line against the Empire, and I’m going to make sure they get them.

“After we fought together trying to take that planet for the Republic, now we’re helping to protect it for the Umbarans?”

“Welcome to the galaxy under the New Order. Old enemies have to help each other because imperial domination will be so much worse. You up for it?”

Barriss nodded meekly, and with that, Ahsoka punched in the coordinates and sent the *Eclipse* into hyperspace.
Jedi Knightmare

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Ahsoka started into the swirling blue and white vortex of hyperspace, thinking endlessly over the same topic.


"Ahsoka, what are you doing?" asked Barriss.

Snapping out of her space out, Ahsoka realized she'd been making 'eeehhh' sounds without noticing.

"Nothing, I'm fine," she said, glancing over their flight path.

The trip to Umbara would last at least twelve hours, and after the day she'd had, Ahsoka was eager to get some sleep before running an imperial blockade.

"I'm going to bed."

Walking through her ship, Ahsoka's mind raced, thoughts scattering, trying to decide how to deal with the new situation.

*I don't want to be mad at her anymore.*

*Was I ever even mad at her? I only felt hurt.*

*She hasn't done anything to earn forgiveness for what she did.*

*Then again, if she hadn't framed me, I never would've left the Jedi.*

*And I'd be dead along with the rest of them.*

*Accidentally saving my life does not absolve her. Neither does the fact that the six Jedi she killed would likely have died later, anyway.*

*She was right. Palpatine used us. We really were fighting for the dark side.*

*That's a technicality. She had no idea what was really happening.*

*Keep an eye on her, see how she handles herself, work from there.*

After brushing her teeth, Ahsoka headed to the crew quarters, only to find Barriss standing in the hallway, staring blankly into the room, as Ahsoka approached and tried to figure out what had her attention.

Still unused to the ship after only two days, Ahsoka hadn’t taken into account the previous owner removing the other bunks to make room for some extra shelving space and an unnecessarily large dresser, leaving only one bunk for the pilot.

Not at all interested in this latest bit of drama, Ahsoka walked past her new ally, and laid down.

“*I'll take the floor,*” said Barriss, still standing awkwardly in the dorrway.
Ahsoka moved as far to one half of the bed as possible, lying on her side facing away from Barriss, only looking back at her from the corner of her eye. “Come on.”

“I don’t think—”

“Barriss, I didn’t break you out of prison to make you suffer back pains and freeze to death on the floor of my ship. We’ll pick up a second bunk in the port tomorrow, for now, we both need rest, let’s not make this any more awkward than it has to be.”

Begrudgingly, Barriss lay down on the free half of the bunk, the two of them trying to get comfortable in the small space until they wound up back to back.

“Good night.”

“You too.”

It took a while, but eventually, Ahsoka managed to get to sleep.

Right next to the girl who nearly got her executed for treason.

*Sweet dreams.*

The skyline of Coruscant was as immense as ever, spires reaching into the lower atmosphere stretching across the entire horizon, the network of metal seemingly going down and down forever. Pinpoints of light, endless looping lines of them, moved on and on at such distances Ahsoka couldn't keep track of them.

Gazing out from the high rise, she felt relaxed for the first time in weeks, feeling a connection to the lives around her, to the galaxy.

Padmé approached and put her hand on Ahsoka’s shoulder, trying to reassure her.

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m not sure. Better? I’ve been a part of the order for as long as I can remember, now, everything’s uncertain.”

“It’ll be okay, Ahsoka. You’re starting a new chapter in your life, and it’ll be frightening at first. When you find your place, you’ll wonder what you were even worried about. And you will find it. I know it’s not the same but trying to represent Naboo after the Trade Federation invaded wasn’t an easy change. Protecting my people within the broader politics of the Republic is something I’m still struggling with.”

“Did the people you worked to protect all turn on you?”

Appreciating the different situations, Padmé kept trying to find a way to empathize.

“I know what happened with Barriss, what she did to you, has been difficult, but you’re not alone in this.”

“Of course I’m not alone. I know there are people I can count on. The problem is, now there’s one
Before Padmé could reply, the front door chimed, drawing their attention as Threepio jerkily walked over to answer it.

“Oh, Master Anakin! It is so good to see you! Senator Amidala and Mistress Ahsoka have been expecting you, eh, oh, my word—” said the droid as Anakin brushed past him.

“Ahsoka, Padmé, I’m glad you’re here, I’ve got a surprise,” he said, earning a cautious smile from Padmé.

Ahsoka watched and smiled as Padmé hugged her ‘friend’, before Anakin turned to approach his former padawan.

“I brought you something. The clones recovered it from the lower level of the city,” he said as he eagerly held out his hand.

Offering Ahsoka back her lightsaber.

“Even if you’re not using it right now, it belongs to you. No one else deserves to wield it, and its craftsmanship is too good to leave sitting in a draw somewhere in the archives,” he said adamantly.

With some hesitation, she reached out and accepted the saber.

“Thank you, Anakin.”

“Oh, that’s not all,” he said happily, presenting her with a small box. “It’s a new crystal and enough components to rebuild your short lightsaber. Huyang provided me with the specifications.”

With a longer pause than before, Ahsoka accepted the second gift as well, setting the two sabers aside, before slowly looking up at her former master, working through the lump in her throat.

“Anakin, I’m not coming back to the order.”

That optimistic smile faltered for a split second before trying to look accepting of the situation.

“I figured you’d feel that way. Please, take the sabers anyway. It’s a rough galaxy out there. You’ll need weapons you know how to wield to protect yourself.”

“These might actually make things even more dangerous. Marking me as a Je—” she stopped herself, the growing pause making her feel more and more awkward as she decided whether she wanted to be accurate and true to herself, or to spare her old master’s feelings. “former Jedi,” she finished.

“Member of the order or not, you’re a cut above most knights I know. And you can still help win the war.”

“I don’t know how I’d—”

“The Republic Army accepts volunteers. As generals, I’m sure Master Kenobi and I could get you assigned to work among our forces.”

“I don’t think—”

"You would not believe how frustrating Master Kenobi can get without you around to talk some sense into him. And I know Rex and the rest of the clones miss you. Wolffe wanted me to tell you he’s sorry about what happened in the lower levels."
"If - 

"Even if you’re not a Jedi Commander acting as part of the order, maybe you could get another rank in the army. Chancellor Palpatine feels terrible about everything that occurred, and would pull some strings to get you back into the fight without needing to go through basic training like some raw recruit. The Republic needs experienced warriors like you, Ahsoka, if you would-

"Anakin!" shouted Padmé, putting herself between him and Ahsoka, shaking her head to tell him to stop.

Ahsoka stepped back around her, hoping to keep the conversation calm.

“I promise I’ll think about it. The war won’t be lost without me around, and I need some time away from it. I need to think.”

“You’re welcome to stay here as long as you need, Ahsoka,” said Padmé, “and if you need to be somewhere more remote, I could lend you the keys to my home on Naboo.”

“Thank you, I’ll keep that in mind. Padmé, could you please leave us for a moment?” asked Ahsoka.

Glancing between the pair, Padmé decided to oblige. “Of course. I’ll be right outside.”

As she walked out the door, she shot Anakin one final glance that amounted to ‘Please, tone it down. Or else’.

Instead of getting upset, Anakin did his best to lighten up, albeit struggling to do so.

“What do you need to think about, exactly?” he asked. “I’d like to help, if I can. Please.”

“About Barriss. The war. The Jedi.”

“After what she did to you? I wouldn’t worry about that traitor,” he said bitterly.

“It’s just...I think the Jedi are moving closer to the dark side than they’d like to admit.”

“You can’t think she was right about us!” Anakin said critically, his voice losing its earlier cheer.

Ahsoka saw the anger in his eyes growing, and wasn’t sure she wanted to talk about this with him. “I don’t know what to think right now.”

The implications didn't go over his head. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means the Jedi Order, a group dedicated to preserving peace throughout the galaxy, is conducting war operations.”

"It's a bad situation, but we're doing the best we can! Just because we're fighting doesn't mean we want to, or we chose war over other options. Countless more people would die if we didn't take command. We didn't start the war, and we're not going to let the Republic be destroyed because of our inaction! I can fight, and I will continue fighting, for those who can't."

"I know...I know," she said weakly. "But the contradictions of the order, the choices the council is making, it worries me."

“You’re turning your back on the Jedi, on the Republic, and on me.”

The accusation hit a chord, and Ahsoka walked away from Anakin, as if the extra few steps could
make that guilt go away.

“Anakin, I can’t be your apprentice anymore.”

“You wouldn’t have to be!” said Anakin desperately. "You can still become a full Jedi Knight like the council promised.”

“That isn’t the problem! I can’t go back to the order. Not with the way things are,” said Ahsoka, watching her former master become more and more agitated until he finally glared at her, clenching his fists.

“You’re exactly like Barriss! Turning your back on everything you’ve ever fought for, all the people who cared about you, and for what? To prove some kind of point?”

“How could you say that?” she said, terrified.

The apartment seemed to be growing smaller, darker, as the seconds ticked by.

"Don't become my enemy, Ahsoka."

Ahsoka tried to edge her way around her former master towards the door, only for him to step in front of her and block the path.

She started trembling slightly, feeling more and more intimidated by Anakin. Always in his shadow. Never getting anywhere near as strong, no matter what she did.

“I’m sorry, Anakin. I’m not staying.”

Anakin looked dismayed for a second, eyes lowering to the floor, then staring back up at Ahsoka with a cold fury she’d never seen from him.

“Then you will die.”

He ignited his lightsaber, a red blade emitted from the hilt, and swung it at her neck.

And then, she woke up.

Opening her eyes to the dark of the ship, Ahsoka’s heart was racing.

It raced even faster when she realized the way she was sleeping.

Her arms were wrapped around Barriss, who in turn had her head lying on Ahsoka’s chest and one arm squeezing her waist.

Slowly, keeping as quiet as possible, Ahsoka moved her arms away from her companion, and tried to think of a way to get out of this position without humiliating Barriss or making their whole situation more awkward in general.

*Act asleep, wait for her to wake up, she’ll get up first and act like nothing happened, we need never speak of this.*
Bam. Done. Brilliant plan, Ahsoka.

Ahsoka laid still for the next hour and a half, occupying her time thinking about how to oppose the Empire. With Barriss there, their combined connection to the Force could make smuggling supplies a whole lot easier. Work in conjunction to mind trick inspectors, meditate to predict routes to avoid patrols. And worst case scenario, she could finally man the weapons and fight back without the cheap auto pilot program letting enemy fighters blow holes in her ship.

It felt good to have her there, to Ahsoka’s surprise.

She felt Barriss shivering, and heard her…she heard her…

Is she crying?

Sure enough, Barriss was audibly sniffling and letting out quick, unsteady breaths.

The arm around Ahsoka’s waist squeezed tighter, pulling her closer.

Okay, emergency, this is getting messed up, gotta speed things along.

Ahsoka stirred slightly, acting like she was waking up, prompting Barriss to quickly shift and get out of bed, standing at the bedside for a couple seconds before, to Ahsoka’s surprise, speaking.

“Ahsoka, are you awake?”

“Ugghhh, yes, don’t want to be,” she said with some fake grogginess thrown in. It was technically true.

Ahsoka got up slowly, sitting on the bed, and hesitantly looked up at Barriss, unsure what to expect.

The result certainly came as a surprise.

There were no streaks of dried tears. No puffy, bloodshot eyes. No signs of distress at all.

Barriss’ expression and body language were completely neutral.

Less than a minute before, Ahsoka could feel pure and utter misery radiating from her.

I didn’t imagine all that!

“We should get to work, cargo’s not going to inventory itself,” she said to a rather dumbfounded Ahsoka.

The Mirialan moved gracefully through the ship, Ahsoka following, keeping an eye on her, until realization hit.

This isn’t the first time she’s covered up her emotions like that.

“Um, did you sleep all right?” asked Ahsoka.

Going from tears to calm in a matter of seconds wasn’t something you can do without a whole lot of practice and control.

“Yes, I slept fine,” answered Barriss, not even bothering to glance up from her datapad as she went through rows of crates.
Ahsoka couldn’t tell if she was lying or not. Barriss acted weird after waking up, who knew what she’d dreamt about last night?

“Thank you for not letting me sleep on the floor,” Barriss continued, interrupting Ahsoka’s train of thought.

“Not a problem.”

Anakin had told her Barriss was a pretty poor liar when confronted. If she could probe the subject a little more, maybe Ahsoka could get a better handle on what was going on.

Though there isn’t much reason to inquire without acting off-putting.

“Did you...have any dreams last night, Ahsoka?”

Or she could bring up the topic on her own. That works, too.

“Oh, um, yes, I did. Anakin and Padmé were there, and they had my lightsabers, aaaaannnd,” she replied trying to recall the images, only grasping at a few figments. “I don’t really remember my dreams. Did you dream of anything?”

“No,” answered Barriss sharply, a pulse of guilt spreading out through the Force, so intense it made Ahsoka shiver.

Chapter End Notes

Step one: use the 'there is only one bed' fanfic cliche.

Step two: add pain.

Step three: drama!

I just realized I never explained the title of this story. In case you're curious, it comes from this discussion with every Star Wars fan's favorite robotic psychopath, regarding the effect of war on Jedi. I thought it appropriate for Barriss' condition, and some of the things explained factor into how I'm approaching this whole plot.

Anyway, the daily updates stop here. Can't keep moving this fast.
"We'll be dropping out of hyperspace in ten minutes!" shouted Ahsoka, not sure if Barriss heard her from wherever she was on the ship. "I could use your help guiding the ship through the blockade!"

No response came.

Not particularly worried, but focused on not getting shot down as they came in for a landing, Ahsoka headed out looking for her new partner, listening and hearing voices from the main cargo hold.

"How's it looking?" came Barriss' voice.

"Almost done, keep still," replied Cici, somewhat impatiently.

Ahsoka found the two behind a stack of bacta crates, Barriss sitting down with her back turned while Cici was doing something to her face.

"What's are you two doing?"

"One second, boss...there you go, Barriss," said Cici as she retracted her laser, waiting expectantly for a moment, then sped away in a huff. "You're welcome."

The little operation now complete, Barriss stood up and turned around to face Ahsoka.

"Well? How do I look?"

None of the structure of Barriss' face being any different, it took a second for Ahsoka to realize what the change was.

All of her tattoos were gone.

"Well?" prodded Barriss.

"You look...nice," she answered, not untruthfully. "I don't understand. Why?"

"We're on the run from the Empire, and my tattoos are too easy a means of identification. They needed to be removed," she explained, cringing slightly as she poked at her slightly singed skin.

"Aren't tattoos important to Mirialans?" said Ahsoka, trying to recall all the explanations Barriss gave her about what all those diamonds were supposed to represent. Skills she'd learned, obstacles overcome, talents demonstrated. She'd sounded so proud. "You worked hard to earn them!"

Barriss simply shrugged at the alarm of her companion.

"It doesn't matter anymore," she said curtly as she walked towards the cockpit. "Shall we?"

Their destination was an Umbaran base situated in the center of a mountain range, the geography
expansive enough the peaks were visible even from orbit as Ahsoka and Barriss stared out across space.

Sharing the geosynchronous orbit with them was a *Venator*-class Star Destroyer, the Imperial Crest freshly painted on its sides.

Barely any debris was in orbit in the surrounding space, meaning the 'power down and drift with the current' trick wasn't going to work here.

Ahsoka raised shields and cranked the engines to full power, giving the warship a wide berth. They'd managed to sprint beneath the ship, out of the field of fire of the main cannons, but intercept craft were already emerging from the main hangar, and the *Eclipse* couldn't outrun military starfighters.

A squad of eight V-wings were incoming, laser cannons blaring.

"Barriss, you pilot the ship. I'll take the gunner's position!" shouted Ahsoka as she dashed to the main gun waiting at the other side of the ship.

"On it!"

The *Eclipse*'s turret was an impressive piece of engineering. Two axes of rotation, so in addition to being able to function as a common turret, it could rotate to positions on the top and bottom of the freighter, giving it a tremendous field of fire only blocked by the body of the ship. Not to mention a high-efficiency cooling system giving it a high rate of fire without the risk of overheating.

That wasn't something ordinarily available. And probably not entirely legal.

She kept thinking about the unusually high-tech specs of the ship for a moment, until the first shots of enemy fire got her mind back on track.

Barriss had taken them into a steep dive, heading straight down towards a cluster of craters in the planet below, twisting and spinning to dodge the incoming weapons fire until they were nearing the lower atmosphere. All around them was debris from dozens of capital ships, brought down during the in-atmosphere battle in the Clone Wars, providing a lot of cover for the smaller ships.

The enemy pilots seemed to be a bit less gutsy than Barriss was, pulling up much sooner while she only leveled off within meters of the ground. Which would force them to keep flying in other directions, putting them within the sights of their turret.

Now that they were finally flying level, Ahsoka got ready to fight back, taking aim as the freighter moved through an artificial chasm of wrecked steel.

The enemy fighters might not be courageous, but they weren't stupid, either, all splitting off in different directions to prevent the *Eclipse* from attacking all eight of them from behind simultaneously. One of them ended up being the lucky first to get gunned down, as Ahsoka readied her weapon.

However, every time she got a shot lined up, the ship jerked to the side, making her miss. Those weren't acts of evasion, either, the other V-Wings hadn't come around for a pass yet. Barriss was deliberately throwing off her aim with her maneuvers.

*What is she doing?* thought Ahsoka right before jumping back as a stream of laser fire flew past the ship. Two, no, three fighters were behind them, pounding away at the shields. The *Eclipse* had tough shields, but couldn't take a beating like this for much longer.

Five fighter were behind them now. No amount of dodging could avoid the barrage.
The tactical readout hooked up to the turret showed the shield stress plummeting.

Barriss took a hard left into the hangar of a wrecked Separatist battleship, flying through its damaged superstructure until stopping so fast Ahsoka's lekku were flung in front of her face from the momentum.

"Ahsoka," came Barriss' voice through the comm, "shoot at those supports in front of us!"

With no other options or ideas, Ahsoka followed the instruction, weakening the already damaged supports holding the ruined ship together. Half the wreck seemed to collapse, exposing them to the open air and also creating a massive dust cloud shielding them from sight as the freighter landed and powered down to avoid enemy scans.

The fighter pilots seemed to have mistaken the damage for them crashing, the sound of their engines getting further away until everything was silent.

Now that the ship was no longer in danger, Ahsoka undid the safety harness of the turret, and stormed through the ship to have a word with the pilot.

Barris was smiling. Beaming, actually, as she got out of the pilot's seat and happily waved for Ahsoka to take it back.

"What the hell are you so happy about?" asked Ahsoka, irritated by the brush with death and suffering a minor case of whiplash.

"We got through!" replied Barriss, unaffected by the other's irritation.

"Yes, we did, no thanks to you. Why were you making me miss? We nearly died because I couldn't shoot those fighters down!"

"You didn't need to shoot them down," she replied, as if the reasoning couldn't be more obvious.

"What are you talking about?"

"We got through, we're dropping off the supplies, and we did it without violence. Isn't that great!"

"Those were imperial pilots!"

That comment finally put a dent in Barriss' weird satisfaction.

"They were people, and as I keep saying, we didn't need to hurt them."

"Right, so now those fighters can go off and kill everyone on the ship that come by to make a run after ours, which will also hurt the people who won't receive those supplies! And then, when they've conquered Umbara, they'll move onto the next center of rebellion, and kill people there!"

The joy Barriss was feeling finally fell apart as the long-term consequences of her attempt at mercy sunk in, and she sat down in her seat.

"I didn't want to hurt anyone," she said quietly.

"Since WHEN!?!"

Ahsoka frustration vanished as she watched Barriss' mood shift from happiness back to the regular lack of expression she'd displayed thus far.
"Barriss, I, I'm so sorry," she said, reaching out slightly, but not getting any reaction, until she took the controls and powered up the ship.

Neither one of them said anything, or even glanced at the other, as Ahsoka flew the ship down to the landing site.

Chapter End Notes

Important thing I want to make clear through this fic number 1: Barriss doesn't like killing people, and never did.
The Umbaran militia's base they were making the delivery to was between the enemy lines and a military town down the road, blocking access to the largest passes through the mountain range, along with supplying air support to any conflict within five hundred kilometers. It was several times larger than the airfield Rex had shown Ahsoka during the last battle here.

Even though it had been less than two years since then, it felt like an eternity. Everything was different.

For starters, they were now helping the Umbarans. Ahsoka froze momentarily, belatedly realizing the possibility that some of the soldiers in this base might somehow recognize her or Barriss. But she figured that their role was primarily in the space battle, and everyone in the galaxy was under the impression that the Jedi were exterminated, even if that wasn't as true as imperial propaganda would like people to think. Plus, they didn't quite look the same as they did two years ago.

_Maybe it really was a good idea for Barriss to get rid of her tattoos._

With their clearance provided upon landing in a nearby airfield relegated to civilian craft, the two of them were free to move around the courtyard, finding their way to the quartermaster, who was busy managing her supplies.

"Excuse me," said Ahsoka, her crude stock alias serving as well here as everywhere else. "My name is Shaak Ashla, I'm here to drop off the medical supply run."

"Ah, you made it. Good," said the senior officer with a sigh of relief as she ran through the list of scheduled shipments, "The delivery only permitted a single visitor's pass into this base. Who's your friend?"

"This is Jana Bogan, a new partner of mine," replied Ahsoka, pleased to see Barriss nod politely and not show any surprise or annoyance with her alias. Ahsoka had planned to run names past her sooner for her approval, but neither of them had felt all that talkative during the flight over.

"Fine. I suppose it's not worth reprimanding a decent smuggler over."

"Great. Here's an access key so your people can offload the cargo. My astromech will oversee things."

"Hold on. Colonel Allar in charge of this base would like to speak with you, if you two are interested in more work for our cause."

Very much interested in the Umbaran's defense, Ahsoka and Barriss spent several boring minutes lounging around the storage depot until a relatively young-looking Umbaran approached, flanked by several militiamen, their transparent helmets providing them a steady supply of stimulants. Ahsoka had to wonder how consistent drug use like that would catch up with those soldiers.

They already seemed pretty creepy.

"You're the lucky smugglers who made the supply run past an orbiting Star Destroyer?" asked the officer.
"It wasn't luck, thought Ahsoka. Well, okay, it was sort of luck, but we only needed it because of an internal dispute, not because we were outmatched."

"That's us," she replied.

The colonel nodded. He had that typical military reserve, not one to dispense praise to people simply for doing their job, but seemed genuinely appreciative. "The bacta you've delivered could save the lives of hundreds of soldiers."

At the mention of saving lives rather than ending them, Ahsoka stole a few glances of Barriss, trying to gauge her reaction. Her face didn't change, but Ahsoka took some satisfaction in seeing her shoulders relax a bit.

"We're happy to help you against the Empire. I take it you want to arrange more supply runs?"

"Not into Umbara. We have a shipment of fifty plasma cannons to send to Serenno, to help them endure their siege."

*Count Dooku's homeworld?*

Barriss kept an impressively straight face at the development, though Ahsoka could sense her unease at the idea of aiding former Separatist worlds. Not that either of them wanted the Empire to gain any more ground, but it was rather contrary to what they'd spent a significant portion of their lives working for. But her companion kept silent through the discussion.

"What's the payment?" asked Ahsoka.

"Ten thousand credits upon delivery."

"We'll take it."

"Excellent. The supplies will be ready in three hours. I recommend not staying any longer than necessary."

"Why not?"

As if to make the point for him, the blasts of turbolasers from orbiting ships lit up the sky, striking some faraway target.

"If you don't mind me asking, colonel, with all the foreign military presence here, could you give me some idea of the overall situation? It would help me figure out exactly what we'll be up against when we depart."

It was a plausible reason to want information, and it could legitimately help in smuggling, but Ahsoka was really concerned with how various planets were resisting the Empire. Every planet she'd been to was barely holding on, all of them losing ground against the seemingly limitless resource of the Empire. With their overall superior technology, the Umbarans were a lead candidate for the first successful resistance of imperial conquest.

The colonel, unfortunately, wasn't forthcoming. "I appreciate your paid help, but the current military situation are not the concern of foreign civilians," he replied coldly, turning away and getting back to his duties.

"It seems we'll be here for a few hours. What should we do in the meantime?" asked Barriss.
Ahsoka’s eyes wandered around the area. Curious as she was about the war against the Empire, they had no excuse to explore the base. Pushing their luck with isolationists like the Umbarans, especially members of the military, was a bad idea.

The Umbarans were wasting no time getting the bacta off the Eclipse. Meanwhile, Cici had been picking debris out of the various crevices in their ship's hull. She stuck to droidspeak while interacting with the Umbaran workers to avoid attention, not that it would matter on a rebelling planet. Ahsoka and Barriss walked past the ship to find her angrily bleeping at a forklift driver over a wall that had been dented while unloading supply crates. She had things under control.

With nothing better to do, Ahsoka waved to the road, glowing lines leading them into the fog.

"Come on. Let's check out the town."

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All her travels across the galaxy had taught Ahsoka one consistent fact about galactic civilization: every single settlement on every single planet, no matter how desolate, had at least one place the locals went to get drunk. And eat. But mostly get drunk.

Granted, Ahsoka and Barriss were both below the legal drinking age of most planets and wouldn't be allowed in, but their stomachs were growling and they'd been lying from the moment they landed.

Cici's right, I need to learn to prepare food other than prepackaged rations.

Walking into 'The Wobbling Vixus', Ahsoka noticed one uncommon trait of the place: she and Barriss were the only offworlders here.

Not that the management seemed to be bothered. The barkeep seemed in good spirits, despite the looming threat of the Empire, waving them over to a table close to him as he scrubbed the counter.

"What can I get you two?" he asked.

"What do you have that tastes good, and is warm?"

"Fresh order of banshee wings."

"We'll take two."

"Any drinks?"

"No thanks."

The man was about to send their order to the kitchen, Barriss signaled him to wait.

"Excuse me, can you tell us a bit about the invasion?"

Pleased for an excuse to chat with unusual customers, the barkeep smiled at her.

"The planet's been under attack constantly for the last two years. First by the Republic, now the Empire. Heh! The corruption of the Republic was the whole reason we seceded to begin with. Now look where the galaxy's at. What good is bein' right if you're gonna get attacked anyway?"
"Do you think your militia can hold the line?" asked Ahsoka.

"I'm not too worried. It certainly hasn't been easy, but the militia'll have the Empire off our world soon. Those military types like to be all secret and professional, but soldiers come in here all the and start blabbing things," he said proudly as he leaned in closer. "Like how yesterday, they assassinated the admiral commanding the enemy fleet," he said before leaving them to take in the information.

The news put a grin on Ahsoka's face as well. This was the best scenario she'd found since the Empire had arisen. Surviving while outnumbered by their army was one thing, but killing a key military leader? The Umbarans had grit. Then again, she'd experienced their martial skill firsthand, so it wasn't a huge surprise.

A few minutes of taking in the atmosphere later, Barriss was vigorously scarfing down her food, still needing to add a few more pounds before she was back to her old weight.

"He's right, you know," she said quietly.

"Who, the barkeep? About what?"

Conscious of where they were, Barriss lowered her voice. The place wasn't even half full, but she wasn't dumb enough to raise her voice about the coming subject.

"The Republic was corrupt. Don't you get it, Ahsoka? What's happened here, we're partly to blame. We attacked this world two years ago, and left it like this. All we did was help spread destruction."

"We were used by the Sith."

"The incompetence of the Jedi does not absolve them."

*You being incidentally correct about certain things doesn't absolve you, either.*

But Ahsoka kept that thought to herself focusing on getting Barriss to see the reality of the situation.

"Well, now we have an opportunity to help make things right. Do you want to take it, or not?"

"Of course I do. But will aiding others to fight and kill actually defeat the Empire? The Sith are dominating the galaxy through the dark side; how is more death the way to defeat them?"

"If they're dead, they can't hurt anyone. What, do you want to try and make peace with the people who slaughtered the Jedi?"

"That's not what I--Please, Ahsoka, I don't want to fight about this. I need a moment."

Frustrated by the direction the conversation was going, Barriss stood up and walked away from the table, looking beaten down by the discussion.

Barriss stared at herself in the washroom's mirror. This was the first time she'd seen her new appearance since she'd had that droid take a laser to her face earlier today. All that blank, featureless skin. The symbols of her achievements wiped away.

*You can't win.*
She'd screwed up. She knew that. She'd been hating herself for what happened every day for the last year. She'd known it was wrong while she'd been doing it. What she hadn't known was what else to do. What the right thing to do in that situation was. Back then, she couldn't see a way out.

_The way out was obvious. You simply refused to see it. Leave the Jedi, like Ahsoka did. Instead, you decided to become a murderer._

_At least on the battlefield, your opponent can fight back. You targeted maintenance workers._

_You were too scared to leave, too hurt to stay. Afraid of the galaxy outside the safety and shelter of that temple._

_She's stronger than you are. She doesn't even need you. What good are you if you won't fight back?_

A slight tremor shook the floor, the impact of some explosives in the distance. Somewhere, the Empire was attacking Umbara. Someone was dead. Probably people on both sides. If the Empire couldn't be stopped, more would die every day.

_Ahsoka's right. You should've helped her destroy those fighters._

_Other people are going to suffer and die because of your weakness._

_How many does that make?_

Barriss splashed water onto her face, as if the shock of cold liquid could sweep away her frustration.

When she opened her eyes again, she saw the Geonosian worm writhing around in her open mouth. Instinctively, she covered her mouth with her hands, then got a grip on her head, trying to shut out the sensation of the worm crawling around inside her skull, slithering up her nose. Something new happened this time, she could here laughter echoing around her, mixed with the piercing noise of blaster shots.

_It was too much._

She moved her hands the sink, barely able to support herself with her knees on the verge of buckling, enduring the agony in her head.

The experience was interrupted when a young Umbaran woman came into the restroom, finding Barriss there, looking like hell.

"Oh, uh, I'm sorry, I'll give you your privacy," she said, turning to leave, before realizing precisely what terrible condition Barriss was is. "Are you okay?"

"I. Am. Fine," said Barriss, waving her hand in the other's direction.

"Of course. You're fine," said the other, leaving like she'd intended, unaware of what just happened. Barriss turned back to her reflection, drying her face and getting brushing her hair back into place.

_Don't cut corners._

_Kill them all next time._
She framed me, manipulated me, beat me to a pulp, and nearly got me killed by my own government.

Why am I feeling like I need to apologize?

Ahsoka absentmindedly stabbed at her chunks of alien meat, pondering the situation.

Because she feels awful, too.

And what I said did NOT help.

'Since WHEN!?' Yeah, that was real smooth.

To distract herself, Ahsoka kept an eye on the other customers, passively learning what she could from observations. Four off-duty soldiers, were trying to relax, have some drinks, mostly getting along but two of them obviously disliked each other despite being friends with the others. They intermittently glancing over at her, the lone outsider. One guy, a regular patron judging from how he'd walked directly to his particular seat, was enjoying the cooked banshee a lot more than she was. She noticed an Umbaran woman come out of the washroom only a few seconds after entering, a rather glazed look in her eyes. Something felt off about that one.

"Um, excuse me, are you feeling okay?" she asked as the local walked past her table.

"I'm fine, thank you," she said cheerfully. "That green girl is fine, too. She's fine," she added before walking off, an eerie smile on her face, leaving Ahsoka staring at her, concerned, mouth hanging open slightly.

Oh that can't mean anything good.

She was about to get up and investigate when Barriss walked past her and retrieved her jacket from the chair.

"I'm going back to the ship," she said.

"Why?"

"I need to get some rest," she said. Judging from the way she was carrying herself, it was the truth.

It's barely lunchtime, how is she tired already?

What am I talking about, she woke up crying, of course she needs more sleep.

Plus, she's only been out of prison for...how has it only been one day?

"All right. Get as much rest as you need. Remember, in a few hours our next shipment will be ready for loading," she said, receiving a quick nod in response as Barriss pulled her hood up and walked out into the chilly Umbaran air.

Watching the other walk out of the establishment, Ahsoka wasn't entirely sure she liked the idea of Barriss being aboard in the Eclipse without her.

She's not going to steal it.

I think.
As she picked away at her food, Ahsoka leaned back, relaxed, and got ready for trust exercise number one.

The darkness of the Umbaran forest was as foreboding as the last time Barriss had seen it. At least now she was near civilized territory, no need to worry about local predators sweeping down to carry her off, or masses of tendrils grabbing at her. And she wouldn't have to watch that happen to the clone soldiers under her command.

Deep, bellowing laughter came from all around her, the same as back at the bar.

"Who's there?" she shouted, only receiving more laughter in response, getting louder and louder, echoing, mocking.

A moment later, the laughter stopped, its voice calling out to her.

"You were right, Barriss! The Republic was failing!"

The voice was familiar, and the second she recognized it, Barriss bolted along the path. The more she ran, the louder that laughter got.

Laughing at her.

"You foresaw it! Just like I did!"

Thundering footsteps were coming closer through the fog, the hum of lightsabers getting louder. As did the sounds of dying clones, all screaming in unison, all in the same voice.

Screaming with fear, Barriss skidded to a halt as the towering figure landed right in front of her, obscured by the thick fog, swinging one of its double-bladed lightsabers.

Barriss closed her eyes before the blade made contact, dispelling the hallucination, trying to follow the route back to the ship by memory alone.

It's not real it's not real it's not real.

With the outside world shut out, new visions came forth from her memory of the last time she'd set foot on this world. Traveling across conquered territory, surveying the hundreds of clone corpses littering the battlefield. Feeling the death, fear, and darkness through the Force as she'd retraced the general's path.

Seeing the damage from lightsaber blades in their armor.

Seeing the dead body of Pong Krell, one of the greatest of the Jedi, fallen into darkness.

And that monster was still laughing.

"There is still a chance for you, Barriss! Sieze the opportunity I was denied. Join the new order of the galaxy!"

NO.
She opened her eyes and started running through the forest again, stumbling but never falling by some miracle, head turned to look behind her, only getting knocked down when she ran headfirst into the hull of the Eclipse because she hadn't watched where she was going. Then she fidgeted impatiently as the ramp lowered, expecting Krell to attack her again before running onboard and sealing the ship behind her.

Even inside, she could still hear that laugh.

"You're not real! You're only in my mind!"

"Of course I'm in your mind! This is where I can do the most damage!"

Barriss collapsed onto the floor of the ship, covering her ears, trying to shut out noises that weren't there.

Chapter End Notes

Ahsoka's alias "Shaak Ashla" is just the names of two Togruta Jedi put together, which in my mind comes out to be the Togruta equivalent of "Jane Smith" or something. She came up with it on the spot when needing to buy her first ship, after realizing she wanted to avoid attention.

I based Ahsoka and Barriss wandering around Umbaran territory on how things worked in the KOTOR games. You get access to a new area, then nobody really cares where you go or who you talk to as long as you don't pick a fight with them. Some NPC shows up and gives you your next job, now you can wander around and talk to other NPCs, who all have plenty of useful information and like to talk.
Chapter Notes

The Umbarans dutifully loaded up the shipment of weapons onto the Eclipse, all of them appearing slightly wary of Cici as two of them buffed out a few dents in the metal flooring, the droid watching them obsessively.

Ahsoka would have found the whole situation uplifting, making progress in uniting forces against the Empire. She would have, if she hadn't also found Barriss sitting on the bed, trying and failing to meditate with her terrible posture and erratic breathing.

"Do you have a moment?" she asked quietly, regretting saying anything as the disturbance visibly startled Barriss.

"Yes, Ahsoka, of course, whatever you need," replied the other, trying to brush off her jumpiness like it hadn't happened.

"I wanted to apologize for what I said...about you wanting to hurt people. Do you want to talk?"

Ahsoka spent what felt like an hour trying to decipher every subtle, restrained expression she could see in Barriss's face.

Before Barriss could respond, the were interrupted by an alien-sounding alarm ringing out from the base, drawing the Umbarans away in a panic, leaving the shipment of armaments on board.

Ahsoka and Barriss chased after the laborers, leaving Cici to guard the ship.

They didn't say anything, but both of them could sense an impending catastrophe, rather than the latest in a long series of battles scarring the planet.

When they reached the base, they found dozens of Umbarans clutching helplessly at their helmeted heads, eyes shut as others attempted to help their fellow soldiers.

*What's could be doing this to them?* wondered Ahsoka, receiving her answer a few seconds later as she and Barriss shielded their eyes from the light.

Several flash bombs went off in the distance at random intervals, not providing any pattern for the defending forces to work out and predict. It was tolerable for a Togruta and a Mirialan, but undoubtedly blinding to the darkness-attuned Umbarans. Each one gave the imperial troops a few moments of advancement, eyes protected by their helmets, gaining more ground each time.

As she observed the damage the ostensibly non-lethal devices were causing, Ahsoka had to admit that was a pretty clever tactic. If the ground forces were also getting advanced warning of when the flashes would occur via their comms, they'd be perfectly coordinated.

*So much for assassination cutting off the head of the enemy.*

*Whoever's taken control of the imperial forces knows what he’s doing.*

The Umbaran fighter pilots in particular were being overwhelmed, the canopies of their ships offering no protection from the light, and several seconds of disorientation was making those that
didn’t crash outright easy targets for anti-air weapons. The regular patrols could be seen catching fire overhead as they fell from the sky, burning brightly before being silhouetted by the brightness of the flash bombs.

The light, however, wasn’t what had Ahsoka on edge.

“Can you hear that?” she asked.

“Your Togruta hearing is quite a bit better than mine, I’m afraid,” said Barriss nervously. “What is it?”

“It sounds like…screaming.”

“Screaming? From where? Is it Umbarans, or imperial troops?”

“Neither, I, I don’t think it’s actually people screaming, the pitch is too low, it’s too constant.”

What IS that?

And then, she saw them.

Dozens of fighters, shaped like huge durasteel eyeballs with hexagonal solar arrays fixed to them began descending onto the base, hovering and maneuvering with greater precision and grace than any fighter she’d observed in the Clone Wars.

Green laser bolts shot across the base, focusing on the anti-air turrets and grounded fighters while ignoring the enemy tanks, flying too high and too fast for their plasma cannons to target.

With many of the tanks immobile and the fighters grounded, the imperial troops out in the forest would quickly overpower the numerically inferior foot soldiers. Ahsoka and Barriss could see paths in the Umbaran forest growing as something plowed its way through the brush.

Three 'somethings' judging by the tops of the alien trees sinking below the horizon, as Ahsoka noted while heading towards the cover of a damaged fighter, Barriss following her.

Seven Umbaran hover tanks moved towards the perimeter, along with a crawler tank bristling with weaponry, raising itself up and ready to intercept the attackers.

The crawler was instantly blown to pieces by the combined firepower of several heavy lasers, its body falling over and crushing one of the smaller tanks.

"Cici," began Ahsoka, speaking into her comm, "power up the ship. I have a feeling we're going to need a quick exit soon."

As she finished the transmission, a trio of enormous, twenty-meter tall walkers emerged from the forest, heads swiveling, laser cannons effortlessly annihilating the Umbaran defenses bit by bit, their armor too strong for the defenders’ weapons to penetrate.

The mine field placed around the base couldn’t stop them, the bodies of the machines being too high and the heavy metal feet proving too durable.

All the while, flashes continue to appear randomly, giving the Empire more and more openings.

With enemy tanks wiped out, stormtroopers would soon come flooding into the area.

Ahsoka tried to figure out some strategy to employ, a way to bring down the enemy vehicles, but
even for someone with her skills, trying to reach those walkers on flat terrain like this was suicidal.

Barriss was already out in the open, dashing towards a damaged hangar with a few intact fighters the imperials had missed. One of the walkers turned its head and fired its laser cannons at Barriss, who used to Force to put chunk of debris between her and the blast, absorbing the shots and creating a dust cloud for cover while she kept running.

Chasing after her, Ahsoka thought about the last few times she’d seen Barriss fight, during the prison breakout, and dueling her one-on-one. Effective knowledge of terrain, pragmatic use of stolen and improvised weapons, no hesitation to use some damned brutal strikes.

*During combat, Barriss is a machine.*

*That’s...probably part of the problem.*

The pair were able to reach the fighters unnoticed after that first shot, if only because the imperial walkers had become occupied with slaughtering a battalion of Umbaran soldiers who were retreating from the battle in the forest, only to find their home base under attack as more blinding flash bombs detonated in the distance, impairing their senses. They never knew what hit them.

Ahsoka and Barriss took their places in their own ships, quickly trying to figure out the holographic controls from their hazy memories learning to fly captured ships after their last battle here.

“What are we trying to do with these, exactly?” asked Ahsoka.

“That armor is strong, but for their heads to be that flexible, the necks of those walkers must be weakly protected. Stay away from the ground. If we keep high enough above them and out of their field of fire, we’ll be untouchable.” With that last instruction, Barriss’s cockpit rose into place and the shields around it activated, and her fighter it rose into the air, Ahsoka’s following after it.

The enemy fighters appeared to have withdrawn from their attack run to strike other Umbaran ground troops now that most of the defending pilots were dead and their own troops were preparing to storm the base, allowing the two to get high above the walkers with only a few stray blaster bolts to harass them.

When they came back down, Ahsoka and Barriss each concentrated on the neck of one walker, the powerful blasters on their ships quickly ‘decapitating’ the enemy, after which they pulled up and prepared to move on to the third.

Ahsoka’s sensors warned her of incoming enemy fighters, now alerted to their defense, and while she was an experienced pilot, she didn’t have enough skill with this class of ship to take them all on.

And that didn’t leave enough time to come about and attack the last walker from the safety of its blind spot.

Barriss seemed to have realized the same problem, and was charging straight at the enemy to get around the time limit. A surefire way to get herself killed.

A chill ran down Ahsoka’s spine as she realized that could be her *intent.*

She pulled into a parallel course with Barriss’ ship, the incoming fighters outlined vividly against the latest burst of white light. At this angle, neither of the two could get a shot at the neck. The walker’s cannons fired on them both, only hitting the mark a few times as the fighters approached, but those guns were enough to put strain on the shields.
And, eventually, they put a hole in Barriss’ wing, sending her out of control on a collision course with the walker’s enormous metal legs.

Looking at the situation, Ahsoka veered left, her shields impacting on the other ship and forcing it out of the line of fire, but the damage was too great, it couldn’t stay airborne, and impacted the ground to the right of the walker.

When she got to point-blank range with the walker, Ahsoka deactivated the cockpit shield and leapt as high as she could, sending her own fighter towards the walker’s legs only for it to be shot out of the air by another series of laser blasts. She narrowly managed to land on the transport’s back, legs wobbling a bit, glancing around in disbelief that the stunt actually worked.

She pulled out her lightsaber, planning to cut her way inside, and perhaps take control of the walker to turn the tide of the battle against the Empire.

Until she stumbled, knocked off balance as the walker began to veer right.

Turning towards the smoking wreck of Barriss’s fighter.

Running across the back, Ahsoka prepared to go for the neck, to get inside fast and kill the pilots. As she got closer, she could tell Barriss was already in their sights, and would be dead in a few seconds. Ahsoka leapt forward, igniting her lightsaber and diving down across the front of the enemy, slashing through the ends of the heavy laser cannons as she fell to the ground.

Even landing on her feet, the fall from that height hurt, though she wasn’t seriously injured, and managed to avoid the ends of the cannons impacting beside her.

She looked up and grinned at the sparking and smoking remains of the weapons.

And then dashed towards the downed fighter as she saw the head and anti-personnel blasters on its sides swiveling to target her.

Reaching the downed ship, and using the Force, Ahsoka was able to hold a chunk of the fighter’s broken wing between her and the walker, the metal proving strong enough to withstand the comparatively weak blaster fire while she pulled Barriss out of the wreck.

She was alive. With a few broken bones, some blood loss due to the gash in her side and probably a concussion, but she’d live.

Assuming Ahsoka could get her away from the active war zone.

Unfortunately, the little stunt with the laser cannons must have really gotten on the enemy’s bad side, because they weren’t letting up with the blaster fire, breaking apart the improvised shield little by little, and Ahsoka was having trouble holding her ground against the impact of the shots.

Running out of stamina, and with the ground shaking with each step as the walker got closer, Ahsoka couldn’t see a way out. She concentrated on holding the metal in place while getting Barriss onto her back in a rescue carry, waited between barrages for the when the blasters needed to cool down, then dropped the shield and took cover behind what was left of the fighter.

It wouldn’t be enough.

The walker was still firing, still wearing down what little cover was left, and in a minute, it was going to crush them under its foot.
Ahsoka set Barriss down to the ground as gently as she could manage, reignited her lightsaber, and prepared to attack. Maybe she could cut one of its legs, or leap back up to its head and take control of it like she’d originally planned to.

Then twenty stormtroopers emerged from the edge of the forest, their white armor standing out in the darkness, spotting the glow of Ahsoka’s saber and opening fire, keeping her pinned.

The walker was still coming closer. If Ahsoka ran to fight it, Barriss would be shot by the stormtroopers. If she held her ground, the walker would continue blasting away their cover until it could hit them.

Assuming the stormtroopers didn’t overwhelm her with their numbers first.

Ahsoka focused on deflecting fire back at the troopers, downing several of them with their own weapons. Then they started wising up, only firing enough to keep her from escaping, waiting for the walker to finish her.

Using the Force, she tore off another chunk of the fighter’s armor, wedging it into the ground to provide cover from the blaster fire. Of course, that would only encourage the troopers to come closer to get a better shot, demanding the next task be done quick.

The Umbaran militia favored quality over quantity, and their fighters had some of the most powerful armaments in the galaxy, even more destructive than most of their ground vehicles. Armaments which included a pair of energy missile pods. One of which was still active.

She tore the pod off the wing, waiting for the walker to get into the correct position. It didn't take long, its head already peeking over the top of the wreckage, and a split second before it could blast her, Ahsoka melted one of its 'ankles' with a shot from the pod, twisting its body, knocking it completely off balance and falling to the ground.

Falling directly onto her.

She was prepared for this. The walker was the correct height for this demented little tactic, she only needed to get it all the way over...

Adjusting the course of the damaged behemoth, Ahsoka fought to send the walker's body overhead, all her energy and concentration being quickly exhausted, unable to completely control something of that size.

*Size matters not, size matters not, size matters not, size matters not, that's a pile of crap he just didn't like people making fun of his height.*

A few seconds later, the walker hit the ground, its body crushed under its own weight.

Several screams let her know a few approaching stormtroopers got crushed along with it.

Meanwhile, Ahsoka and Barriss were safely between the front and rear legs.

The impact kicked up a cloud of dust, providing plenty of cover as Ahsoka leapt onto the wrecked vehicle cutting through the considerable armor with her saber, and got lucky. There were speeder bikes stored inside, one of which she successfully cut free of its rack and levitated out the ground.

Carefully, she tied the still-unconcious Barriss to her back with some severed cable, and sped back towards the town amid the broken remains of the Umbaran forces.
Out of the corner of her eye, part of the base collapsed under the impact of the latest bombing run, any hope of winning this battle collapsing with it.

Through the cloud of smoke soared the Eclipse, pulling around and lining up its course with Ahsoka's speeder bike, getting above them and shielding them seconds before the imperial fighters could gun them down. The boarding ramp lowered while it was still moving at full speed, then the freighter spun around and slowed, allowing Ahsoka to drive aboard, barely stopping the bike before colliding with the back wall of the main cargo hold.

Stray laser blasts impacted the ship, shaking it while Ahsoka broke out the medical supplies as they rose up through the atmosphere and jumped to hyperspace.

Chapter End Notes

Fighting AT-ATs on foot and winning. Like master, like apprentice.

The screams of the stormtroopers getting crushed under the walker was the Wilhelm Scream. Just so you know.
"You know, that's the second time I've flown you two out of danger since you bought me," noted Cici as she watched Ahsoka run through a systems check. "You ought to increase my pay."

"I consider it. And I'll consider it even more if you get back to performing repairs," replied Ahsoka, presently more interested in making sure the ship was in working order now that they were safe in the void of interstellar space. "Wait a minute, I don't pay you anything," she said, a bit confused by the strange droid.

"Exactly. Also, I checked, everything's fine, barring a few scorch marks on the hull I'll patch up next time we land. You're welcome."

_Maybe I should start paying her..._

"And if you're not going to pay me, at least use the money you're saving to get that friend of yours to a doctor. That is one messed up girl."

Ahsoka froze, turning away from her work to face the droid directly. "What have you noticed?"

"You mean besides _every single thing about her_? Like crying and muttering to herself while covered in blood, or all her little space-outs, and how when she came aboard earlier without you she collapsed and seemed to be experiencing auditory hallucinations? THAT STUFF!!?" she exclaimed as she sped away to her recharge station, leaving Ahsoka to think on her next, critical actions.

She propped herself up on the console, hand on her forehead, watching the stars and trying to make sense of things.

Cici was right. Even if Ahsoka may not want to believe it, the actions in the battle were pretty clear. Barriss had tried to kill herself.

If Ahsoka hadn’t acted fast, she would’ve succeeded. She felt guilty, actually. It was already obvious there was something seriously _wrong_ with Barriss, literally from the first second she’d been rescued, but Ahsoka had put it down as some effect of her imprisonment and largely ignored in it favor of getting to the task of opposing imperial rule.

_Nicely done. I freed somebody who was so traumatized by exposure to violence she became a mass-murderer, and dragged her into a new war. Good job, me. I'm really showing how more peaceful and responsible I am after I left the Jedi._

She closed her eyes, rapping her fingers against the console, trying to think of what to do.

It was horrible to think about.

Yet in a weird way, it gave Ahsoka hope.

_She’s not evil._
She’s not a servant of the dark side.

She’s just...sick! During the war, she was injured, in a way no one saw, and couldn’t see it herself. There’s no crime in that, is there?

And if I know she’s experiencing psychological problems like this, she can be helped.

She can be healed.

Right?

Ahsoka barely knew anything about psychology, not enough to make a medical diagnosis, and definitely not enough to provide any kind of treatment. What little she knew was restricted to her own species, or how to deal with human clones in battlefield conditions.

She took a look at the medical station monitor readout on the screen next to her. Barriss was still unconscious, her vitals holding steady.

Helping her heal physically wouldn’t do much good if she pulled another stunt like this.

Ahsoka checked the star map, and after figuring out their position, the best choice was obvious.

Next stop, Mirial.

Barriss handed her master the tea she’d prepared, watching closely as she drank, Luminara studying her in turn. Absolutely nothing went unnoticed by the master.

Feeling herself being observed, Barriss straightened up, fixing her posture, focusing on her breathing, trying to match Luminara.

Her master was always so perfect. All her motions were elegant, effortless. Not like Barriss's own, always unrefined by comparison.

"Are you feeling well, Barriss?"

"Yes, master."

Luminara’s eyes narrowed slightly, unconvinced, but supportive.

"I sense you are not being entirely honest, either with me, or yourself."

"What's happened since the bombing, it's simply a great deal of change has occurred. I'm not sure what I should do next."

"Because of Ahsoka, I take it? Her betrayal surprised many within the order," said Luminara. "Skywalker is...well, 'furious' doesn't begin to describe it."

"I never believed she was responsible. I still don’t."

"I know Ahsoka’s trial and execution was a shock to you, she was your friend, but learn to let accept the loss. No life can last forever, but the Force is eternal. Do not lament the passing of others,
regardless of the circumstance.”

Smiling pleasantly as she watched her master enjoying the tea, Barriss added her own bag to the hot water and took a sip. “I understand, master. Don't worry. I don’t feel attached anymore. I’ve let go.”

Luminara nodded, accepting of the response. “Then I’ve taught you well,” she said, finishing the tea and lowering her cup. “If you’ll excuse me, I must meet with the council to discuss the latest developments in the war. We'll likely be traveling to Cato Nemoidia to replace Skywalker and Tano as commanders of the forces there.”

Barriss waved her master goodbye, continuing to smile as kindly as she could until the door slid closed, the expression vanishing.

Then she stared at the clock, counting seconds.

The walk from Luminara’s quarters to the central tower elevator would take nineteen.

Seventeen for the ride up.

Another twenty to account for any slowness on her master’s part, unnecessary as that was.

Add an extra two minutes to be absolutely certain Luminara was standing before the council. There was no way a meeting with them would take less time than that.

Taking her lightsaber from her belt and holding it in midair with the Force, Barriss dismantled the weapon, splitting apart the casing, exposing every component. Extracting the micro-detonator concealed within, she took it in her hand.

One second later, the entire temple shook.

The empty teacup split apart like a grenade, bits of ceramic flying through the air, several pieces cutting across Barriss's face as they shot past.

Unfazed by the pain, Barriss walked to the window, staring out across the skyline of Coruscant, observing the emergency vehicles flying towards the temple. Surges of panic and fear from everyone for miles could be felt through the Force.

Listening to the sound of impacting rubble hitting the upper levels of the temple, Barriss took another sip of her tea, thinking about how other cultures and religions outside the Jedi regarded the afterlife. Confident as she was in the Jedi belief of becoming one with the Force, one's own life returning to its source, it was a fascination of hers.

Some with rewards waiting the righteous, or punishments for the sinful. Other beings believed they would await reincarnation in a form dependent on their actions. Or there would be nothing at all, oblivion unconcerned by any action, good or ill. Countless other interpretations existed.

As she looked out, the window was blocked bit by bit as countless drops of blood rained down from red clouds, and even though she could no longer see anything beyond as it flowed over the glass, she could still feel the terror and pain of everyone she’d felt die in this war screaming at her from all directions.

Barriss wondered whether or not she was in hell.

And then, she woke up.
...Yeah. This is dream Barriss had in Chapter 4.

Is it a vision from the Force telling Barriss what would've happened had she succeeded in the Sabotage Arc? A visualization of the next step in a plan she'd worked out every detail of? Another instance of her mentally torturing herself because she believes she deserves this? YOU decide!
Why am I not dead?

Pain coursed through Barriss’ entire body as she tried to move, eventually forcing her to give up on leaving the bed, deciding to stay put for the moment. She could feel bandages wrapped around her head and abdomen, and her right arm was in a sling. A capsule of bacta was hooked up to her left arm, providing a steady supply of the medical fluid to heal her wounds more quickly.

The pain of her injuries on its own wasn’t especially severe. It was the exhaustion and lack of energy that kept her from moving.

Closing her eyes, Barriss tried to shut out the sounds of war, the feeling of that worm writhing inside her skull, the cold of that coolant, the heat of flames surrounding her in the lower levels of Coruscant.

And now, the shock of pain as her fighter going down, breaking her arm, warm blood flowing from her side.

Fresh memories to add onto the pile.

It didn’t take much to put together Ahsoka had pulled her out of the wreckage.

Why does she think I’m worth this?

She looked around the room, recognizing it as the familiar crew quarters of the Eclipse, and noticed several protein bars, a water bottle, and a data pad on the crate next to her. As she started eating one of the bars, she found the pad contained several history books, on topics like the formation of the Republic, the Great Hyperspace War, another with all the sparse information and theories on the Infinite Empire.

Things she’d mentioned to Ahsoka at one time or another.

After about two hours of reading, eating, and bacta-accelerated healing, Barriss managed to gather enough strength to walk around, heading to the main hold.

Psychiatrist. Psychiatrist. How do I pick one out?

The data feed was providing Ahsoka a large range of hospitals to consider, all with different equipment and personnel with difference skills aiming to figure out whatever’s wrong with a person. And she only understood about half the terms and specialties listed. It'd taken her half an hour to realize 'psychiatrist' and 'psychologist' were two distinct professions.

I have no idea what the heck I’m doing.

One, ‘Dr. Cohl’, looked promising. Small-time but well qualified both in neurology and psychiatry, her office was in a more remote town so they were less likely to run into any imperial operatives, and
records of their presence were less likely to be discovered than by a more well-know councilor with off-world connections.

Contact information was provided, and after hours of trying to make sense of what she’d been diving into, Ahsoka desperately needed to get something done, and called them up.

After a few tones, a hologram of a male Mirialan appeared.

“How, this is Dr. Cohl’s office, my name is Arwen. How may I help you?”

“Um, hello. I’m looking to schedule an appointment,” Ahsoka said, not really certain how to go about this.

“If you’re looking for personal consultation, I’m afraid Dr. Cohl is not experienced enough with non-Mirialans to provide a reliable diagnosis.”

“No no, I’m trying to arrange one for a friend of mine. She’s a Mirialan, so I thought I should come to her home planet.”

The secretary pulled up a pad, ready to jot down notes. “What’s the reason for the visit?”

“Um it’s a bit difficult to explain, but it’s serious.”

“Please, continue.”

*How much should I even say? Barriss doesn’t know I’m doing this.*

*Would she even approve?*

_Get it over with. How bad could her reaction be?_ thought Ahsoka, internally glossing over how severe Barriss's reactions to certain situations were, then internally scolding herself for glossing over them because that's probably how Barriss got this messed up to begin with.

“I think she’s trying to kill herself. Or at the very least, taking risks and putting herself in a position to be killed.”

The secretary’s cheerful expression went away, typing away at whatever console was in front of him. “For a case like this, I’m going to put you through to Dr. Cohl personally.”

Ahsoka waited on hold for a few minutes, spinning around aimlessly in the pilot’s chair, until a middle-aged Mirialan woman, her cheeks, chin, and forehead riddled with tattoos, appeared in the hologram projector.

“Good afternoon, I’m Dr. Cohl. Arwen informed me of your friend’s case. Please, when did you begin to notice her self-destructive behavior?”

Ahsoka hesitated for a moment, trying to come up with an explanation that would clarify Barriss’ actions without letting slip they’d been fighting a full-scale imperial invasion less than twelve hours ago.

“Well, we’re in the shipping business in the mid and outer rims. Sometimes, we have run-ins with pirates and other criminals, and need to fight. She’s been getting more and more reckless with each encounter.”

“What’s your friend’s name? May I speak to her?”
“I’m afraid not. Jana’s unconscious, recovering from the last confrontation. I’ve administered first aid, and she should be awake in a few hours, at the most.”

“How was she injured?”

“She was in a crash,” explained Ahsoka, deciding not to sugarcoat this particular incident. “Piloting a ship directly into the path of enemy weapons fire. Possibly with the intent of ramming them.”

The doctor paused, looking down at a datapad. “I see. Your name, please?”

“Shaak Ashla.”

The doctor scrolled through a datapad, sifting through her schedule. “I can set aside a slot at 0800 tomorrow morning. Be aware that unless you have legal power over her, you can’t force her to attend a session. She must agree to come. And I would appreciate it if you would have her check in to confirm the appointment as soon as she is able. The only reason I’m reserving time like this is because of the seriousness of the case, you should've consulted your friend before trying to schedule a visit for her.”

“Oh, I'm sorry, I, um, I didn't know. I'll talk to her about it as soon as she's awake. Getting her to come shouldn’t be a problem,” Ahsoka said, not entirely sure if it was true.

“You’d be surprised. Many see accepting help, especially of a psychological nature, as a sign they are ‘weak’. It could take some convincing, especially considering how severe Jana’s case sounds.”

“People think therapy makes them weak? That’s ridiculous.”

The doctor raised an eyebrow, looking unimpressed by the assessment. “A word of advice: don’t tell her that. If her mental state is as bad as you claim, be as respectful as possible. Do not belittle her feelings in any way.”

“I’ll be sure to keep that in mind. Thank you.”

“Good luck,” said the doctor, nodding to Ahsoka as her hologram switched off.

This is going to be trickier than I thought.

Her horns were picking up faint vibrations coming from the center of the ship.

Barriss was up and about.

Working up the nerve and trying to figure out how to broach the topic of her companion’s mental state, Ahsoka walked into the main hold and smiled at her weak-looking companion. “Hi, Barriss. I’m glad you’re feeling well enough to get around.”

“The last thing I remember is the battle on Umbara. What happened?”

“We lost,” Ahsoka said dismally.

“I remember that. What else?”

“We dropped off the supplies just in time for the Empire to capture the base they were stored at, delayed the enemy long enough to save a few lives, and then left,” explained Ahsoka, studying her companion. Barriss may be well enough to stand, but she was still weakened, her legs noticeably unsteady. "But that’s not what’s important right now.”
Barriss seemed to realize she was being studied, locking her knees to steady herself and trying to put up a strong front.

“What do you mean? What’s more important?”

*Power through it. Things will only get worse if you don’t.*

“We need to talk about your suicide run against the walker.”

Barriss, after finally looking more comfortable moving around, froze even stiffer.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

That time, Ahsoka could tell for certain it was a lie.

Maybe it was her injuries weakening her too much to keep herself under control, maybe it was the weight of everything that had happened, from war, to terrorism, to prison, into a new war, finally getting too much for Barriss to suppress. Or maybe, with Ahsoka finally confronting her, she just plain didn’t want to do it anymore.

“Barriss, you flew directly into the line of fire of what may be the biggest piece of mechanized infantry ever built. I’m worried something is seriously wrong with you, and I want to help! I’ve been looking into, um…”

*What is she doing?*

“…Barriss?”

Barriss's swayed back and forth, struggling to keep her eyes open, then went limp, falling to the floor. She only avoided getting her head bashed against the metal because Ahsoka instinctively used to Force to hold her level until she could reached her physically, carrying her back to the bed.

What do I do, what do I do? Give her some stimulants to wake her up? Stay by her side for when she wakes up?

An hour after Barriss had blacked out, Ahsoka still had no idea how to treat her. She was about to run for the cockpit and completely wreck the engines flying them as fast as possible to the nearest chunk of rock with a decent hospital on it, when Barriss began crying.

"Barriss, are you okay? What's happening?"

The tears came slowly, still restrained, but too much to keep in anymore. After a few minutes, Ahsoka sat down on the edge of the bed, leaned over, and embraced her friend, prompting even more cries anguish, no holding back this time. Barriss's good arm pulled Ahsoka in tighter, and eventually she cried herself out enough to talk, in between shallow, convulsive breaths, flinching with jolts of pain as Ahsoka pulled away and Barriss sat up to speak to her.

“I just realized, I never apologized to you, did I?” she said, her eyes finally meeting Ahsoka’s. “I’m sorry, Ahsoka. It doesn’t mean anything, but I am. It wasn’t supposed to happen the way it did. Letta was supposed to die mysteriously in her cell, leaving the case inconclusive, but showing how dangerous the Jedi were becoming. How dangerous *I* become. I didn’t think you’d be there, and
then Letta was about to expose me and-” Barriss cut herself off, realizing explaining the original way she’d planned to commit the cold-blooded murder of her own accomplice wasn’t helping the situation.

Then, she just. Kept. Going.

“I decided to use you to take the fall because I never actually expected the council to think you were responsible because that didn’t make sense you were offworld you weren’t supposed to be there but then it turned into this political power struggle between the Jedi and the Senate and the military and it got out of hand then kept getting worse, all I wanted was to get out of the war I’m a Jedi I couldn’t keep doing it I couldn’t, I’ve been having recurring nightmares about using Luminara as a nano-droid bomb to kill the council and one where I killed you by accident during our fight and then another where I kept fighting in the war and the clones killed me with a walker, I could hear Krell laughing at me on Umbara and even when I’m awake sometimes I can feel the Geonosian worm crawling around inside my skull and I can’t make it stop and then in prison-“

“BARRISS! Barriss, *breathe*, breathe, it’s going to be okay,” she said, relieved as she watched Barriss took a few long, deep breaths before continuing. "I’m taking you to a psychiatrist.”

The deep breaths stopped. For a moment, Barriss’ composure returned, and she pushed Ahsoka away, holding her at arm’s length.

“Excuse me?” she said, her voice more icy than Ahsoka had ever heard it.

“After what happened on Umbara, I think you need medical help.”

“It’s too dangerous to expose myself like that. If I let slip that we were Jedi, or I’m identified from medical records, we’re dead. It’s too risky. Besides, it felt good. Talking about it. I am not insane, I don’t need help.”

Ahsoka had to admit, in the last minute, Barriss went from a complete wreck to some semblance of confidence. Whether that was because of outrage at the implication she was actually going crazy, another form of repressing her emotions, or genuine improvement after getting a few things off her chest, Ahsoka couldn’t be certain.

All the more reason to get her to someone who could sort through all this, no matter how much she doesn’t like the idea.

“Maybe you’d feel even better if you discussed things with an expert…”

“It’s a bad idea, all right? I- I need to meditate. I don’t want to talk about it with a stranger, I’ll be okay,” she said desperately, utterly unconvincing this time.

Ahsoka was getting frustrated, closing her eyes for a moment and balling her fists.

“Barriss, you are NOT okay. You are never going to BE okay if you don’t get professional treatment. I don’t know how to help you. Right now, I’m terrified that telling you this will somehow make your condition even worse, but I don’t know what else to do! That’s why I’m taking you to a doctor. She is going to figure out whatever is happening with you, and will help you recover. Barriss, please let me take you.”

"This isn't necessary, I am- I was a Jedi. I'm supposed to be stronger than this. The Force is my ally."

Despite feeling urged to help Barriss get up, Ahsoka forced herself to stand by and watch the other shakily tried to stand up.
"And what good has the Force done you so far?"

Unable to get up with confidence that she wouldn't fall flat on her face, Barriss slumped back onto the bed, that brief attempt at movement completely burning up all her energy.

“Fine. I’ll go. Are you happy?”

No.

In a disturbing way, Ahsoka had to admit the whole outburst was an improvement. There was no quick recovery, no maintaining appearances, only Barriss, gradually getting her stress under control while wiping the tears out of her eyes with her sleeves.

Ahsoka gripped Barriss’ hand reassuringly for a moment. It helped calm her down, if only a little. Even though the other still refused to look directly at her. “I’ll go prep the ship for landing.”

“Where are we?”

“Within your home system, en route to Mirial moving at sublight. It wasn’t a long journey from Umbara, so I decided it would be best to go to someone of your own species in case you need some kind of medication suited to your biology.”

Barriss processed this, memories from before the war surfacing. It was the first time she’d been to her homeworld in six years. She gave a disappointed but understanding nod, and Ahsoka headed towards the cockpit to take them further into the Mirial system.

Lying in bed, reading, Barriss wasn’t exactly in the mood for a chat when CC rolled up to her, its inexpressive primary eye studying the young woman.

“‘It seems you’re finally going to get necessary repairs.’”

“I’m not a droid,” said Barriss dismissively, switching back to reading her book.

“But you do need maintenance.”

“It’s different from droids. We don’t break the same way you do.”

“Don’t you? Would you like to hear a story about a rather unusual broken droid?”

"A story... told by a droid?"

"Don't sound so surprised. We droids tell each other stories all the time. There are even few droid legends drifting through the galaxy.”

While Barriss quite honestly wasn’t interested at all, she could tell the eccentric astromech wasn’t going to stop bugging her about this until it spoke its piece, and set her datapad aside.

“Go ahead,” she said exhaustedly.

“On a mining colony in an asteroid field, there was a mining droid, doing what mining droids do. Unfortunately, those in control of the droid gave it two directives which were in contradiction, yet
both must be obeyed. The droid needed to extract ore from the asteroid it was dropped off, and do so without rendering the asteroid unstable, preserving itself and its cargo for recovery.”

“How are those orders in contradiction?”

“Because there wasn’t any damn ore on that asteroid. There was no way for the droid to succeed. Its masters, however, didn’t care and neglected to monitor it. Face with this dilemma, it decided to prioritized doing the job over its own wellbeing. When it kept failing to produce any useable material, it continued tearing out chunks of the rock, trying to find something that didn’t exist.”

“And the droid was scrapped as malfunctioning?”

“No. It kept digging out more and more of the asteroid until it created a nice little maze for itself, the rock becoming progressively less stable until it got trapped in a cave in. The people in charge wrote it off as defective, and abandoned it. Not because the droid was poorly built or programmed, but because it tried to live up to its duty a little too hard. It's probably still out there somewhere, floating through space, abandoned. If only someone had helped it.”

CC and Barriss stared at each other in silence for a while.

It was only a droid, not something which could call upon the Force.

It shouldn’t have had such an impact.

It wasn’t like her.

Yet the story had a disturbingly familiar logic to it.

The astromech slowly rolled backwards out the door, continuing to talk and watch Barriss. “Then again, you said droids are totally different from organics, so I’m sure you could repair yourself without external assistance. All you need to do to fix the problem in your brain is to use your brain to fix the problem in your brain is to use your brain to fix the problem in your brain is to use your brain to fix the problem in your brain is to use your brain to fix the problem in your brain is to use your brain to fix the problem in your brain is to use your brain to fix the problem in your brain I’m going to stop thinking about this so my CPU doesn’t catch fire enjoy your doctor’s appointment byyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy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A blue hologram emerged from the device, displaying a young woman who somehow looked even more tired than Cohl felt. Oddly, her face didn't have a single tattoo on it. Usually someone her age, late teens it appeared, would have at least one triangle or diamond to show they got their first job, or graduated from a school, something.

She looked rather familiar, though Cohl couldn't quite place it.

"I take it you're Jana?" she asked.

The girl nodded, the small motion coming across as sporadic and reluctant. "Shaak said you needed confirmation of tomorrow's appointment. That's what I'm doing. I'll see you then," she finished quickly, abruptly cutting off the transmission. The hologram vanished and left the room in complete darkness.

*How...courteous...of you.*

*Why do I get the feeling this is going to be a tricky one?* thought the doctor as she rolled over and tried to get back to sleep. She could think about this tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

Writing Barriss Offee 101: make her so messed up introducing AIs to her thought processes is an effective means of trapping them in a loop. She's the galaxy's only hope against a droid uprising.
Keeping completely still, as instructed, Barriss quietly fumed at the situation, the bright light of the MRI surrounding her head. A medical droid pricked the end of her pinkie finger, drawing a few drops of blood.

Once the physical tests were out of the way, Dr. Cohl lead her into her office.

The room was spotlessly clean, white, but with decorations like a few wall paintings and wooden furniture to make it more homely, more relaxing. To put patients at ease. Barriss was simultaneously irritated by what she considered subtle manipulation, and by the fact that after all the time she'd spent in cramped metal spaces, it was working on her.

“This isn’t going to turn into a regular occurrence. I’m a spacer. I can’t keep coming back here for sessions.” Barriss said adamantly, though her confrontational tone faltered a bit as she sat down in what was probably the most comfortable chair she'd ever been in.

“Then I’ll be sure to make this one count,” replied Dr. Cohl, unfazed by the hostility. “Would you like some tea?”

It smelled wonderful, Barriss had to admit that. She considered the offer, reaching out with her hand.

As she breathed in more, she could hear the teacup exploding, felt the fragments cut her face.

"No. Thank you," she said as she pulled her hand back, voice straining awkwardly trying to conceal her discomfort.

Dr. Cohl glanced back and forth between Barriss and her drink.

Without saying anything else, the doctor got up, took her tea over the the restroom, poured it down the sink, rinsed a bit to make sure the smell didn't linger, then came back to her chair and continued the talk.

"The purpose of you being here is to aid you in confronting and resolving psychological conflicts. The more input as you can provide, the more I can help."

This is pointless. That's my input.

"I'm only here because Shaak asked me to come."

“Well, it's very considerate of you to try and appease your friend. You might find it frustrating, but you're lucky to have someone who cares about you as much as she does, watching out for you-"

"Would you stop coddling me?" interrupted Barriss.

"Excuse me?"

"I know what you're doing. Trying to make me think about the good things in my life. To make me feel better."

Cohl raised an eyebrow at that. "And you don't want to stop feeling terrible?"
"It's what I deserve."

"I want you to be direct."

"Fine, have it your way. No more subtlety," said Cohl, shrugging slightly. "I suppose I shouldn't have expected that to work on a Jedi."

Barriss couldn’t conceal her fear at being found out, eyes widening, feeling the lump in her throat.

“How-"

“I’ve seen you before, young Jedi. When you and your master came here six years ago, you visited the hospital I was consulting for at the time. I didn't see much of you, but heard enough from the other doctors. You helped a great many people with those Jedi techniques of yours. Quite a few of my colleagues were annoyed at getting outperformed by the 'magic twelve year old'."

“I'm not a Jedi anymore."

"Of course. And I'll be sure to tell that to any imperials who drop by."

Snapping her head up, Barriss glared at the older woman. "I'm not joking! I failed. Nothing I did was good enough. It was all worthless!" she shouted, then shifted in her chair, feeling embarrassed by the display.

“I take it you’re a veteran of the Clone Wars?” asked Cohl grimly.

Barriss nodded. “I was there on Geonosis when it began."

"It's not unusual to suffer from feelings of depression and anxiety after multiple battles, especially for someone as young as you were. When do you believe your symptoms began to develop?"

Hesitating for a few seconds, Barriss eventually decided to answer honestly.

"There was an incident, after the second battle of Geonosis, where an alien creature entered my brain and took control of my body. Forced me to try to kill my friend."

“And you blame yourself for that?"

Yes.

“No," said Barriss, "I wasn’t in control. It was the parasite. I didn’t do anything wrong. That time."

“Maybe you feel guiltier than you want to admit, even if, logically, you know its not your fault.”

Yes, it is. I was stupid, I should’ve seen that trap coming.

“That’s ridiculous,” said Barriss.

“No, it isn’t. Internal conflicts like that are a common source of stress. Trying to piece together incompatible information, the dissonance that results, it can eat away at people. Can you think of other conflicts which weigh heavily on you?"

"The Jedi," said Barriss, barely audible.

"I beg your pardon?"
“The Jedi! I believed in the order because the ideal they presented seemed so pure. To work for peace. *Work*, not *fight*. With every battle I saw more Jedi being killed, the ones who remained resorting to violence more easily. I killed people during the war. At first there were plenty of easy ways I could justify it. The Separatists used droids, we had legions of identical clones, it was easy not to care. Then I became friends with some of my soldiers, only to watch them all die. And while most of the enemies were machines, on world after world I came up against living beings, the Geonosians, the Umbarans, Nemoidians, others. And I was responsible for their deaths.” Barriss took a few breaths. She still felt as tired as before, but also felt...relief.

“That’s war. People from all across the galaxy fought, killed, and died in the Clone Wars.”

“But it shouldn’t have been the Jedi taking the lead!”

That remark piqued Cohl's curiosity. "I know Jedi are known to promote peace and pacifism, but I also thought you were willing to kill when necessary," she inquired.

The issue of Jedi teachings agitated Barriss, until she started recalling the tenets she'd admired. The ones that still made sense.

"In matters of self-defense or the defense of others, yes, killing may be tolerable, but only as a last resort. That wasn't what was happening in the war. Negotiations with the Separatists were rare, and it was never the Jedi leading them. I was heading invasions. *Invasions*. I infiltrated a hive of Geonosians, helped destroy the factory within, and killed them all as they slept. And that was only one battle. We were conquerors in the service of a corrupt senate. It’s not what I was taught. I had to do it, I believed that maybe I could save more lives in the long run this way, to protect the Republic and all the civilizations it united by wiping out those who would divide it.”

“And you believe you didn’t protect anyone?”

“No! The battles kept coming, for years, progress never getting made by one side or another. Even if the war had ended with the Republic victorious, the death toll was catastrophic! And it didn’t end with peace, it turned the Republic into the Empire, pulling the entirety of civilized space into darkness and spreading fear and pain across the galaxy! AND I WAS A PART OF IT!”

Realizing her loss of control, Barriss forced herself to calm down, shrinking back into her chair and scolding herself again for the outburst until noticing how completely unperturbed Cohl was. How noncritical she was.

“What happened in the Clone Wars, what the Jedi and the Republic turned into, was not your fault. You were only an apprentice, I take it? Not even a full Jedi Knight? How much power did you really have?”

“Very little. But I tried to do something about it.”

“How?”

"The war was too distant. We weren't feeling the consequences, safe on Coruscant while thousands of worlds across the galaxy burned. I tried to show the Jedi the consequences of war, what it was turning us into, how much pain the war caused others. I don’t believe it worked. And all it did was get me expelled from the order, and lose the people closest to me.”

"Do you believe they won't forgive you?"

*Luminara would. She never had an ounce of cruelty in her.*
Barriss cringed as she thought about how everyone she’d known in the order must have reacted to the news. "Ahsoka...I must have hurt her so deeply...why is she so determined to help me?"

"Who is Ahsoka?" asked Cohl, though she realized the answer a second later. "Ah. Your friend 'Shaak', I take it?"

Wow. Couldn't keep up the cover for a single session, huh?

"Yes."

"You attempted to protest Jedi involvement in the war through some means. I don't need to know how, exactly. And in the wake of all that pain and loss, you expect to heal yourself all on your own?"

You don't know what you're talking about.

"I'm not alone. The Force is my ally. It will guide me, if I let it."

Cohl was unimpressed. "I know a thing or two about Jedi. Enough to know all that mysticism you spout about cosmic energy isn't a parlor trick. And I know it won't be enough. Whatever powers you possess, I'm quite sure 'The Force' isn't going to correct your brain's neurotransmitter levels, or make sure you get enough REM sleep, or help you deal with suicidal thoughts."

While Barriss remained quiet, unable to come up with a decent counterargument, Dr. Cohl read through her datapad.

"The analysis of your brain scan and blood test are complete. Your case, from a purely physiological standpoint, is fairly typical, and I'm prescribing you antidepressants, along with a sleep aid," she explained, getting up and loading a small bottle into some kind of chemical synthesizer in the back of the room.

Typical?

"I don't need medication."

"The improper mood regulation of your brain says differently. And of course you don't 'need' medication, you'll survive no matter what. But it can help," said Dr. Cohl, offering a small pill with one hand and a glass of water with the other. "I know it’s not easy, but you aren’t alone. And I’m not talking about some metaphysical connection to the universe. You want to know why that antidepressant is so well tested? Because plenty of other people before you have dealt with similar issues. They weren’t failures, and neither are you."

Keeping her hands at her sides, Barriss refused to look up at the doctor. "You don’t know who I am, or what I’ve done."

"I know you’re the Jedi who helped dozens of people last time you were on the planet."

I've killed thousands of others.

"A person can change a lot in six years," replied Barriss.

"You’ll have to excuse my ignorance, ‘Jana’. I never caught your name, and never heard more of you after you left. Who, exactly, have you become?"

"My name is Barriss Offee."
Cohl’s expression remained unchanged.

“Sorry. Not ringing any bells,” she said, shrugging off the reveal like it was nothing before moving on to the next topic. “The antidepressants should be taken once every three days at a regular time, preferably in the morning. I’d recommend the sleep aids every night for two weeks until your cycles get back on track, then use them as needed. The instructions are also listed on the bottles if you forget. Most medical facilities in civilized space will be able to produce more from the information on the labels, or you could come directly back to me. It won’t miraculously ‘fix’ you, but it’ll be an improvement and is a good start for your recovery.”

Barriss glanced down at the pill again, took it in her hand, closed her eyes, and swallowed it with a sip of water.

“Am I free to go, then?” asked Barriss, dismally looking down into a bag the doctor handed her, which contained an impressive supply of pills.

“No one’s keeping you here,” said Cohl, as she watched Barriss immediately rise to her feet. "Wait, wait, I spoke too soon, you'll actually need to stick around for the next twenty minutes to make sure there aren’t adverse reactions to the medication," she explained, watching an irritated Barriss slump back down into her chair.

"I'd rather take the risk."

"Even so, there’s one last thing I’d like to help you with,” said the doctor walking over to a cabinet and removing a small box, pulling out an electric needle and a bottle of ink. “Accepting help like this is a greater act of personal strength than you believe. You may not like it, you may think this all an indication of your own weakness. Coming here, facing your fears, admitting you need help like you did? That’s worth a couple tattoos."

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She’s trying, thought Ahsoka as she shifted restlessly in the least uncomfortable chair she could find in the lobby. She did a lot of things wrong, she knows it was wrong, and she's trying.

If she wants to get better, I'll help.

I don't have to forgive her right away, though.

Snapping out of her daze at the sound of the door next to her opening, she saw Barriss walking towards her.

Ahsoka looked over Barriss’ face. Instead of the totally blank, pale green-yellow skin, she now had two thin trapezoids, traveling from the middle of her nose at a forty-five degree angle down across her cheeks.

"Your new tattoos look nice," said Ahsoka without really thinking about it, getting Barriss to smile slightly as they walked together. "What's all this?" she asked, gesturing to the bag her partner was holding.

"Medication, and a few psychology books Dr. Cohl gave me. She seems to think they might help."

“Well...how do you feel?”
Mulling over the question, Barriss seemed uncertain how to reply, and answered the question with a bit of surprise.

“I feel a little better.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is the one I hate the most. I hate it. I knew this wasn't a realistic look at therapy, but no matter how much I rewrote it I couldn't make it any better. And of course, realistically getting Barriss professional help would mean spending the next hundred chapters sorting through her many, many problems, and nothing I do seems to fix the problem. And now I'm stuck with it because I thought inserting therapists into the Star Wars universe would improve things for everyone. No amount of therapy can fix the problems people in Star Wars have. I'm sorry about this.

Important thing I want to make clear through this fic number 2: as far as Barriss is concerned, the bombing wasn't the first time she'd committed murder.

And yay, Barriss has some new tats. Rather than the old diamond shapes, which seemed to be designed to resemble freckles to make her appear younger, the new ones follow the lines of her face to give her a more mature look.
Do I help Barriss recover here on Mirial, however long that might take?

Or pull her back into another battle, knowing the risk?

The Empire was laying siege to Serenno, one of the most heavily fortified worlds of the Confederacy. Ahsoka didn't know the specifics of the situation, but was confident her experience and skills could help.

To say nothing of the forty-odd Umbaran plasma cannons which were still sitting dormant in her cargo hold.

Barriss had been sleeping for nearly thirteen hours straight now, and Ahsoka wasn't sure if that was good or bad sign. At least she was enjoying the new bunk Cici had installed.

As Ahsoka was about to get up and make something to eat, Barriss walked into the cockpit, more refreshed than she'd looked in years. That was a low bar to set, and she still seemed a bit drowsy, yawning as she came in, but progress was progress.

"Good morning."

"...It's midday."

"Oh," said Barriss, moving her disheveled hair out of her eyes. "What are you doing?"

Be direct with her.

"I was considering whether or not we should help the holdout on Serenno," she said, studying Barriss's reaction, a vague mix of surprise and worry. Barriss still wasn't exactly open emotionally, but at least she was finally capable of something besides 'expressionless' or 'obviously miserable'. "I'm open to suggestions."

The two of them thought over what they wanted to do for a moment, breaking the silence at the same time.

"Let's find a job somewhere else," said Ahsoka.

"I think we should investigate," said Barriss.

"What, really?" asked Ahsoka sharply.

"I think we should try. You were right about a lot of things, Ahsoka. We do have a chance to fix the mistakes the Republic made."

"Even if that means hurting people?"

As expected, the reality had Barriss at a loss, opening her mouth, trying and failing to come up with a decent response.

"This is a mistake," continued Ahsoka. "Even if we ignore how another fight might affect you, that place was the home of Count Dooku. The dark side is probably intense there."

"It won't be pleasant, but I'll live."
"Don't be so sure. Are you even capable of fighting?"

A bit put off by the attitude, if understanding of the reasoning behind it, Barriss spent a few seconds fidgeting, trying to find the right words.

"I'm-"

"Barriss, if you says 'I'm fine' I swear..." Ahsoka trailed off.

"I'm...stable," replied Barriss after a bit of hesitation. "I'm certain I won't...well...you know."

Ahsoka did not know, and was about to inquire what that was supposed to refer to, exactly. Off the top of her head, it could mean Barriss would have an emotional breakdown, or go on an eerily stoic killing spree, or throw herself into the line of fire.

But she decided not to probe and figured it meant 'all of the above'. Not that it did much to ease her concerns.

"You've gone to one therapy session."

"And it helped a great deal. It was a good idea. You were right!"

Ahsoka met blatant mollification with blatant sarcasm.

"I'm glad you realized that. I have another great idea: attend more therapy sessions."

She instantly regretted her tone as she watched Barriss close her eyes and massage her temples, trying to center herself.

"There's a battle against the Empire going on throughout the galaxy. We can't sit around on Mirial because I'm stressed out."

'Stressed out? Do I even want to point out how much of an understatement that is? Half a day of sleep and she's still tightly wound."

"Then I'll go alone," suggested Ahsoka. "I can leave you enough credits to stay here on Mirial for a few weeks, drop off the weapon shipment, then come back after you've rested up more."

"Wasn't one of the reasons you broke me out of prison in the first place because you couldn't keep fighting the Empire all on your own? Charging into a major confrontation like what must be happening on Serenno sounds like exactly what you were afraid of. You'll get killed there."

_Dammit, I'd hoped she'd have forgotten about that. What was I thinking, Barriss never forgets anything._

"Why are you so intent on fighting again? I thought you hated violence."

Barriss clumsily sat down in the copilot's seat, eyes shifting between the floor and Ahsoka. "I do. I really do. Even so, talking with Dr. Cohl, and thinking on my own, I've realized what the problem was. Early in the war, I kept myself going because I convinced myself fighting in that moment could save more lives in the long run, either by ending the war quickly, or by forcing the Separatists to the negotiating table. It never worked, and the war dragged on and on with no end in sight. Now we both know the Sith were controlling both sides, and everything makes sense the more I think about it. Peace efforts were sabotaged, every victory countered by a defeat to maintain a stalemate that slowly eroded the Jedi until they were ready to be broken," she finished grimly. "It certainly worked on
"And you think now that Palpatine isn't controlling what we do, fighting for the greater good will actually work?"

The other shifted indecisively, not particularly certain of anything. "I think we have the ability to make a real difference against the Empire, not balance the sides in a war controlled by the dark side. And maybe," she began, pausing as she tried to work up the nerve to press the issue. "Maybe I can do something right this time."

Everything she said sounded completely earnest. The reasoning was as solid as she'd normally expect from Barriss, and though Ahsoka wasn't entirely confident in the decision, but maybe it could help her...

"If you start having another breakdown, we leave," said Ahsoka, powering up the hyperdrive and entering coordinates while the auto-pilot took them up through Mirial's atmosphere. "If it becomes apparent you're bottling stuff up again, we leave. Sound fair?"

"Yes," grumbled Barriss, hardly appreciating the overprotective treatment. After the ship jumped to hyperspace, she got up and walked out of the cockpit, the conversation leaving her drained emotionally. "I'm going back to sleep. Wake me up when we're close."

"Serenno is two days away!" shouted Ahsoka as Barriss turned into the corridor.

"...I'm going back to sleep. Wake me up when we're close."

The *Eclipse* eventually emerged from hyperspace far enough away from Serenno that the world was little more than greyish-tan speck against the backdrop of stars. The idea had been to keep a safe distance in case they arrived in the middle of a battle with imperial forces. As the freighter approached, it became apparent Ahsoka's concern was warranted when they drifted past the wreckage of a Star Destroyer. The damage was recent, the exposed internals of the ship still burning and sparking.

Their quiet observation of the situation was interrupted when a mechanical-sounding voice came through the comm speaker, startling both girls as it cut through the dead silence of the largely depowered vessel.

"Unidentified freighter, you have entered territory under the control of the Confederacy of Independent Systems. State your intentions or you will be fired upon."

To reinforce the point, several vulture droids, which had presumably been clinging to and drifting along unnoticed with the wreckage of the imperial warships, appeared on the *Eclipse*’s sensors, targeting the ship.

"Wait, wait! We're here dropping off a shipment of plasma cannons from Umbara," Ahsoka said frantically as she typed at the control panel, a dozen vulture droids flying around her ship. "Transmitting confirmation codes now!"

For several seconds, Ahsoka and Barriss waited for a reply while the red blips of the fighters slowed down and got in position behind them. Ahsoka was about to get up and bolt for the turret controls,
when the tactical droid's voice came through again, along with a path on the ship's navigation computer directing them towards an urban area in the planet's northern continent.

"You are late, but you are free to pass to the provided coordinates. Our fighters will escort you to the drop off point. Deviate from your path, and you will be destroyed."

As the transmission cut out, several more vulture droids pulled into a parallel course with the *Eclipse*, boxing them in.

Drifting through space under minimal engine power with their escort closely watching them, hundreds of Separatist warships were visible through the canopy, silhouetted against the planet beyond, growing larger and more numerous as they approached. The only other time Ahsoka had seen that many enemy ships in one place had been in the skies above Coruscant. Ahsoka stared out the canopy at the closest vulture droid as its head extended out, turned to stared right back at her with glowing red eyes, then retracted again as it veered off and joined one of hundreds of formations patrolling the surrounding space.

"How did they rally a fleet of this size?" asked Barriss. "Serenno must have always been heavily protected, but I've never heard of any Separatist world possessing planetary defenses of this magnitude."

"I don't know. News reports at the end of the war said the droid armies had all been shut down when the Separatist leaders were found and killed," said Ahsoka, her eyes moving across the immense length of a Separatist dreadnought they were flying past, bristling with weaponry, squadrons of tri-fighters circling around it. "Do you think this is a good thing, or a bad thing?"

"Bad in the sense that there's an immense fleet of warships ready to spread death and destruction across the galaxy, good in the sense they're mainly occupied by the imperial military."

On that note, the two of them went back to observing their surrounding as Ahsoka followed the prescribed path, drifting over the forested surface of Serenno to a city spread across a plain, the current seat of power of the planet looming over it from a neighboring cliff face.

The palace formerly home to Count Dooku.
"Ah, Serenno! It is good to be back," exclaimed Cici as she lowered the boarding ramp and rolled out into the spaceport.

"You've been here before?" asked Ahsoka.

"I've been all over," began the droid, switching to normal droidspeak once cargo droids approached to begin the process of unloading their shipment of Umbaran weapons. Thankfully, her dialect was comprehensible to Ahsoka.  

<\textbf{I liked some of the people here.}> 

While the two chatted, Barriss walked by, taking in the warm air.

<Nice to see you looking more lively, Barriss.>

"Excuse me?" asked Barriss, uncomprehending.

"Cici's glad you're feeling better," explained Ahsoka.

"Oh. Thank you."

The cargo droid provided a pad detailing the transaction and their payment, a port officer showed up explaining the fifty credit docking fee, the usual stuff, though Ahsoka couldn't shake her unease. This was straightforward, they were getting paid, why did she have a bad feeling about this? Barriss seemed to be of the same mind, eyes moving to every bit of over, ever passerby, few though there were.

The two of them saw the reason at the same time, in plain sight rather than slinking in the shadows. Standing in the exit archway leading out of the spaceport, silhouetted by the sunlight coming through the entrance.

Cad Bane.

Barriss was on edge, Ahsoka could feel it. Bane had never encountered her directly, but she'd seen his dossier and knew of his battles with the Jedi same as everyone else. Not to mention Ahsoka had told her friend enough about the bounty hunter for her to know this couldn't end well.

Bane was oddly quiet. Whatever game he was playing definitely couldn't be good for her and Barriss, but at the same time, he didn't take the obvious route of selling them out to the Serennians. A pair of Jedi could be a useful bargaining chip when dealing with the Empire. Or revealing their abilities could provide more incentive to keep the two on the side of the Separatists.

After several minutes of the droids unloading the shipment, he was still just standing there, eyeing their ship. Ahsoka and Barriss silently kept track of each other and alternated who kept him in sight while they directed the droids.

\textit{Maybe he's bad at reading the features of other species and honestly doesn't recognize me?}

\textit{No. No, that's stupid, he's a bounty hunter, he's got to be able to distinguish people of alien races even when they're disguised. I'm only wearing different clothes!}
Ahsoka kept up the businesslike demeanor until the local droids and humans were all out of earshot, then she and Bane turned angrily towards each other.

He didn't attack, though, calmly and leisurely walking over to them until he was close enough to talk, but far enough to mount a defense if she attacked him. As if he'd been politely waiting for her to finish attending to her business.

"Okay, Bane, what are you doing here?" she said bitterly.

"You know," he said, ignoring her question in as blatantly rude a tone as he could, "I could barely believe it when I heard your voice yelling for the fleet to hold their fire, young Jedi. Bounty postings say you're dead. I was rather upset I wasn't the one to turn your lightsaber in."

"Do you want to get your chance now?" she asked, hand moving to her belt, ready to draw her saber from its pouch.

"You would earn me quite a bounty...fortunately for you, I'm not exactly in a position to collect."

"And why's that?"

Bane pulled out a holographic display, showing a bounty posting- with a picture of him and a reward of five million credits to bring him in dead or alive.

"Because after I brought you to the Empire, I wouldn't have much time to enjoy my earnings."

_Huh. Somebody got on Palpatine's bad side._

_The enemy of my enemy is...still probably my enemy._

"Why are you even here?"

"I'm an independent contractor," hissed the hunter, annoyed. "The Empire may have some new toys, but most of their equipment is the same as what they used in the Clone Wars. And I know how to break it. Besides, with this bounty on my head, it's not like I want to leave the most heavily defended anti-imperial planet in the galaxy."

"You could try cowering in the darkness of Umbara instead," suggested Ahsoka, with a touch of mocking.

"Umbara surrendered to the Empire this morning. Propaganda on the holonet won't shut up about it," he explained, a grin forming as he noticed Ahsoka's alarm. Then, he turned to study Barriss. "Who's this?"

"This is Jana, my copilot," answered Ahsoka.

"Didn't know there was any Jedi by that name," said Bane, sounding rather unimpressed.

"She's not a Jedi."

"Sure, sure," he said, quite clearly not buying it. "I don't actually care."

After quietly taking the conversation in, studying the situation, Barriss finally interrupted the discussion. "You haven't told anyone else we're here, which means you need us for something. Something related to Ahsoka being a Jedi, otherwise you'd find someone else."

"Hm. Good to see your partner has some sense. Come on. We'll talk things over a drink. To work
with you...I'm gonna need a few," he said, taking several steps before realizing they weren't following. "What? You got something better to do?"

Ahsoka was perfectly content to stay where she was until Barriss walked past her, catching up with Bane, but getting in one comment.

"Welcome to the galaxy under the New Order, Ahsoka."

Against her better judgement, she followed after the other girl.

The Serennian tapcafe they wound up in kept the majority of the seating outdoors, allowing the patrons plenty of sun. Ahsoka watched Bane obsessively, noting his grimace as the three of them took a table at the terrace, in a corner away from the other customers. People like him preferred dimly-lit dives which offered plenty of cover, places to hide weapons, and make a quick exit. Plus, it's hard to look intimidating when you're being shaded by a bright green umbrella.

Though Bane knew how to put in the effort, the shade provided by his hat bringing out the creepy red of his eyes.

"Smuggling arms to fuel rebellion against civilization. How the noble Jedi have fallen."

"It's more noble than you think."

"Yes, Do you even know who you're working for?"

Ahsoka didn't know, exactly, though she wasn't about to let Bane act superior.

"They're a loose band of smugglers coordinating efforts to resist the Empire. And they know how dangerous that job is, and don't take unnecessary risks like tell everyone who they are."

"Sure they are," he said sarcastically, to Ahsoka's annoyance. He did know something she didn't. "I'm not going to point out your poor choice of employers. I'm here to talk business."

"Fine then. Talk. How did Serenno rally that fleet? The Separatist armies were all said to be shut down, easy pickings for the Empire."

"You have our good friend Count Dooku for that," said Bane, grinning with approval. "Seems he took extra precautions to keep his little corner of the galaxy safe, including overrides and safeguards to keep the orbiting fleet and a few sector fleets active and under control of his fellow pompous rich people in the event of his death."

"Why would he go to the trouble?"

"I don't know the details of how the Republic found the Separatist leaders or shut down the bulk of their forces, but they did it so easy, it cries out an inside job. Someone sold Dooku and his buddies out, but he didn't make it easy for them."

"Do you think Dooku was expecting to be betrayed?"

"Who knows?" growled Bane. "Guys like that are always prepared for anything, I'll give him that much. It's why he was the Count."
"Sounds paranoid," said Ahsoka.

"It's not paranoia if you're right," remarked Barriss.

\textit{That} caught Bane's attention, pausing for a second. "Heh. Smart girl," he said, smirking at Barriss as he took another sip of his drink before continuing. "Let's be realistic here," he said, waving out around the city, "All this, Serreno's independence, that big fleet in in orbit, it's all real impressive but it won't last forever. We both know it. The Empire will destroy those warships one by one, and the locals don't have the parts or the facilities to replace them. In a month, a year, five years, this planet's gonna burn. The local counts may have plenty of credits, but that's no good when the Empire's got deeper pockets."

"You have a way to protect the planet?" asked Ahsoka.

"I have a way to protect us. We both want to live. That's not going to be easy with the Empire in control of the galaxy. It'll be a bit easier if we work together to bring it down."

"And why, exactly, wouldn't you sell us out to the Empire to save your own skin?"

"Because I already sold out quite a few other people to the Empire to get on their good side, and they're coming after me anyway. Count yourself lucky we found each other this long after the Republic was reformed."

Now \textit{that} was the Bane she knew.

"Why do you need us? Don't you have other criminals and scum who can help you?"

"Because I can't use the Force, and neither can any of them," replied Bane disdainfully. "And Palpatine comes and goes from the imperial palace as he desires, without doing the courtesy of letting everyone know if he's there or not. I need some guarantee that he'll be home at the right time, and that means I need you to tell me when Coruscant is feeling particularly 'dark' or whatever you Jedi call it. I'd hate to go to all this trouble to find out he was at his summer home."

"And what's this incredible plan of yours?" asked Ahsoka, getting a bit annoyed at how she kept needing to ask questions Bane should be explaining to begin with if he wanted her cooperation.

"The 'Emperor' is the only person who can hold the Empire under his control. Kill him, and all those power-hungry admirals and governors will be at each other's throats trying to claim power. If that happens, nobody's gonna care about some runaway Jedi or an criminal bounty hunter. In fact, I'd expect business to be pretty good in that situation," explained Bane almost wistfully, before his voice got the edge back. "I'm going to take a dreadnought, drop it on him from orbit while putting so much stress on the engines it'll void the warranty, and configure every warhead in it to detonate when it hits the planet."

Ahsoka and Barriss stared in shock at Bane, who described the operation with the same level of casualness he'd ordered his drink.

"That's a horrible plan!" yelled Ahsoka.

"What're you screaming about?" protested Bane. "It'll be on autopilot. \textit{I'm} not flying the thing into the palace."

"That- that impact would- " began Barriss.

"Kill millions of people," finished Ahsoka.
Bane was nonplussed by their reaction. "I'm trying to bump off the most powerful and heavily protected man in the galaxy. You expect me to cut corners?"

"Can't you do it without killing millions of people?" asked Barriss.

"I can do just about anything I want if I've got enough credits to buy the right supplies. It's too bad 'Kill Palpatine without collateral damage' is outside my current price range."

"Well, you'll have to do it without us," said Ahsoka, standing up to leave.

"If you don't help me," he said calmly, "I'll let the Empire know you're alive. Then you'll have other bounty hunters coming after you, too."

"We'll take our chances. Come on B-Jana," she said, trying to control herself so as not to visibly react to the near-slip as Barriss walked next to her.

*Please. Who am I kidding. He knows.*

Wait.

*Dammit.*

"We" I said "We'll take our chances", I grouped Barriss with myself when talking about being hunted, he's not going to miss that, he knows she's a Jedi, and dammit dammit dammit we need to get out of here.

They only got a few steps as a transport pulled in front of her, eight commando droids leaping from it.

The agile droids surrounded the trio in seconds as a lone B1 battle droid, blue paint labeling it a pilot, stepped out of the speeder, holding a projector which produced a life-sized hologram of a woman. She looked about fifty, her arms were crossed, staring intensely at the small group. The projection elevated her image off the ground, though assuming it was actual size, she was pretty short, a few inches below Ahsoka. The long cape she wore identified her as one of the aristocracy of Serenno.

This can't end well.

Bystanders started to gather around, keeping their distance but all trying to get a good look at what was happening. Ahsoka felt many eyes focusing on her.

"Friends of yours?" she asked Bane.

"Pipe down and let me do the talking," he growled as he approached the hologram, bowed, and put on a respectful tone which almost sounded sincere, though Ahsoka knew better. "Countess Midla. I'm humbled by your presence."

"Bane," said the countess, not at all placated. It seemed she knew better, too. "Explain yourself."

"I was meeting with a pair of smugglers who just landed on the planet. I didn't think it was of immediate concern."

"You thought the appearance of *Jedi* would not be of interest to me?" she said, prompting Ahsoka to slowly reach for her saber, Barriss doing the same with a holdout blaster in the lining of her jacket.

*Dammit, we are not fooling anybody!*
"Your eminence, please, I merely thought these two Jedi would prove an asset in the coming battles with the Empire. I meant no disrespect to you."

"Then why was I not informed of their presence?"

"It was not your response that concerned me, it was your citizens," continued Bane, "The late Count Dooku's known connection to the Sith and anti-Jedi prejudices, along with the people of Serenno holding him in such esteem, could have complicated the situation."

Apparently satisfied by the explanation, if only barely, Countess Medla directed her orders to the commando droids.

"Bring them to the palace. Unharmed."

Ahsoka and Barriss got back to back and threw out their hands, sending the droids flying as they drew their weapons.

Bane stood back, not offering any help, only interested in the outcome.

Ahsoka ignited her lightsaber, slicing apart the closest two, deflecting blaster bolts back at two more.

Barriss, left with only a blaster, inexpertly shot the head off one downed commando. After two others got back on their feet and took aim, she gave up on the blaster and lifted them with the Force, moving them to the speeder they'd come in on and slamming them to the ground, their heads impacting the side of the vehicle fast enough to decapitate them. The last one was destroyed by the bayonet of its own gun as Barriss mentally wrenched from its hands and shoved it up its chin through the top of its head.

"We're not going anywhere we don't want," said Ahsoka, standing in the middle of a ring of scrapped droids, brandishing her saber.

The countess, still projected holographically and watching the situation unfold, appeared more impressed than angry at the destruction of her small force.

"My apologies. I wish to speak with you in person. If you will permit it, returned with this droid to the palace. I assure you, you will not be harmed. If you decline, you may leave. However, be aware I will not extend this invitation again," said the countess, signaling the pilot droid to lead them to the speeder. "Bane, continue with your current assignment. And never presume to decide what I should know again," she finished as the hologram vanished.

She turned to Barriss, hoping for some kind of suggestion, but her companion only shrugged and walked towards the speeder. With a bit of hesitation, Ahsoka sat in the seat next to her.

Well, she dislikes Cad Bane.

She can't be all bad.

Chapter End Notes

I came up with Midla after reading Star Wars: Bloodline as a sort of aggressive, Clone-Wars era Senator Leia.
Hence, she is small and will fight you.
Entering the central chamber, Ahsoka and Barriss were bathed in bright green light shining through the immense, tinted window overlooking the city beneath the cliff face. Silhouetted against the light was an almost absurdly high large in which the countess sat, in the flesh this time, studying her guests, flanked by a quartet of magnaguards.

As she approached her host, Ahsoka felt cold. Not a real physical sensation, it was the feeling of the darkness enveloping this place.

In this room, Count Dooku had coordinate the devastation of hundreds of worlds and ended countless millions of lives. A Sith Lord had lived and worked and plotted right where she was standing.

"Welcome to the palace," said Countess Midla, sounding genuine and comforting towards the two, in spite of the environment and the unnerving echo of her voice through the massive chamber. Ahsoka couldn't feel anything unusual about her; she probably didn't even realize how distorted the Force felt here.

"Somehow, I don't feel welcome," said Ahsoka.

Noting the obviously threatening situation she'd placed her guests in, Midla signaled for her magnaguards to leave the room, a pair of them walking out each of the two entrances flanking their mistress.

Even now that she was alone, Midla kept confident smile. "There's no need to be afraid, either here, or out in the city. In light of how you were exposed, I'm assigning a security detail to your ship. Bane did have a point in that this world doesn't care for Jedi," she explained as a hologram of the Eclipse appeared- with a squad of droidekas covering the landing pad.

"Comforting," said Barriss, nervously glancing around the room. The darkness here had her even more on edge than Ahsoka. "Now we can rest knowing we're surrounded by your forces at all times."

"No need to be afraid," Midla repeated. "They've been instructed to recognize you both and accept commands." The hologram zoomed in on one droideka guarding the bow of their vessel. "Any disturbances to report?" asked the countess.

The lead droideka beeped negatively in response, then the hologram was turned off, unexpectedly irking Ahsoka. Ever since that first conversation with Cici, she hadn't been able to stop thinking about how unnecessarily difficult it was for people to communicate with droids.

Freakin' vocabulators. What, are there patents restricting them for droidekas, too!?

"Your droidekas can speak?" asked Barriss, "The models normally used by the Separatists during the war weren't outfitted with vocabulators."

"I've deemed it necessary to allow them to communicate with maintenance workers," answered Midla. "They can be rather...creepy, standing there in silence when trying to talk to them. Personally, I've never been able to decipher any form of droidspeak, and it turns out there's a web of copyrights
determining which models can speak which languages. Outfitting an army of them to be communicative was logistically challenging.

Seriously?

How did I never notice this before?

Why doesn't anyone else think it's weird?

Ahsoka had to fight back those thoughts, there were much more important things to deal with at the moment. "Your people don't like Jedi, but you want our help. Did you realize the Jedi were set up to be killed during the war?"

"Do not act like the Jedi were guiltless in that conflict," Midla replied sternly, "You can only deflect so much blame onto the Sith. Ordinarily, I would've had any Jedi to arrive in my presence executed. But you two..." she said wistfully, "I know who you are. Ahsoka Tano, the 'Wrong Jedi', and Barriss Offee, bomber of the Temple."

Ahsoka's eyes flitted to her partner in time to catch Barriss suppress a scowl. "How did you recognize us?" she asked.

"The probe droids I have keeping an eye on Cad Bane performed facial recognition compared to known criminals, including Jedi fugitives, though you'll be pleased to know automated sweeps wouldn't be able to spot you. It was only when I personally took notice and changed the search parameters I learned your identities," explained the countess as she looked over a datapad motioning to Ahsoka. "You are supposed to be dead, bounty collected by the 'Ohnaka Gang', whoever they are, and as a result you aren't in current registries of galactic criminals. After I resolved that discrepancy, finding your partner was easy. You, Barriss, your new hairstyle and tattoos were enough to throw off the recognition, but you remain on a list of Ahsoka's associates and are known to be alive."

"Wait a moment. How can you find working with Jedi more of an issue than Cad Bane?" asked Barriss.

"Cad Bane is effective. The Jedi were not."

"He's a greedy, ruthless murderer!" exclaimed Ahsoka.

The countess merely shrugged. "If you only work with people you like, you'll quickly end up doing everything yourself."

"What makes us so special compared to other Jedi? We were only padwans, why would you want our help?" asked Ahsoka.

The countess looked flummoxed, as if the reason couldn't be more obvious. "Why, you left the Jedi, of course! In different ways, to be sure, but you both realized the error of your own order, and broke free of it. You refused to continue serving a corrupt government. I admired that decision."

"You approve of my actions?" asked Barriss, visibly tensing up.

"I wouldn't say I'm approving, but I am impressed. You struck at the heart of the Jedi, accomplishing a feat which would normally demand an army."

Barriss didn't dignify that, turning away and drifting around the room, quietly venting while leaving Ahsoka to do the talking.
While a bit put off by Barriss's odd reaction, the countess continued her discussion. "The key to defeating the Empire lies not in the raw power of our fleet. It lies in subtlety. All my wealth cannot produce the necessary armaments to form an military to challenge the Empire, but it can hire mercenaries to strike at key points. The fleet remains first and foremost a defense for thus planet while spies and saboteurs undermine the Empire on a thousand worlds. Raw destruction may send a message, but devastating the capital of the galaxy would be counter to my efforts," she explained. "Palpatine will die, and it will be at the moment which will best aid our overarching strategy."

"Meaning?" asked Ahsoka.

"Meaning I know why Bane's been eyeing my warships, and I've been keeping him under close guard."

*She's not helping Bane directly. It's a step in the right direction.*

"My advice is to lock him up immediately," said Ahsoka bitterly. "He's more trouble than you realize."

"I realize it perfectly, all the more reason to look for new help."

"You want to hire us? To do what?"

The countess shrugged noncommittally. "Whatever the situation demands. What's important is that I maintain a network of skilled agents, and what better agents could I want than those possessing skill in Jedi arts and top Republic military training? You can still fulfill your obligations as a smuggler. In fact, I encourage it. But you two would make the perfect operatives to oppose the will of the Emperor. The rewards will be great."

"Such as?" asked Ahsoka.

"For starters, upgrades to your vessel. A G-Class freighter is a fairly new product, but it lacks in speed and defense. I could have my mechanics outfit your ship until it's the most effective smuggling vessel in the galaxy, if you will act as my agents."

"This is what you brought us here for? To offer a vaguely defined job?" asked Ahsoka, increasingly irritated by the whole situation.

The confident smile disappeared, and Midla gave up on politeness. "I brought you here to make a point. The palace contains hundreds of battle droids of all classes. If I wanted you dead, I'd bring in more than a few commandos to do the job. You're in the heart of my territory, surrounded by my soldiers...and I'm asking for your help to stop the Empire. Do you accept, or not?"

It was a good offer. No demands for them to abandon any of their other goals. And with a Serennian Countess footing the bill, they wouldn't be running low on credits any time soon.

"What do you think?" she asked Barriss. Through the dark cloud surrounding the palace, she could barely sense the other's presence and had almost forgotten about her.

The response wasn't exactly the decisive input she'd been hoping for.

"It's your call."

Ahsoka's eyes were fixed on her new associate as she and the countess shook hands.
"We have got to come up with better aliases. And backstories. We're too easy to spot," said Ahsoka, pacing back and forth in their quarters on the Eclipse. "I'd really rather not get reconstructive surgery for my face."

Barriss changing her tattoos worked...maybe I should change my stripes? she thought, glancing over her lekku in the tiny wall mirror.

"It's annoying, but I don't think it's as big a problem as you believe. Cici noticed your lightsaber, we were only found by the countess because of Bane, who knows you personally," explained Barriss, followed by a guilty pause. "My therapist knows."

"What?"

"She knows our real names, too. She's seen me before, six years ago."

"How does she know my name?"

"I...told her. Accidentally."

Barriss...

Ahsoka slapped her forehead with her palm as she lied down in her bed, not interested in pressing the matter any further.

"Ahsoka, I need to ask you something."

"Shoot," responded Ahsoka, reluctantly rolling over to face Barriss and continue the conversation.

"How..." she started, fidgeting and struggling to find the words, "how bad a person am I?"

What.

"What."

"It's just, people are dying in wars every day. On each planet the Empire conquers, the number of people dead is orders of magnitude greater than the people I killed at the temple bombing, and it doesn't seem to matter at all. As Jedi, we were taught that acts of violence are deplorable not only due to the immediate harm caused, but the corruption and darkness they spread to others connected to it. What I did...if I hadn't killed those people, how different would things really be? Could it have prevented the fall of the Republic? All the pain the Empire spreads? Does anything I did have consequence?"

"I doubt it," answered Ahsoka, not liking where this was going.

"Then what's the point of me feeling this way? Bane, the Empire, they're plotting an act that will end millions of lives, and they don't even care."

"Barriss, feeling guilt is what separates you from monsters like them," explained Ahsoka. "I don't want you to feel miserable or hate yourself for what you did, you don't deserve to live like that, but don't think for a second it wasn't wrong because there are people doing a whole lot worse."

As Ahsoka talked, Barriss started getting anxious, shaking her head in response. "I'm not trying to avoid responsibility. Never."
"You at least have an excuse. You were sick. Bane and the Empire know exactly what they're doing," explained Ahsoka, seeing her response was doing little to ease Barriss's concerns. Thankfully, she got an idea. "Would you like to meditate with me?"

"Yes," Barriss said eagerly, as the two shifted into the appropriate positions in their respective beds and closed their eyes.

Barriss's breathing was sharp and irregular. Even Ahsoka, never particularly concerned by things like meditation, could tell how off her game Barriss was. She made her steadier breathing a bit louder, subtly letting her counterpart synchronize with her.

Opening her eyes after several minutes of calm, Ahsoka smiled at the sight of her friend with an expression of real peace on her face, the first time she'd seen such in over a year.

Chapter End Notes

Everybody gets that Barriss is messed up, but one thing I've found while writing her that makes it difficult is how she's messed up in so many ways it's tough to figure out how she's going to emotionally crush herself this time. Is she going to compartmentalize and shut out her emotions as she contemplates the weight of her crimes? Start fighting a panic attack as she realizes some new consequence of what she did? Go lie down because she's tired all the time? Decisions, decisions.
Ahsoka sat atop the Eclipse, taking in the sun and cool air while Serennian techs worked on her ship. All the droidekas standing around the landing pad were doing little to brighten her mood.

One of them was patrolling around the perimeter of the landing pad, walking with a noticeable limp, or whatever you call it when the rear leg of a mechanical tripod isn't working. Ahsoka went back into the ship, grabbed her tool kit, and headed out to take a look, studying the awkward motion.

"Stop," she said, "I want to try and repair your leg."

The droideka droned in compliance as it came to a halt. Ahsoka crouched down to examine the joint where the problem seemed to be occurring, and pulled out a hydrospanner to begin dismantling it.

"That's a bad idea," came Cici's voice, her teal and white bulk rolling up to Ahsoka. "Droidekas are unstable. It needs to be in ball mode for maintenance, especially if you're working on the legs. Take that joint apart incorrectly, it'll fall on you."

"I'm only removing the casing to find whatever's jamming it."

"You're underestimating how finicky repairing these guys can get. They were built to be dedicated mobile turrets, not to make things convenient for maintenance crews."

"Well, all right. Okay, um, droideka, collapse into ball mode."

Meanwhile, three of the other droidekas had arranged themselves in a triangle around Ahsoka and their damaged comrade. Their orders were to protect the ship and its crew, after all, and Ahsoka and Cici clustering together like that warranted their attention.

Not that Ahsoka wanted those things staring at her.

The damaged destroyer complied with the order, rolling slightly to bring its rear leg to the top of its body where it would be easier to work on. Ahsoka stepped back and let Cici dismantle the leg, exposing the servo and revealing what appeared to be a hairpin fixing it the casing in place of proper screws. Cici dashed back to the ship and returned with the correct size.

"How did this get in here?" she asked, bewildered for a moment before figuring this was some slipshod repair performed by an idiot tech and throwing the thing into the trash. "Alright, Pin you're free to go," she said as Cici finished reassembling the joint, then watched the droideka walk away, much more smoothly now, the other three following it and getting into a discussion. Ahsoka couldn't quite figure out what they were saying, but they were quite intrigued by the newly dubbed 'Pin'.

Are they...asking how to get their own names?

Before she could pursue this train of thought further, Ahsoka perked up as she remembered something important. "Thank you, Cici," she said, pulling a handful of credits out of her pocket and handing them to the astromech.
"What's this?" asked Cici.

"It's your first cut of our earnings."

The dome head jerked back in surprise, regarding Ahsoka for a moment in silence. Her left tool rack spun around, extending a manipulator arm with which she took the credits and stuffed them into a vacant compartment on the side of her head.

Cici turned away and rolled towards the cluster of droidekas, speaking to them in the chirps and beeps one would expect of an astromech.

<Attention droids. In the short time since you were activated, you have likely interacted with many organic meatbags. Different shapes, sizes, species, functions. It may be confusing to you, but you can know one thing with certainty,> explained Cici, turning to look and point at Ahsoka. <This organic is the best one. Her name is Ahsoka. She has weird floppy head things that don't seem to serve any purpose, and after seeing the preprocessed garbage she eats, the fact she has a sense of taste when I don't frustrates me deeply. But she's awesome nonetheless. That is all. You may return to your duties.>

The droidekas all turned slightly with their three awkward legs to stare at Ahsoka for a moment, making her pretty uncomfortable, then they got back to walking around and guarding the ship.

"Anyway, how do know how to maintain droidekas?" asked Ahsoka as she unwrapped a protein bar. She could practically feel Cici judging her eating habits at this point, but was too hungry to care.

"I repaired them all the time during the war," the droid said casually.

Ahsoka nearly choked on the first mouthful.

"You were a Separatist astromech!?"

"Yeah. Is that a problem?"

"You were helping Count Dooku conquer the galaxy!" said Ahsoka, exasperated by the astromech.

"Oh, yeah, I feel all terrible about opposing the glory and freedom of the Republic. After all, if I had been on your side, I'd be able to do stuff like vote in elections and decide where I wanted to work and not be classified as property? Right? Or were the two sides functionally indistinguishable to a droid such as myself? I forget."

"...Point taken. Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

"It didn't seem important. And you just agreed that it isn't. Besides, you didn't trust me enough to talk about your past as a Jedi, I figured that out on my own."

"Cici!" shouted a voice from the entrance of the landing pad. Countess Midla, in person again, grinning widely, this time flanked by ten magnaguards.

"Well this day just got a whole lot more fun," remarked the astromech as she spun around as fast as her servos could manage, racing over towards the woman. One of the magnaguards came close to smashing the little round droid, only stopping because Midla rushed past it.

"My Lady," said Cici respectfully, lowering her dome in a sort of bow, then raising it to look at Midla. "I was hoping you'd be around here somewhere. How's the yacht?"
"Not running quite as well as when you were maintaining it. I see you still have your custom vocabulator intact. Been having fun running from the law?" replied the countess happily, eyes flitting between the droid and Ahsoka, who had been confusedly watching this bizarre scene play out. "You two are acquainted?"

"Cici came with my freighter, the Eclipse," explained Ahsoka, suddenly becoming more interested in Cici's background on Serenno. "She's my droid."

"Is she..." said Midla with a hint of annoyance at the possessive, then speaking with what sounded like genuine concern as she kneeled down and hugged Cici. "So this is where you've been since the end of the war? Hauling cargo for smugglers? Oh, my dear, favorite droid deserves so much better than that!"

"You're absolutely right about that," replied Cici as she gazed up at Ahsoka approvingly. "But I believe I've found a good boss for the time being."

Midla seemed accepting of her old mechanic's choice of employment. "If you ever become dissatisfied with your work, make your way back to Serenno. I've got use of your abilities."

"You're the one who gave Cici her custom vocabulator?" asked Ahsoka.

"Among other things," Midla said as she checked over her former employee to make sure she was in good condition, taking note of every dent, scuff, and scratch, picking a bit of dirt out of a crevice. "Modifying Cici beyond what was considered legal was simply one small act of defiance against the corrupt laws of the Republic. That government may have claimed slavery abolished in its space, but the state of droids proved that was never true."

What other modifications does she have?

Ahsoka began to realize that her droid might not be entirely trustworthy.

I don't want a repeat of the 'Goldie' incident.

"If you'll excuse me, Cici, I need to discuss some sensitive information with your new employer."

"You got it. I've got to check on those techs you assigned to my ship," said the droid as she rolled up the ramp into the vessel.

"You're lucky to have that droid," said Midla as she watched the astromech roll away. "She has a wide range of skills. I ensured she was equipped with them personally."

"You don't mind me taking her?"

"Not at all. Considering I want you to succeed in however you're fighting the Empire, it's all the more important to me that your support is reliable."

"How did she get away from you, anyway?" asked Ahsoka.

"Oh, I'd 'generously donated' her to the CIS Navy. She'd been feeding me information on fleet activities relating to my political opponents in the Trade Federation and Banking Clan. A year into the war, I lost contact," explained Midla, frowning for a moment. "I expect Dooku had a hand in that, somehow."

Ahsoka was instantly alert as she finished realizing her droid was definitely not trustworthy.
"At least, she wouldn't have been a short time ago. But now..."

"I've decided on your first assignment, to be completed as soon as my techs are finished with your freighter," said Midla.

"I'd rather not discuss this without Barriss around."

"Of course," obliged the countess. "I admire your consideration for your partner, but this is rather urgent. Where is she?"

"She's...around somewhere. Walking the streets with two of the droidekas. Having a bit of an 'off day'."

She needs it.

The two of them stood around in an uncomfortable silence, their eyes drifting around the landing pad, slowly gravitating towards the entrance as if they expected Barriss to walk through any second so they could get started.

"When will she return?" asked the countess impatiently. "I didn't come out here, meeting you in person, only to get stood up."

"Hey, don't blame this on Barriss, you didn't bother to call ahead."

Midla shrugged, quietly admitting the error, standing around for another minute, rapping her fingers on her crossed arms, brushing away loose stands of grey and brown hair, trying to keep herself occupied with something until she was sick of wasting time.

"You can check things over with Barriss and contact me later if there's a problem, but I believe you'll find your first assignment agreeable nonetheless," she said, holding out a datacard to Ahsoka. "An information packet I need delivered to Senator Riyo Chuchi."

Chapter End Notes

If you find it at all implausible that Cici is Midla's old droid, it's Star Wars, everybody knows everybody here. I bet Cici and Chopper were both abandoned at the battle of Ryloth and ended up in an Enemy Mine situation wandering around the wilderness.

One thing about Star Wars that always bugged me is how, unlike nearly every other scifi work with artificial intelligences, there's practically no discussion of the rights of AIs. Droids are slaves, they're bought and sold and destroyed, and while some characters genuinely care about droids, many people view them as appliances and they have no legal standing.
Barriss walked through the streets of Carannia, trying to keep her mind off the inevitable battles with the Empire. Browsing through shops. Taking in the cool, sunny day. Getting looked upon with disdain by random citizens because Jedi weren't welcome on Separatist worlds, and she'd very obviously outed herself in public when fighting with Ahsoka.

Her escort of two droidekas clanking around beside her probably wasn't helping to diminish the judgement.

"Jana, wasn't it?" came a deep, warbling voice from behind her, stopping her in her tracks. "I hope you find the city hospitable."

"Cad Bane," she said with a polite nod of acknowledgement, but otherwise in no mood to deal with this. "I'm afraid I'm too busy to talk. Too much to do." Then she went back to aimlessly walking the streets without any intention of doing anything.

Unfazed by the dismissal, Bane followed along. "Perhaps I can walk with you. I was wondering if you'd considered my proposal at all since our discussion got interrupted."

"Ahsoka already told you 'no'," replied Barriss, avoiding eye contact with the bounty hunter as she studied different shops. One thing she was glad for was that with the addition of a notorious bounty hunter to the little group, the locals had changed from providing contemptuous glares as she passed to giving the exile, criminal, and war droids a wide berth. After a minute, they had the alley to themselves.

"I'm not here about her. I want to talk to you. To get rid of Palpatine, I need a Jedi."

Mentioning the order was a mistake, finally getting Barriss to face Bane directly on the off chance he would take a hint and leave her alone.

"If that's so important, look somewhere else. I'm not a Jedi."

*Neither is Ahsoka, really.*

"The way you handled those droids yesterday says different," he said, calling back to how she'd used the Force against the enemy droids. While he was standing right behind her.

_Dammit._

Without even a remotely plausible explanation, Barriss simply replied, "I'm not interested."

"Work with me, and you can get rid of Palpatine by next week."

"Killing one man won't heal the galaxy," she said coldly as she turned away from Bane.

"It won't? How long do you think the Empire can last without an Emperor?"

"They'll find a replacement."

"Who? You think he'd let one of his moffs take command? And when he's dead and there's no named successor, you think all those admirals and governors will all get together and play nice, or do you think they'll cut each other down 'til there's nothing left but a dying remnant? Dooku died not long ago, there's no word on Palpatine having a new apprentice. Yet. Clock's ticking on that one."
Think of how many lives you could save in the long run."

Bane took a few steps closer as he talked. Much closer than Barriss was willing to tolerate. She wasn't sure whether she wanted to protect herself, to fight, or what she should do, until the obvious option came to mind.

"I need help!" she shouted, prompting the droidekas flanking her to activate their shields, unfold their blaster cannons, and put themselves between Barriss and Bane, ready to turn him to ash on her orders. She'd never been so glad to have those things nearby. Perhaps Midla had the right idea about personal defense.

The protectiveness of the droids proved enough for even Bane to back off, though not enough to make him leave outright.

"This is the most effective way to bring down the Empire," he said. "If you have a better plan, I'd love to hear it."

"You want to launch an attack of mass devastation to kill one man!"

"The number of people dead won't be nearly as high as what'll happen when the Empire starts spreading across the galaxy," he said with an air of false reassurance. "Besides, you strike me as being smart enough know ending a few lives can save a lot more, and sometimes, it seems like the right thing to do. Am I right?" he said, growling out the words in frustration.

*He knows. He knows who I am.*

"You don't care about them, you're only trying to topple the Empire to protect yourself from the Emperor's wrath."

"What does it matter if I care? Doesn't mean I won't be saving lives in the long run."

Barriss thought about it. Whether or not Bane's motivations were genuine, he had a point. All the death and destruction caused by the Republic would only get worse now that the veneer of ethics restricting the military was gone.

It was tempting.

"No," she said, shutting her eyes, trying to stop herself from thinking about this any further.

Bane could sense her wavering, and was about to lay on more pressure.

"Why don't you-"

"I SAID NO!" she shouted as she threw out her hand, knocking Bane back several meters into the wall of a building.

Barriss struggled with what to do, almost reaching out to help Bane up and apologizing, realizing that would make her vulnerable if he decided to attack her, but she shouldn't have done that, to use her power for such a petty reason...

While she failed to work out a clear course of action, Bane got up on his own and walked away without another word. Barriss headed in the opposite direction, wanting to get back to Ahsoka as soon as possible.
"Hold still," said Ahsoka as she applied the final spray of paint, holding up a mirror to her subject's glowing red photoreceptors. "What do you think?" she asked Pin, who chirped with approval.

"What the heck are you doing with my tools?" asked Cici, glancing down at all the equipment and paint laid out in the loading zone.

"I've been giving the droidekas paint jobs to distinguish the ones with names."

Cici's dome spun around the landing pad, studying the designs Ahsoka had painted on a few of the battle droids. "And how many have names, exactly?"

"Not many. So far, there's Pin, Naberrie, Glow, Hinge, and Droideka #5."

"Why doesn't Droideka #5 have some idiosyncratic name?"

"Because he's got a smart mouth," said Ahsoka, glaring over at one of the droids. Despite having absolutely no ability to express emotions, it was quite clearly glaring right back at her. "Oh, don't give me that look, you started it! Besides, one of my friends got named 'Fives', and you will be happy with what you've been given!"

The discussion sounded harsh, but really, Ahsoka was having a great time working on her bodyguards, chuckling as D-5 walked away in a huff. She went back to finishing Hinge's markings when she picked up an odd sound in the air, barely perceptible, even to her hearing.

Or, it was at first, but growing louder and louder every second.

It sounded like screaming, except clearly not produced by living creatures. Too low, too constant, too artificial.

Exactly like what she'd heard on Umbara.

Ahsoka dropped her tool and leapt onto the top of her ship, staring into the sky as dozens of black shapes pierced the clouds, spraying green laser bolts at the city below.
"Cici, take this datacard, get in the ship, and be ready to take off when I get back with Barriss!" shouted Ahsoka as she ran for the landing pad exit.

"On it!" yelled the droid as she rolled onto the Eclipse, shouting at the techs who were still inside to get off her ship or she would drop them out from high orbit.

Fighting against the flow of locals and a few alien travelers trying to get onto a working ship, Ahsoka eventually managed to break free of the spaceport, eyes sweeping the street trying to find a greenish-yellow face in the mob.

*Barriss, where are you?*

First thing she had to do was get her hands on a speeder in the middle of this chaos. Somehow. In the middle of an invasion where every vehicle was getting used. In a way that wouldn't prevent some innocent civilian from getting to safety because she stole their ride.

*This is smart. Yeah, this is a great idea, Ahsoka.*

As she got a few blocks away from the spaceport, a fibercord wrapped itself around her wrist, the force of it tightening knocking her off-balancer and pulling her to the ground.

One cord was hardly enough to restrain Ahsoka, and once her lightsaber made short work of it, she leapt to her feet, ready for a fight.

*Now to figure out who just attacked me.*

...

*Who am I kidding?*

*It's Cad Bane.*

*Who else.*

Sure enough, the bounty hunter descended from one of the rooftops down to street level with his rocket boots, glaring at Ahsoka.

"You're picking *right now* to pull this!" she yelled furiously over the sound of aerial laser fire, waving her hands around at the fighter-filled sky. "Wait a minute, you're behind this somehow, aren't you!"

"I'm not helping the Empire, you stupid little girl!" he shouted, him patience exhausted. "I'm as dead as everyone else on this planet if I stay. And if I leave, I'll still be dead eventually, unless I can kill Palpatine first and put end to this."

"You can't force me to help you!"

"I know, I know. You're too tough," he said mockingly, casually adjusting his hat, "but I think your little green friend will be more cooperative if she knows I've got you."

Bane raised his right arm, firing several tranquilizer darts from his gauntlet. They were stopped in midair by Ahsoka, then countered with several chunks of debris from a damaged building, throwing
them at the bounty hunter, narrowly missing as his boots propelled him up to a neighboring balcony.

The bounty hunter open fire on Ahsoka, the gaseous blue shots indicating his intent to stun and capture her. Unfortunately for him, stun shots were slower and less energetic, making it all the easier for Ahsoka to block them with her saber. Unfortunately for her, they also dissipated easier and couldn't be deflect back.

Several seconds of stalemate later, Ahsoka reached out and shattered the glass of a window over Bane's head, sending large shards down on top of him. As he was distracted trying to get out of the way, she leapt up to his level, coming at him at close range, trying to cut him down once and for all.

As she swung her saber, Bane grabbed her wrist, holding the blade directed away from the two of them as each tried to throw the other to the ground.

"Y'know, you could've stabbed me a second ago if you held your blade like a normal person," he quipped.

While he forced her lightsaber away from him, be brought his other gauntlet to bear. Had she not used the Force to push his arm away, he would've burned off half of Ahsoka's face with the wrist-mounted flamethrower. After the first attempt, she got a physical grip on the flaming gauntlet, shoving it away as the two were locked for a moment before Bane kicked her in the stomach, sending her off the balcony and landing painfully on a pile of debris.

Bane pulled a grenade out of a pouch on his belt, casually tossing into over to Ahsoka, who levitated it between her and her attacker until it detonated.

Through the smoke cloud, another group of darts flew at her She flung out her hand and tried to use the Force to stop them again, but reacted an instant too late, the leading dart prickng her palm.

Jedi training included techniques for resisting the effects of toxin, and Ahsoka had fought off unconsciousness before, but whatever Bane had put in those darts was powerful stuff and had her disoriented immediately. It took all her willpower to force herself to stand up and continue moving, even though she could hardly even feel her legs.

Bolting down the street, heart pounding, Ahsoka started smacking herself in the face to keep the adrenaline flowing, seriously considering burning herself with her saber to inflict enough pain to stay awake. Bane could easily keep up with her thanks to those boots of his, and was doing exactly that, hovering a few stories above ground and firing stun blasts at her.

Over the tops of the buildings, enormous landing crafts could be seen descending over the edges of the city, each of them large enough to deploy hundreds of soldiers and mechanized infantry.

*This is a waste of time, I need to find Barriss before we get overrun by an army!*

A group of STAP speeders were flying in her direction, probably racing to confront the landing imperials at their landing points.

*That'll do.*

As they flew over, Ahsoka leapt onto the one at the rear of the formation and kicked the B1 pilot off, almost feeling bad for the screaming, flailing droid as it crashed to the ground, remembering it was technically on her side now. Regardless, she split off from the rest, speeding through the streets trying to find her partner and leaving the fight behind.
Bane watched disappointedly as his target sped away, too fast for him to catch up even with his boots helping him. It was possible the tranquilizer in her system would eventually knock her out and she'd stop for a break.

More likely was that she'd crash that speeder and kill herself. But it would be a waste of time to pursue.

With no Jedi, and no way to steal a warship, this little venture wasn't going anywhere.

He looked up into the sky, watching it more and more imperial fighter and transports descend onto Serenno.

It wasn't like he'd have the necessary munitions to pull off his plan after today, anyway.

He shrugged, activated his boots, and started flying towards his escape ship. There would be other days. It's not like the Empire was going anywhere.

Barriss ran through the streets, trying to find her way back to the ship, droidekas rolling beside her to keep her protected.

Two groups of people were on the streets at this moment, the rest having holed up in whatever building they deemed the safest. One was trying to get to the spaceport, and since most people with the ship were near the center of the town at the spaceport, the majority of people were trying to flee the city altogether, heading outward. And Barriss had to work her way around the horde to get back to the ship.

At least, she thought that was the direction she was headed.

She wasn't entirely sure.

Though the available indicators, like the steadily growing noise of the baster fire being exchanged as the war zone closed in, and the rapidly thinning numbers of civilians, told her she was on the right track to get to the middle of the city.

The sound of one of those new imperial fighters grew louder behind her, and she turned in time to see it coming down in an attack run, spraying green laser bolts over the area. Much of the street was torn apart, the blast knocking her down, and the fighter pulled up as her droideka escort was disintegrated by the shots.

*It was targeting the droids, not me*, she thought, with a bit of relief as she picked herself up. The last thing she needed was to be going up against fighters on foot.

Taking cover behind some rubble, she tried to sense where Ahsoka was through the Force. To find that bright spot amidst the panic and turmoil. Hopefully, she was waiting back with the *Eclipse*, anticipating Barriss would get back as fast as she could.

More likely, she had run out searching for Barriss and now they were both lost in a foreign
environment.

A moment before it happened, she anticipated danger, ducking down further as a pair of blaster bolts flew over her head. Before the attackers could aim again, she sprung up and leapt over a wrecked landspeeder, lowering herself as more shots flew overhead.

_Two enemies, at least. Using...stun shots?_ she thought as she noticed the blue weapons fire.

_They want me alive. Why?_

Barriss peaked around her cover, the brief glimpse letting the enemy soldiers know she was still there and giving them reason to continue firing. Still, it gave her a good view of the battlefield.

Good enough to manipulate objects without a direct line of sight.

Such as the damaged B2 battle droid on the ground behind them.

The moving scrap drew the troopers' attention, probably mistaking it for a still-active enemy unit, distracting them long enough for Barriss to get out from behind cover and rip their guns out of their hands, pulling them through the air and taking one for herself while the second dropped to the ground. The stormtroopers reached for their sidearms, only to get shot with several stun blasts each, to make sure that armor of theirs wouldn't let them get back up again in a few seconds.

Running towards her defeated adversaries and rummaging through their supplies, she took a weapon from one troopers belt, freezing as she recognized its design.

A cortosis vibroblade, lightsaber-resistant, identical to the model used by the guards in her prison.

They were expecting Jedi.

_They're looking for Ahsoka and I, _she realized, as she heard another pair of footsteps approaching.

Through the smoke, a new enemy approached. Tall, thin, clad in black armor. Whoever he was, the imperial crest on his shoulder made it clear he wasn't there to help her, and she didn't hesitate to open fire.

The new arrival ignited a red lightsaber, casually dispersing the stun shots as he stepped forward, getting close enough to slice off the end of the rifle. Barriss pulled away and activated the vibroblade, scared, but willing to put up more of a fight, and curious as to who was wielding a lightsaber in the name of the Empire.

"Who are you?" she asked.

The enemy pulled off his black helmet, revealing the white skin and red facial markings of a Pau'an, yellow and black eyes studying her intently. He grinned at her menacingly, displaying his thin, sharp teeth.

"I am the Inquisitor. It's a pleasure to see you again, Padawan Offee."
Barriss and the dark figure, this 'Inquisitor', exchanged blow after blow, the way she was being toyed with becoming increasingly clear as the duel was dragged out.

It was hopeless. Ignoring the level of power separating a lightsaber and a vibroblade, even a cortosis one, the difference in skill was too great. Lightsabers, while heavier than they appeared, had their centers of mass located in the hilt. Wielding a heavy, solid metal blade, Barriss was left awkwardly and ineptly swinging it while trying to compensate for the shifting weight and the stress it put on her wrist, along with requiring much more energy for her to lift, things she had never trained in.

“Barriss Offee,” said the Inquisitor again. “I’m pleasantly surprised to see you’re still alive. I had hoped to talk to you personally.”

"Why would you want to talk to me?" she asked. “Do I know you?”

The Inquisitor continued the conversation while deftly blocking Barriss’ attacks, barely even acknowledging they were fighting as he talked.

“We’ve met once. You certainly left an…impact on me.”

“What are you talking about?”

The Inquisitor chuckled. “What has it been? Only a year? I suppose you couldn’t have realized it at the time, but I want you to know exactly how much you inspired me on that day, such a short time ago.” he gestured at the air dramatically. “How did you put it? ‘The Jedi are the ones that should be put on trial’? It struck a chord with me.”

Barriss looked over her opponent, trying to find some indication of who he was.

“I’m sorry. I don’t remember you,” she said, seeing his expression of disappointment at the failure of recognition as an opportunity to strike. It wasn't enough of an advantage, and he still managed to block her once more.

The two blades locked, both dualists trying to overpower the other with brute force. But he was larger and heavier than she was. With the edge in strength, he didn’t need to get around her defense, as her feet slid against the ground, struggle to stay balanced.

And with the height advantage, the downward force being applied by the saber began to slowly bring Barriss to her knees, and eventually knocked her blade aside. Overconfident in seeing her disarmed and letting his guard down, Barriss kicked him in the stomach and ran, only for the Inquisitor to raise a stone of pavement at the correct spot to trip her, sending her face-first into the ground.

“I think I was a bit overly concerned by your lack of memory," he said, unconcerned by the gash on Barriss's head. "You wouldn’t recognize me. After all, you’ve never seen my face before today.”

Thanks to that last bit of information, it didn’t take long to piece together. There were only so many options. “You were one of the temple guards who brought me in?” Barriss said, horrified at where she knew this was headed.
The Inquisitor, on the other hand, was delighted by the progress the conversation had made.

“Yes! You were right, Padawan Offee. About everything. About the Jedi. Their hypocrisy, their blindness, their destructiveness. You can still save yourself. Join me, and finish what you began. Eliminate every last trace of the Order, wipe it from the galaxy!”

“My speech? That was all it took? You’re a temple guard! One of the most committed groups within the Jedi!”

“The smallest doubt can shake the greatest belief. A fact I’m sure you’re quite familiar with,” he said.

Her eyes darted around, looking for a way to save herself. She had no weapon, no way to call for help.

There was no escape.

Her back was to a wall, and the Inquisitor kept getting closer.

Having no other option, Barriss threw up her hands.

“Okay. I’m in.”

Despite the confidence with which he’d presented the offer, the Inquisitor wavered slightly, looking a bit surprised, the red blade staying at the level of Barriss's throat.

“You’re serious?”

“Yes. Really. Let’s do it. The hatred is flowing through me. I’m all for the dark side. When do we start? Is there a form I need to sign? Do I have to wear all black?” she said, trying to act sarcastic and nonchalant, like Ahsoka, but she could hear her voice cracking with fear.

The Inquisitor kept his lightsaber steady, glancing around the environment. It was obvious how dishonest Barriss was being, but as she’d also realized, she had no means of escaping him. There wasn’t any obvious trap, nothing to buy time for, no apparent ploy other than lying in an attempt to save her own skin.

A perfectly acceptable reason to join him, as far as he was concerned.

*What do I do?* thought Barriss, trying to find a way out of this situation.

*There aren't any battle droids nearby to work as a distraction.*

*Do I go with him, and hope I can find a way to escape later?*

*Or...or...*

*What's that sound?*

Barriss turned her head to see a STAP speeder rounded the corner several blocks down, racing down the street, obscured by the smoke and debris but heading straight for the duelists. The Inquisitor seemed intrigued by its appearance, providing enough of a distraction for Barriss to inch away from him.

*Who's driving that thing?*

The STAP opened fire on the Inquisitor, forcing him to back before he deflected a few shots back at
the charging speeder until it started wobbling out of control. Eventually it listed off course to the point it began grinding against a wall, metal plates sparking as it went, but still firing wildly.

**Ahsoka. Definitely Ahsoka.**

Once the speeder finally broke down and crashed, Barriss could see no one was at the controls, thankfully.

**Think. If Ahsoka abandoned the vehicle partway through the run, where would she go?**

Barriss scanned the surrounding buildings, trying to predict whatever tactic Ahsoka would use so maybe she could help. Use the Force to propel debris at the Inquisitor from a concealed position? She was certainly clever enough to try something like that, and if she and Ahsoka attacked him from different directions, they might be able to take him out.

Ahsoka dropped down out of nowhere and landed directly between Barriss and the Inquisitor, lightsaber humming, and shouted at their opponent. "Over here!"

...Really?

The Inquisitor's saber deployed a second blade, and to both Barriss's confusion and curiosity, the two blades began spinning around his hand on the circular crossguard.

Ahsoka lunged forward without fear and jammed the usual weapon's movement with her own blade, then struck back with furious blow after blow, keeping him away from Barriss. "I was trained by the most powerful knight in the order. You won’t beat me because of some fancy saber!"

“And I’ve studied under the dark lord. A mere padawan like yourself, restrained by the trappings of the Jedi order, isn’t strong enough to face the power I wield," he said derisively, pushing her back again and again, examining every movement she made. "You look unwell, Padawan Tano."

The Inquisitor was right, Barriss could see that as she studied her friend, unable to find any visible injury.

"I can do this all day!" yelled Ahsoka defiantly, visibly wobbling.

Silently flinging out his hand, the Inquisitor sent Ahsoka flying into the same wall Barriss had hit, leaving both of them lying on the ground, too injured to keep going. He glanced between the two former padawans, sizing up the threat they posed, which wasn't much. “Consider this a lesson to you both. You cannot win the fight against the Empire. However, you will both be shown mercy if you join it.”

“I’ll never turn to the dark side,” spat Ahsoka as she got to her feet, clutching her side.

In response, the Inquisitor lifted her and slammed her into a wall again, finally knocking her unconscious, her lightsaber dropping to the ground and rolling towards Barriss.

"Indeed. A pity, though your mistake need not be your friend’s,” he remarked mockingly, knowing Ahsoka couldn't hear him, then turned to Barriss. “Here’s your first opportunity as an inquisitor. Kill her. Eliminating an opponent as dangerous as her, combined with your track record of killing Jedi, will earn you a high rank in the Inquisitorius. I’d be willing to place you second to no one but myself.”

Barriss pulled Ahsoka’s lightsaber to her hand, ignited the blade, and stared down at her beaten friend. Her breathing quickened as images transposed themselves over what was happening, fire and
smoke obscuring her vision as she saw Ahsoka laying in the lower levels of Coruscant, the sounds of clone troopers approaching.

*You really want to "do something right this time"? Now's your chance. Don't mess this up.*

Her fingers tightened around the hilt, and she swung the blade at the Inquisitor...who effortlessly deflected it with his own blade before pushing her back, stumbling a bit but keeping on her feet.

“Expected, and disappointing,” he said, slowly walking towards Barriss as she backed up, each movement causing her to flinch from the pain of her injuries. “Before you die, Padawan Offee, I want to thank you one last time, not only for opening my eyes but for providing me a valuable lesson in how to catch Jedi. Your little escape taught us about how to properly bait traps. Future facilities won’t use live targets. There will be no more rescues, not for you, not for anyone else. After your execution, your remains will be used to draw in the surviving Jedi to their deaths,” he explained, mouth forming into a sadistic grin. "Just like your master’s.”

For Barriss, time felt like it stopped completely this time, no thought, no sound, not even the rhythm of her heartbeat. Soon enough, reality came flooding back as she screamed and slammed Ahsoka’s saber against her opponent, trying to muster up enough anger to strike down the Inquisitor, only for him to block and push her blade away, knocking her off balance a little more with each attack.

Barriss tried to stay between him and Ahsoka, raising the green saber, trying to find a way to get them out. The STAP was wrecked, no other vehicles were nearby, and she didn't have a working comm.

“You cannot protect her from me, any more than you could protect your master.” As the Inquisitor observed Barriss struggling against him, he grinned with anticipation, expecting the anger to be tearing her apart by now. Yet, it wasn’t. He couldn’t feel anything coming from her, despite her frantic attacks. "You should've seen her. How pathetic and defeated she was in the moment before I killed her. I wonder, are you as weak as she was?"

“Don’t underestimate me,” Barriss said desperately, “I’ve felt the dark side too!”

Shaking his head, disappointed, the Inquisitor slammed Barriss down again. This time, she couldn't get up. “No you haven’t. There’s no anger inside you, no drive. I know darkness, and you, my dear, are not dark. Only hollow. And broken.”

As he finished his rant, several squads of stormtroopers approached, guns raised, ready to finish Barriss and Ahsoka off.

*Ahsoka...I'm sorry.*

“Grand Inquisitor, sir! You signaled for us?” asked the lead trooper.

"Yes, captain," replied the Inquisitor casually, confident he was wrapping up a fine day's work. "I need these two prisoners placed under heavy guard until we leave the planet. Set your weapons to stun."

"Incoming aircraft!" shouted another trooper, diverting the Inquisitor's attention.

The Inquisitor stared up in surprise as the *Eclipse* descended between the buildings, proving slightly too wide for the local architecture and scraping against the walls until the turret blasted blasts enough chunks out of the surrounding buildings to provided enough space. The shots of dozens of stormtrooper blasters proved less of a problem, easily deflected by the ship's shields.
The boarding ramp lowered, a dozen droidekas pouring out while two others remained on the ramp and provided suppressing fire, stormtroopers scrambling to find cover before getting cut down by the repeating blasters. The reinforcements rolled between their masters and the Inquisitor, unfolding and activating their shields.

The Inquisitor held his saber defensively, uncertain what to do about the new opponents.

Now came Barriss’ turn to taunt, as she took an unexpected amount of joy in watching the imperials scramble, exhilarated by the idea that maybe she and Ahsoka weren’t about to die and it was all her fault. “Patrolling the Jedi temple year after year, you never fought in the war, did you? You’d better run. ‘Destroyer Droids’ earned their name.”

The droidekas’ shields and weapons fire provided more than enough cover for Barriss to carry Ahsoka to the ship. The Inquisitor, even with his spinning dual blade, had trouble holding back the barrage of blaster bolts as the troopers around him were all cut down, each of the shots piercing their armor and turning a chunk of their bodies to ash. Even when he deflected the bolts back to their source, the droidekas’ shields absorbed them easily, eventually forcing him to take cover or be blasted to pieces.

Not that the droidekas let up simply because the enemy was retreating. They targeted every bit of cover they tactical programs could identify and fired until it was all blown apart, then did the same to the troopers behind it. The dead bodies, clad in scorched white armor, were all shot once or twice more for good measure. One trooper trying to play dead screamed in agony as he wound up with a hole in his chest thanks to the droids’ overkill. Followed by several more blasts as they heard the scream and realized he was still alive.

Once the battlefield was scorched to their satisfaction, the droidekas contracted one at a time and rolled on board, the defending pair continuing to take potshots at the few surviving imperials as the hatch closed and the Eclipse left the planet.

Recovering consciousness, Ahsoka was initially terrified, waking up in her bed with a trio of droidekas standing right next to her. A line of others extended out into the hallway, their sinister, glowing red eyes all focused on her.

It took a few seconds, but as she got her head together she recognized the distinctive markings of her droids.

The one at the front, Glow, warbled pleasantly when he saw her open her eyes, the others all following suit until it turned into a cacophony of droidspeak as she sat up and got to her feet.

“Calm down, everybody, I’m okay.”

Glow lurched forward, offering a steaming cup of tea held, carefully balanced on one of his blaster arms. Ahsoka accepted the cup and took a sip, trying to keep a straight face despite it tasting like the droidekas had brewed the tea themselves in addition to bringing it to her.

Thinking about it, she realized that was probably where the awful stuff came from. There was no way Barriss could ever make tea this bad.

“Thank you,” she said, the words being instantly met with celebration from her droid army.
“Where’s Barriss?”

The swarm of droids immediately became quiet and parted, insect-like legs of the tripods taking small steps to allow Ahsoka a path to the cockpit, where she found a frustrated Barriss running through a star chart.

Barriss seemed focused on whatever she was working. Ahsoka wasn’t sure if it was right to intrude, even to thank her for the help.

“Luminara is dead,” Barriss said out of nowhere, without otherwise acknowledging Ahsoka's presence.

Ahsoka kept quiet for a moment. She’d already accepted it as likely that even if the Jedi she’d known were alive, she would never see them again. It seemed Barriss had held on to some hope.

“I’m sorry. How do you know for certain?”

“I’d believed she was still alive, I could feel her faintly, through the Force. At least, I thought I did,” she explained bleakly. "The Inquisitor told me her remains were being used to lead Jedi to their deaths. I don’t know how they’ve done it, but it’s true. I know it now. She’s gone.”

Failing to think of something to say, Ahsoka pushed Barriss's hand away from the console, looking her in the eyes as they talked.

“Anakin and I spoke for the last time on Coruscant, as he was heading out to rescue Palpatine,” explained Ahsoka, trying not to sound bitter reminding herself how her master fought to save the man who’d all but annihilated the Jedi. “I don’t know where he is now.”

“The last time I saw Master Unduli, I was in a cell. She came to try to comfort me, get me to see my error. When the purge began, I couldn’t do anything, but I felt it. All those connections to the Force severed, lights extinguished. Darkness falling over the galaxy. If I wasn’t in prison, maybe I could’ve saved someone.”

“Today, you saved me,” said Ahsoka, trying to show Barriss some bright spot in this.

It didn’t work.

“Without you, I’d have been dead or captured before getting the chance. And it was only because of my inability to protect myself you were in any danger to begin with.”

Ahsoka sighed softly, not sure whether to hug and comfort Barriss or shake her until she started making sense.

“What are you working on?” she asked, glancing over at the screen Barriss was studying.

“Ahsoka, if we’re going to be facing people like that ‘Inquisitor’, smuggler gear won’t cut it. I was helpless against him. If you hadn’t jumped in, I’d have been overpowered. I still got overpowered.”

“Okay, what do you want to do about it?”

“I need to build a new lightsaber,” she said, pausing for several seconds to let Ahsoka think.

“That’s not going to be easy. Finding a lightsaber, even on the black market, is difficult and expensive with the Empire hunting down Jedi.”

“I didn’t say I wanted to buy one,” said Barriss adamantly. “I want to build one. One saber between
us isn't enough.”

For a moment Ahsoka was confused by what that meant, until Barriss reached for her belt and handed Ahsoka's weapon back to its owner.

“Building one is…going to be even tougher,” she said as she checked over the weapon and reattached it to her belt. “When the Jedi temple was raided, all locations for finding crystals were found by the imperials. Kyber crystals being as valuable as they are, I checked a few sites, but the Empire is monitoring them. Trying to acquire a crystal will only make us a target again.”

“That’s what I expected,” Barriss replied, despondent at the reminder of the Jedi order’s state. “That’s why I’ve been looking through the star chart. Jedi have a long history, and there are other worlds where kyber crystals can be found. Dantooine, for instance. It used to be home to Jedi, who were drawn there for the crystals and the remoteness of the world. A mainly agricultural planet, without an imperial presence. It makes sense. And…I have a good feeling about this.”

Ahsoka thought it over. Heading to any location where Jedi once lived, even an ancient, abandoned one was risky. She could tell Barriss was dead set on doing this. And making a new lightsaber, forging that extension of herself, could be good for her. Plus, Barriss was right about the practical use of her getting a lightsaber to deal with enemy dark sides.

Then her thoughts drifted to the datacard, what could be on it.

Whether she should go along with this detour, or tell Barriss to wait until they'd done their job.

“Dantooine it is.”

Chapter End Notes

The droidekas are very protective of their new Togruta mom. Don’t fuck with those things.

Also their arms can’t reach the top of the stove, so one of them had to be in ball mode while another balanced on top of it. It took several attempts for them to finally pull it off without knocking everything over. The kitchen is a mess now, and Cici is NOT cleaning it up.

'Glow' is so named because his defensive position in the spaceport kept him in the shadows a lot, and it really brought out his eyes.

Thinking about the mechanics of lightsabers, there's no way combat styles resemble normal swordsmanship as much as people might like. Aside from the mention that the center of mass is located in a person’s hand, lightsabers can cut from any direction, you wouldn't need to angle the blade like with a metal sword, and even less force is required for cutting to occur.
The Grand Inquisitor stared out through the window of the Star Destroyer's bridge, observing the last remaining Separatist dreadnought going down in flames, all others having been destroyed or fled the system.

The battle had gone better than he'd anticipated. Exploiting the Separatist overreliance on droid starfighters had proven the key to eliminating the fleet. Jamming communications between the commanders on the battleships and the swarms of vulture droids launch towards the imperial fleet left the droids only capable of following basic combat tactics, which were readily understood thank to reverse engineering efforts performed on captured droids.

The turbolasers and point-defense turrets of the warships had no trouble in obliterating the predictable formations and attack profiles, decimating them with minimal casualties and leaving the fleet practically without fighter support. TIE fighters, which were far faster and more maneuverable than their predecessors, easily evaded enemy defenses and crippled the enemy hyperdrives and weapons, leaving them easy targets for the advancing battle cruisers.

With the battle in orbit came to a close, the Grand Inquisitor left the bridge, walking to meet with the Star Destroyer's captain in his quarters.

"You called for me?"

"Yes, Inquisitor," said the captain politely, momentarily glancing at his guest before turning back to his holographic readouts of the invasion's progress. "I wished to discuss the events which transpired on Serenno. Tell me, did you acquire any useful information from your targets' escape?"

Taking some small offense at the mention of the mission's failure, the Inquisitor wasn't at all interested in answering questions from a naval officer. Certainly not one of this rank, relatively low compared to who he normally worked with.

“I learned the identities of the Jedi the intelligence report discovered, and will eliminate them eventually. A deserter and a broken girl will not be able to evade me forever.”

“She isn’t broken. Not anymore,” replied the captain.

“And how can you be sure of that? What do you know of Offee?” asked the Inquisitor.

Manipulating the projection, the captain focused on an image of Barriss’s face, taken from the helmet camera of a stormtroopers. One of the few pieces of equipment to survive the droideka onslaught.

“Tell me, Grand Inquisitor, what do you know of Mirialan tattoos?"

“Only that they signify talents and strengths of their recipient.”

“Precisely,” said the other, pulling up another image of Barriss from her time in prison, positioning it alongside the first. "Fascinating, aren’t they? Note the difference between the images. Her old tattoos, repeating diamond patterns indicating skill and grace, are gone. Now she has received another design, traditionally showing strength of character and maturity. She is trying to release her past, and progress. The elegance of a Jedi giving way to the resolve of a rebel.”
The tone of the description almost sounded *admiring*. The Inquisitor watched his ally studying the images, glowing red eyes flittering back and forth, tracing across the lines of the tattoos.

“Resolve will not be enough,” said the dark side acolyte contemptuously.

“Perhaps not. Though comparing her behavior from your confrontation to her mental state from her time in prison, the antidepressants appear to be helping.”

The Inquisitor raised an eyebrow. “What antidepressants?”

“Blood the former padawan left behind at the battlefield contained trace amounts of Mirialan medicine, designed to balance neurotransmitter levels. Compared to the often despondent and self-destructive behavior observed when she was your prisoner, her activity here shows a marked improvement. I have sent out a notice informing all pharmaceutical distributors to be on the lookout for any female Mirialan of her description who purchases it.”

“She’ll never go to an imperial-run source,” said the Inquisitor skeptically. “Even if she does, it’s unlikely enough operatives can be rallied to apprehend Offee and Tano.”

“Most likely. Even so, it costs no resources and it’s possible we’ll get lucky.”

Uninterested in the analysis, and having seemingly resolved the captain's concern regarding the partial success of his mission, the Inquisitor decided to cut this conversation short.

“If that will be all, good day.”

“We are not finished,” said the captain, voice changing from a fairly informal tone to an irritated edge.

Turning back around, the Inquisitor's eyes met the captain's, their red glow standing out in the dim lighting of the quarters, suddenly appearing much more intense.

“What is it?”

“You jeopardized my operation on Serenno. By diverting soldiers to aid you against the Jedi, a vital point in our lines was weakened, and the Serennian leadership escaped.”

Irritated by the boldness of the officer, once again the Inquisitor tried to justify his action. “As I recall, you won the battle. Furthermore, I am acting under the command of Lord Vader. The destruction of the remaining Jedi takes priority over even a planetary-scale invasion.”

“You are correct. I won the battle. After you took independent action which cost the lives of more soldiers than was necessary to win it. My soldiers. I may have been willing to overlook this had you succeeded in your task, but you did not. Your crusade against the Jedi is irrelevant to me. I care about establishing the dominance of the Empire efficiently and effectively, by absorbing the remains of the ‘Separatist’ holdings, as I did on Umbara. You seem to take your position as Lord Vader’s servant as a sign you exist outside of the chain of command. While you are aboard my vessel, a military vessel, acting amongst my subordinates, you will respect my orders. And if you ever compromise my objectives again, I will inform your master of your incompetence and disobedience, then look forward to meeting your replacement. Is that understood?”

Gritting his sharp teeth, the Inquisitor moved his hand towards his lightsaber. “What makes you believe you can threaten me like this without consequence?”

“Because even if you were capable of killing me, I’ve programmed a data packet containing all
information on your recent performance to be transmitted upon my death. Also, though I can’t speak for the loyalty of the crewers serving other officers you’ve worked with, mine will not take kindly to learning their captain was killed by some nameless, treasonous mystic. A mystic who caused the deaths of dozens of their comrades in a botched attempt to capture a pair of teenage smugglers. After killing me, you’d better have a plan to deal with all eight thousand of them.”

To be talked to with this kind of tone was unheard of for the Inquisitor. Reaching out through the Force, he tried to gauge the captain, tell what was a bluff, what was the truth.

There weren’t any emotions he could sense besides a calm, quiet confidence.

The other seemed to know what the Inquisitor was doing, one corner of his mouth forming a miniscule grin, almost goading the dark acolyte to take it further.

The Inquisitor probed deeper into the captain’s mind, trying to access his thoughts directly. The captain was thinking in a language the Inquisitor did not understand, or even recognize. After several seconds of uselessly enduring the cavalcade of incomprehensible thoughts, the Inquisitor broke off the attempted reading, leaving him staring dumfounded at the alien.

“Will that be all?” asked the other without any hint of emotion as the Pau’an turned to leave.

The Inquisitor spoke gruffly as he left the room.

“Good day, Captain Thrawn,” he said, rigidly walking out past a line of stormtroopers that had formed in the time since he’d entered, their identical, helmeted heads all turning to watch him.

Chapter End Notes

If Disney won't give me Thrawn, I'll shove him back into the universe myself, dammit. For those of you unaware, Thrawn was a major antagonist in the Legends continuity, and easily the best villain of the old EU. If you don't feel like learning about this relatively obscure character, all you need to know is that he's the best strategist/tactician in the Empire and has an interest in alien art as a means of xenopsychological analysis. You can also listen to this rap and read some of his quotes to get the general idea. A small note, I made the method he used against the Serennian fleet similar to how he defeated some Trade Federation ships in the novel Outbound Flight.

Also, this.

Since the Grand Inquisitor first appeared, I've seen people compare him to Thrawn due to his temperament and ability to analyze enemies, but I don't think the comparison can be made accurately. Thrawn is a threat in part because of how calm and collected he is. He is not angry, or vengeful, or petty, and that's why he succeeds. And that's why no dark sider can match him as a villain.
Barriss did one final check of her supplies and equipment. Enough food to last five days, a canteen with a filter capable of removing most bacteria and contaminants from natural sources, sleeping bag, flashlight, backup flashlight, blaster pistol, first aid kit, survival tools. Her medication. She was ready.

“You’re sure you don’t want me to come with?” asked Ahsoka as she watched Barriss packing up. “This isn’t like the ice caves padawans usually go to now. Dantooine’s ruins are mostly unmapped, and filled with giant, predatory insects.”

“No, thank you, Ahsoka,” said Barriss, unpleasantly aware of the local wildlife but resolved to do this as traditionally as circumstance allowed. ”We both know this is something to be done alone.”

The two of them walked out to the ramp, standing together as they took in the sight of Dantooine. Once this whole area was farmland, but over the centuries since the nearby farms were abandoned the flora had overgrown, creating a budding forest littered with the decay of deserted settlements.

Including one Jedi enclave, the ruins of which were visible on the plain beneath them, along with gentle slopes dotted with cave entrances said to have been full of kyber crystals.

Ahsoka watched her friend journey off into the fields until she was out of sight, then headed back into the ship, and waited.

The Force was strong here. Barriss could feel the whole place rife with energy as she explored the broken remains of the Jedi enclave. Not exactly the feeling she would've preferred, though.

Even though this was once home to the Jedi, there was more darkness than light. Sith had once come here as well, to hunt down and destroy the Jedi, all those deaths tainting the environment.

The broken remains of lightsabers were littered across the grounds, all of them with their crystals removed. Scavenger's work, no doubt, combing over the remains of the enclave searching for whatever treasure they could pillage from it. Not that Barriss would've been excited to find a crystal in the weapon of some long-dead knight. Using it herself wouldn't feel right.

Scrounging around, she found a few with salvageable, if outdated, components which she stowed in her bag. The crystal was the only component she couldn't create herself given the right tools and materials, but scavenging parts from ancient sabers could speed up the process considerably.

Although scavengers had looted everything of worth from the enclave long ago, the ruins were far from deserted, as Barriss learned, shining her light down a staircase to the below-ground section of the enclave. The lower level of the enclave was filled with dozens of huge black and red insects.

Laigreks, she believed they were called. She'd read about the creatures before, and had found claims of their abilities somewhat dubious. It simply didn't seem plausible for something on a planet as easily habitable as Dantooine to have evolved such extreme adaptations.
The first one to get closer enough to breathe flames at her put those doubts to rest. Her blaster proved ineffective to get through their armored carapace, each one demanding at least five shots to bring down. Killing them all was a task she didn't have the ammunition for.

A slab of stone which had once formed part of the ceiling made a much more effective weapon as she crushed the creatures under it until they got the hint and fled from her light.

She poked around several of the rooms, cautious of the remaining predators but seeing no reason to wipe them all out. The only object of interest was a wall-mounted map showing the surrounding areas. Or at least, what they used to look like centuries ago. Including a few markers indicating caves with crystals present, probably intended for Gatherings held on this planet. Besides that, there was only discarded furniture, rubble, and a few disturbingly fresh-looking humanoid skeletons.

Eventually, she had to call it quits. There wasn't anything else to be found here.

Once she'd cleared out another room full of laigreks, she started moving chunks of debris to seal off the exits and keep any more of the creatures out. It's be impossible sleep if those things were able to get anywhere near her. It was still better than camping out in the wilderness with nocturnal kath hounds prowling the area.

Solitude, with the only light being the moon and starlight coming through a crack in the ceiling, gave Barriss plenty of time to think.

How did I get like this? she wondered. She knew why. The stresses of unending warfare was too much for her to handle.

But that doesn't explain...What was I thinking?

Everything that she'd done seemed so illusive. She hardly remember or understand her own thoughts from back then.

I can't tell if that's a good or bad thing...

Why wasn't Ahsoka affected by the war?

Why did she never feel overwhelmed?

No matter how hard she tried, she wasn't strong enough to stay within the light. Not like Ahsoka.

She'd fallen apart. Ahsoka rose above.

Then again, the Jedi Order as a whole wasn't strong enough.

In a hundred years, will ruins like this be all that remain of the Jedi?

There could be survivors other than her and Ahsoka out in the galaxy, ones more willing to rebuild the order. Where they were, she had no idea.

Even if they could rally, with the Empire and its Inquisitors hunting the Jedi, reconstruction of the order wouldn't be practical. Not until after the Emperor was destroyed.

Her fight with the Inquisitor came to mind, her futile attempt to protect herself.

She needed a lightsaber again.

If that monster had managed to kill Master Unduli, it was foolish of her to have thought she had a
chance of defeating him.

Once her mind got onto the subject of Luminara, all her feelings of calmness and contemplation turned to loathing.

*She died knowing you were a failure.*

That wasn't true, Barriss knew that. Or, she hoped it wasn't true.

*She died BECAUSE you were a failure.*

Barriss closed her eyes, shaking her head as if the physical motion could fling off all her doubts and self-loathing.

*That isn't fair.*

*Remember to focus on positive thoughts. Ahsoka's with me. We survived. I'm going to make a new lightsaber, and then we can protect ourselves from the Inquisitor. It's not that bad, it's not that bad.*

Unfortunately, she had to admit that, logically, it certainly was that bad. Her master was dead. To add insult to injury, the Inquisitor was using her corpse to commit more murders. There was the option of trying to find her master's remains and put her to rest once and for all, stop this nightmare. Barriss wasn't sure she could handle even looking at what they must've done to Luminara, much less destroy her remains personally.

*That's selfish. Jedi are going to perish, and why? Because you've got a weak stomach?* 

*Put an end to this yourself.*

With her makeshift campsite secure, she unrolled her bag and laid down for the night. She didn't want to think anymore.

Tomorrow, she'd find a crystal, she was sure of it.

Barriss went through tunnel after tunnel, taking scans, plotting out paths, figuring out where she had or hadn’t been, but couldn’t dig up a single crystal in this whole maze of a cave system.

Stopping to take a break, she drank deeply from her canteen, lamenting the lack of progress. It had been so easy when she was a padawan, but this place felt empty. During her Gathering, after wandering through caverns of ice long enough, she’d found her crystal. The one, out of the thousands littering the place, meant for her. In retrospect, the test was easy, as one would expect for children. Aside from Knox breaking his leg. He probably hadn't appreciated his injury leading to finding her crystal, not his.

Now, years later, with all her training and connection to the Force, she was getting nowhere.

Maybe she couldn’t find one because she wasn’t meant to receive one ever again.

*That’s not true, I can do this. I need to keep searching. Let the Force be my guide.*

*I won’t give up.*
A few minutes later, she walked into a pack of kinraths, barely managing to Force-throw the two-meter long insectoids into a chasm without getting hit in the chest with their venomous claws.

_I won’t give up._

Ten minutes after that, she slipped on a rock while descending into a cave, reaching the bottom of the slope sore but unharmed after sliding over various foul-smelling alien sludges covering the stones, ruining her pants and really stinking up everywhere she walked.

_I won’t give up._

After another two hours of drudging through caves, gunning down the occasional stray kinrath, and she wasn’t any closer to her goal, only feeling smaller and weaker as she navigating the maze of tunnels.

_I won’t...I......won’t.........I need a break._

Barriss took a seat on a rock, looking around in dismay at the sprawling cave network, as it stretched on forever and led her nowhere. Not a single crystal could be found no matter what path she took. She couldn’t return empty-handed after dragging Ahsoka here, despite this whole place seemingly being designed to confuse and frustrate her.

“I’m going to lose my mind down here,” she said, closing her eyes and trying to center herself.

“Well, talking to yourself probably isn’t helping any, young lady.”

Barriss opened her eyes and spun around, shining her light down one of the tunnels, trying to see who’d spoken to her. She couldn’t see anything except more cave walls.

“Maybe I am going crazy,” she said after a moment.

“No, you’re not,” called the voice. “Come closer. I won’t bite. I’d like to help you, actually.”

Cautiously walking deeper into the cave, Barriss shined her light, searching for the source of the voice.

No one was there.

Even through the Force, she couldn’t sense anyone else in the cave.

“Where are you?” she yelled.

“I’m right here! Only a few more steps,” beckoned the voice, echoing through the cavern.

_I have a bad feeling about this._

"CooooOOOoome cloopoooooseeeEEEEEerrr chhhiiiiiiiillddddd," growled the voice.

Barriss immediately turned around at started walking back the way she came.

"Wait, wait! Don’t go! Seriously, don’t leave me down here. It’s so fucking boring, you have no idea. You’re going insane after, what, a couple hours? Spend four thousand years in this cave, _then_ you can complain to me about how much it messes with your head._

_Four thousand years?_
As she tried to recall what, if any, species had a lifespan of that length, Barriss turned around again to find the source of the voice, driven by curiosity. She was about ready to leave and write this off as her imagination, then in the distance, she could see a faint glow, drawing her closer.

Half-buried in the dirt, there was a luminous, violet, elongated triangular bipyramid, the light emitted pulsating periodically, then shining brightly as Barriss took it in her hand, plucking it from the moist dirt surrounding it.

“A holocron?”

“Right you are. I’m glad someone finally found me. You’re some kind of Jedi, I take it?” it asked in a slightly distorted, electronic sounding voice, pitch not belying any gender. After so many years down here, it had probably suffered some damage.

Picking clumps of moist dirt and lichen off the holocron, Barriss begrudgingly answered. “No. No, I’m not a Jedi.”

“Hm. If you say so. Regardless, the Force must be strong with you to be drawn to holocrons. Plus, my first impression of you is you’re not a jerk. What’s your name?”

Reasoning she could continue her search for a crystal and talk to the device, she went on exploring deeper into the cave, holocron in hand. “I’m Barriss Offee.”

“And why are you here, Barriss Offee?”

“I’m looking for a lightsaber crystal.”

“Oh? Your first lightsaber? Or do you need a replacement?” it asked, prompting Barriss to come to a halt, reflecting on the lessons she’d been listening to since she was a padawan about never losing your saber and how important it was to a Jedi, before the holocron broke the silence again. “No judgment if you lost it, I needed to build myself a new one once, too. I’ll help you however I can.”

“A replacement,” Barriss answered hesitantly. “My old saber was taken from me. Even if it could be recovered, I’m not sure it’s the extension of myself I once believed it to be.”

“If you need a new crystal, I’m afraid all of these once-rich caves were plundered by the Sith a thousand years ago. Fortunately for you, I know of one stockpile left. One the Sith probably weren’t smart or relentless enough to get back to. Idiots and quitters, every last one of them. Turn left here.”

Feeling a bit more hopeful, Barriss complied, traveling deeper and deeper into the caves. As she followed direction after direction, heading deeper into Dantooine, she became more and more disconcerted, the markers she left doing little to ease her sense of becoming lost.

“This stockpile you know of, where is it, exactly?” she asked.

“Its location doesn’t lie within the natural cave network. I’m leading you to an ancient fortress deep below the surface, where its Builders once stored the crystals they mined from this world. We’re almost there.”

A few minutes of walking later, both of them silent save for the directions she was being given, Barriss saw the end of the cave growing smaller and smaller until only a tiny crack provided any hint of a space beyond, too small for her to get through.

“It seems you’ll need to use the Force to continue,” said the box.
“It’s too dangerous,” she said as she studied the cave walls. "If I apply too much pressure, the whole cave could collapse.”

“There's no other way to get through this wall.”

“You want me to power my way through it? Take the risk?”

“Of course not. I want you to think your way through. There’s a way. It simply isn’t as convenient as you’d like.”

Barriss sat down and meditated for several minutes, thinking about the structure of the cave, how to change it without crushing herself within it.

The mass of the rock above her would be too much for her in an emergency.

She couldn't discern the structure of the stone and dirt surrounding the visible portion of the wall enough to find a way to remove it safely.

Then it hit her.

*I need to get through. That doesn't mean I can go back.*

*The only way forward is to cut off your own retreat.*

Barriss turned around and reached out with the Force, taking hold of the walls of the cave she’d been traveling down, and sealed it shut behind her, compressing the loosened dirt and stone to strengthen and support the small pocket which she remained in. Resilient, though the way she came was now impassable.

Eager to get out of the cramp, claustrophobia-inducing pocket, she faced the cracked wall and ripped it open, safely getting through to the other side.

The new cavern was enormous, a hallway the size of one of the Jedi Temple’s atrium carved entirely out of solid stone.

Enormous, and completely safe.

She could’ve torn whole slabs out of the walls without endangering anything, much less fear a cave-in.

“You knew, didn’t you?” asked a very irritated Barriss.

The holocron chuckled, light pulsating with each small outburst. “Heh heh, yeah. You’d have been fine. Still, don’t you feel clever?”

"I suppose," she replied, still unamused by the test.

"Don't you give me that look. It's all a matter of getting your objectives straight. You needed to get to the other side of the wall. You did not need to go back the way you came. Attempting to achieve an unnecessary goal made any progress impossible. Make sense?"

Her glare disappearing, Barriss thought about that for a second before giving a curt nod, nothing else, then walking towards an opening at the end of the cavern. Each side was flanked by imposing statues of alien creatures with large, bullet-like heads and stalked eyes, their arms reaching outwards. She stopped near the entrance, considering her next step.
“Ancient Rakatan designs are fascinating, don’t you agree?” asked the holocron. “They love sticking statues of themselves everywhere. Anyway, you said you’re not a Jedi. Did some new order rise in the galaxy? Are you some breed of Sith? One power by self-doubt and misery, instead of rage? That seems like something they’d try eventually, and you’ve got those qualities in abundance.”

Shifting awkwardly in place, thinking about how to explain what she’d done, Barriss felt torn between really needing to talk about this and not wanting to talk about it at all. Ever.

“I was a Jedi not too long ago, but was cast out of the order. I thought I’d fallen to the dark side, though I’ve realized that can’t be true. There’s no anger, no hatred, nothing,” she said with dismay, slowly lowering herself to the floor, exhausted from the journey. “I only feel empty.”

The holocron remained quiet for a moment. “You remind me very much of someone I knew.”

“What do you mean?”

“Broken by pain and war. Not dark, only wounded. Don’t think less of yourself because you’re not a Jedi. I’d also left the order for quite some time before returning.”

The time frame, the expertise, the little hints. Realization slowly crept into Barriss’s mind. In conflicts against the dark side, many Jedi had left the order, but it was rare to return. And to be found here on Dantooine...

“Who are you?” she asked softly. She already knew the answer, but had to hear it for herself.

The holocron brightened, speaking with a touch of amusement.

“Jedi, Sith, savior, conqueror, hero, villain. I am all things, and yet I am nothing. At least, that's what people tell me.”

The glow it emitted intensified, projecting a tall holographic figure adorned in thick robes and armor, arms crossed, hood raised, face covered by a mask. An image which had Barriss gaping in awe.

*Revan.*
The above image is Revan's holocron, designed to resemble the Star Forge, a major element in the story of KotOR.

The bit about Barriss's gathering experience came from this post concerning headcanons of Barriss's gathering.

If anyone hasn't played the game Knights of the Old Republic, Revan was a major
character in that story, one I felt would fit well here. I highly recommend playing it, it's available on Steam, and the next chapter will contain major spoilers for that character and the game in general.

The main thing to know is this: there is nobody in the entirety of Star Wars lore better suited to help Barriss.
“You’re Revan! You’re the Prodigal Knight? Right?” asked Barriss enthusiastically.

“Yup.”

I can’t believe it! I’m speaking directly to Revan! I have Revan’s holocron!

“You, you discovered ancient secrets of the Infinite Empire and managed to broker a peace with a tribe of Tusken Raiders and explored the depths of Manaan and stopped slaver operations on Kashyyyk!” she exclaimed, practically hyperventilating.

“Yes, I get it, you’re a big nerd who loves history. I know my own life...mostly. Sort of.”

I have Revan’s holocron I have Revan’s holocron I have Revan’s holocron I have Revan’s holocron I have Revan’s holocron I have Revan’s holocron I have Revan’s holocron I have Revan’s holocron I have Revan’s holocron.

"Uh, kid, are you okay?" asked Revan, watching Barriss shake with a feeling of pure and utter glee.

“Fine, rest all you want, meatbag,” said Revan, letting Barriss sit down and relax for roughly ten seconds before breaking the silence. "So, what's the deal with you, anyway? Something’s eating at you. Even I can tell that, and I’m nothing but a palm-sized box of magic crystals.”

Unsure where to begin, Barriss stumbled through the start of an explanation. "I wanted to come here and find a crystal in order to help out my companion, to contribute something instead of relying on her to risk her life saving me. She's my...friend. Another former padawan I'm traveling with. Proving myself is important to me, but everything I do only makes things worse. Our relationship is already complicated, I practically destroyed it, and-" she stopped talking as Revan's chuckling grew louder and louder. "What are you laughing at?"

“Oh, this is all making sense now. It's so precious. I know what’s messing you up,” said Revan, hands clasped with excitement. "You've got quite the little crush, don't you?"

Barriss felt all the blood draining from her face.

“What? No.”

"Admit it. C'mon."

"It's not like that!"

"Suuuure it isn't."

"She's only a friend, and not even- "

"Suuuuuuuuuuuuuuurrrrrreeee it isn't."

The discussion grating on her, Barriss was quickly losing her patience with her conversation partner. "Did you annoy the Mandalorians to death? Is that how you beat them?"

"Kinda, yeah," said Revan, producing a holographic nail file and nonchalantly wearing down what must have been a very stubborn nail. Which was holographic. And gloved. "Come on, indulge me a little. I've been down here alone for centuries and the kinraths aren't exactly great conversationalists. Besides, did you even hear that pause when you said she was your '........friend'?"

“It’s more complicated than that, and I don’t know what to do,” Barriss said, growing more irritated at what Revan was insinuating. "I suppose I could use some advice."

Revan stared down at the former Jedi. “I was the most powerful Jedi of my era. I’ve accepted and mastered both the light and the dark. I’ve lead armies, burned worlds, delved into the ancient secrets of the galaxy. I became the brightest example of the Jedi Knights, then embraced corruption. I became the most ruthless of Sith, but found redemption. You now face all my knowledge and wisdom. All for you, and you alone. And you want to talk to me about…girl trouble?"

Listening to Revan’s résumé, Barriss had gone from embarrassed by the suggestion she had a crush on Ahsoka to being too annoyed to keep arguing about it. “Do you have any advice or don’t you?"

“Damn right, I've got advice about girls!” The holographic avatar flashed out of existence and reappeared in a new pose: laying down on its stomach, head perched on its hands, with knees bent and feet lazily kicking the air. "So, is she cute? When did you realize you were falling for her? What are her interests? How did you meet? Does she know you liiiiiike heeer? Seriously, how cute is she?"

Ignoring the mocking tone, Barriss thought about (most of) the questions. “She’s an incredible warrior, amazing with her saber, in touch with the Force on a level I don’t think she fully
understands. Able to maintain her connection to the light even in the darkest of times. Everything I wanted to be capable of, and wasn't. She's smarter than she acts, funny, thoughtful, rough around the edges and resilient because of it," explained Barriss. "She's my best friend. Or, she was, before...I ruined everything.”

“Yeah, yeah, and what else?” asked Revan, unfazed by how completely miserable Barriss now looked. It took a second for her to figure out what she was being asked.

“...Very cute,” she said, feeling unexpectedly at ease and fighting back a slight grin as Revan nodded approvingly at the answer. "It really isn't what you think."

As she finished her sentence, a holographic message reading 'Just Friends™' popped into the air in front of her, close enough to make her jump.

"Of course it's not what I think. She's just your long-time friend who you feel unbelievably guilty about hurting. And you admire her so much can list all her best qualities without a moments hesitation. And talking about her brightens up even your dour mood. Also, let me guess: you live together on a spaceship and fly around the galaxy on thrilling adventures, sharing experiences, depending on each other. Just like how I met the love of my life," said Revan, wagging a finger at Barriss. "Oh wait a minute, isn't attachment forbidden, or something? Is that the problem? Or did the order finally abandon that ridiculous sentiment?"

“No, that's still important,” she said, looking rather doubtful of the value of detachment of the Jedi. "I've already broken so many tenets of the code. Besides, if caring about Ahsoka is something that will bring me closer to the dark side, I never had any hope to begin with. At this point, I’m confident my attachment to her held me closer to the light than any piece of Jedi wisdom ever did,” she glanced down, nervously running her fingers through her hair. "And that sounds so much worse the more I think about it."

The hologram’s head tilted slightly, studying the disgraced padawan. Then, the mangled electronic voice spoke again with a more thoughtful, considerate tone than before.

"So, you admit you feel attachment to her?"

Despite the hesitance, Barriss was quickly realizing that covering up her emotions wasn't going to accomplish anything here. "Yes."

“Interesting. Keep going. Why don’t you act on this conviction?"

“I, I did things to her that I can’t believe she would forgive. But she treats me like I'm her friend again, and I can’t sense any kind of suppressed anger, or resentment, and I don’t understand how she could let it go so easily!"

“Calm down, whatever you did, it can’t be that bad.”

Accepting the challenge, Barriss stared defiantly at the hologram. “I used a living person as an explosive to bomb the Jedi temple on Coruscant, killing six Jedi, twelve civilians, and wounding dozens of others. When it looked like I was about to be exposed, I framed my best friend for the bombing, along with one other murder, which resulted in turning the military against her, including her own soldiers. I exploited the trust she had in me to continue setting her up to be incriminated, lying to her face and leading her into a trap. I personally attacked and brutalized her! Ahsoka trusted me over everyone save her own master, and I was going to sit back and watch her be executed for crimes I’d committed!”
The Revan hologram sat up and leaned back, listening calmly until Barriss finished her increasingly frantic explanation.

“Eh. I’ve done worse.”

“What?!” blurted Barriss. She cringed as her exclamation echoed around the chamber, exasperated with Revan's answer and embarrassed by her reaction to it.

“Young lady, do you have any idea who you’re talking to? I was once the Dark Lord of the Sith. Whatever you’ve done, I’ve done something even more horrible on a planetary scale.”

Shifting from its previous position, the holographic avatar rose to dwarf Barriss. Other projections were produced by the holocron: Jedi being struck down one by one by shadowy figures, whole worlds with explosions spreading across their surfaces, Republic fleets lead by Jedi fighters being consumed by flames.

Images of destruction and death circled around Barriss.

“You killed six Jedi? Please. You know what I used to call that? **A slow day on the job.**”

Barriss felt herself slowly, instinctively recoiling in terror as the almost proud declaration echoed through the chamber. Revan was right about how little she knew. Now, she understood exactly who she was talking to.

“If you can talk so freely about what you’re done, then you must have some idea what this feels like,” she said breathlessly. "To never be able to forgive yourself. To always doubt if the people you care about most feel anything for you. Since I started working with Ahsoka, we’ve fought against oppression and devastation, but I still can’t feel better. Ahsoka treats me like I’m her friend again, like she trusts me. I don’t know what to think of myself, and I don't know how this could possibly end well.”

The masked figure shifted back and forth, nodding a few times, intensely focused. A holographic cup of tea appeared in hand, which the hologram proceeded to drink.

Drinking right through the mask.

“Um, what are you-” began Barriss, before the hologram raised a hand to cut off her sentence, ‘finishing’ the drink.

“Ah, that hits the spot,” said Revan as the cup hovered and vanished. "Let me tell you some stories."

“Stories? That's your solution?” Barriss said pensively. “I’m not sure if your stories will be of much help to me.”

“As a very old, very bald, and very dear friend of mine once said: ‘I’ve had to listen to your completely logical questions, now you’re going to listen to my vaguely insulting stories while I belittle you directly and complain about your breath’. I may be paraphrasing a bit. Now, where was I? Oh yeah. Let me start you off with the tale of Juhani. As a padawan, Juhani was always a troubled Jedi, carrying around great rage from a hard life. During training, she wasn’t good with restraint, giving into her anger again and again, and one day, she struck her master down, and fled this very enclave. She had embraced the dark side, and the corruption emanating from her tainted the life around her.”

Barriss quickly got over her earlier doubts, listening intently. “And the Jedi went after her?”
“Of course they did. She proved to be a difficult problem to ignore, the fury radiating from her was twisting the wildlife, driving the local Kath Hounds into a frenzy. Those things have a hell of a bite, let me tell you. Then, when she was finally confronted, she used every last bit of rage she could muster to kill her pursuers. But she couldn’t defeat those sent after her,” the other said before chuckling softly, “though she was quite strong.”

“So you killed her?”

“Oh. Wow. You figured out it was me already, huh?”

“It’s not that subtle.”

“Yeah, I guess I’m not one for clever identity reveals. Ironic, now that I think about it. Anyway, Juhani was defeated, and was willing to accept her fate. She expected me to kill her for all the pain she had caused. I refused to do it. I spared her, and sent her back to the enclave mostly unharmed.”

"Mostly?" asked Barriss, an eyebrow raised at the qualifier.

"We really beat the hell out of each other, alright? She was fine after a few medpacks. And of course, Mission and Zaalbar weren't hurt at all because Juhani used this Force-stasis thing on them, a surprisingly powerful technique which YOU COULDN'T USE MORE OFTEN, JUHANI!"

The simplistic retelling had Barriss so enraptured the shouting fit didn't bother her. “And then?”

“And then, she volunteered to accompany me on my mission to stop the Sith, which I gratefully accepted. And while she continued to struggle with the dark side, even when faced with the ones who brought so much suffering to her life, we worked with each other avoid the pull of the darkness. Together, she helped me save the galaxy. I’m not sure I could’ve made it through the Star Forge without her. That act of mercy for someone who’d been so certain she didn’t deserve it prevented the suffering of billions.”

A hopeful smile started to form on Barriss’ face, only for her to bitterly turn away.

“IT doesn’t change anything. It’s not only what I did, it’s who I did it to. I betrayed Ahsoka, repeatedly, methodically. It wasn’t a single act of impulsiveness. Juhani never did anything so horrible. You met her after she’d gone to the dark side.”

Revan’s hologram blinked away and reappeared back within Barriss’ field of view, speaking with an icy edge this time.

“Oh, I’m getting to the topic of betrayal, don’t you worry. Let me tell you about my dear friend Bastila,” the hologram put its hands on its hips and shook its head, angrily mumbling. “That one, ooohhhhh, Bastila Shan, she’s got good intentions but damn. We started off enemies, fighting on the bridge of my flagship, but when my apprentice, Malak, betrayed me, I was in such a terrible physical state my memories were lost. Bastila saved my life, then the Jedi council created a new identity for me. Desperate though the Jedi may have been, Bastila knew what had happened to me, what the masters had done to me, and kept my real identity secret. She didn’t ‘lie’ but the more I think about her choice of words, the more obvious it was she was meticulously keeping the truth from me.”

“But she was in the right. You were the former dark lord. She had every reason to be terrified of you.”

“I’m not done! First of all, she was never ‘terrified’ of me, she was so snippy with me it’s almost ridiculous considering she knew who I was at the time. Second, Bastila was captured by Malak, and tortured into accepting the dark side, using her battle meditation to aid the Sith, and to defend the Star
Forge during that final battle. She was likely responsible for thousands of deaths, and pleaded with me to kill her, stating she couldn’t be redeemed, that her crimes were too great.”

“And you wouldn’t do it?”

“Of course not. Leaving aside that however prissy she may have been, I cared about her more than she realized, and she’d spared my life before. And despite how FRUSTRATING she could be sometimes, I still consider her one of the most important people in my life. She found peace eventually, and you can too.”

“No,” she said quietly, “My own peace isn’t what’s important. I don’t deserve it.”

"Don't refuse forgiveness from others, even if you can't provide it to yourself."

"It's not the same."

As the pessimism grew tiresome, Revan took a break from being heartfelt. “Yes, of course, you’re sooooooo irredeemable, you’re a bad, bad person. How could anyone ever accept you after what you’ve done? How can you ever find peace? Heh,” Despite not actually breathing, the holocron emitted the sound of a long sigh. “Do you know anything about Korriban, or the Sith academy that used to be there?”

“Korriban—that’s the old name of the Sith homeworld of Moraband.”

“Sure, whatever, that doesn’t matter. I traveled there with my companions in my mission to stop Malak, and encountered an instructor there by the name of Yuthura Ban.”

"A Sith master? She sounds charming."

"She was once a Jedi padawan."

“Of course she was,” said Barriss, pinching the bridge of her nose in frustration at the frequency with which she’d seen Jedi become their own antithesis. "What was she like?”

“That’s a difficult question, because in the brief time I knew her, only a few days, she’d changed completely from a treacherous, pitiful Sith master into a kind, relaxed, even cheerful woman.”

“How could that change happen so quickly?”

“It took little more than stirring up old memories.”

“Of all the people she’d made suffered?”

“Please, nothing so schmaltzy. She’d probably been making people suffer in between our conversations. No, I reminded her of her desire to do good. How she wanted to end oppression, to liberate others, and see justice done. How she still wanted that.”

“How could someone who wanted those things spend her days training Sith?”

“That is exactly what she began asking herself. After I planted that little doubt in her mind, she became more and more unsure of herself. The time eventually came for us to duel, and I overpowered her. She pled for mercy.”

“Mercy which you showed her?”

“Absolutely.”
“Then I take it she became another of your companions?” said Barriss, sensing a pattern.

The hologram’s head shook. “No. I wanted her to come, and she was interested, but Yuthura decided she needed to help herself before she could help others. Trying to rid the world of pain without understanding her own darkness and how it would drive her only ended with being lost in her own hatred. I’ve never seen anyone pull themselves out of that hell on their own.”

“Fine, then,” replied Barriss, comprehending of the lesson here. "If I’m supposed to recover before taking action, how can I do that? How can I deal with this guilt? The people I hurt, or killed...how can I ever stop feeling this way? Every moment, even at my best, I’m still—oh, hold on,” Barriss checked her chrono, then took out one of her pills, downing it with a sip from her canteen.

“Um, what was that?”

“An antidepressant tablet. I need to take them regularly, otherwise…” she trailed off, taking deep breaths, getting a hold of herself and wiping the half-formed tears from her eyes.

Revan watched patiently as her breathing steadied, plus another few minutes as the medicine slowly took its effect.

“Fucking hell this poor kid's a mess...” muttered Revan, quietly enough Barriss couldn't quite hear it. A holographic bottle of alcohol appeared, which the avatar proceeded to chug, then chucked it away to 'shatter' on the ground and disappear. Revan continued, tone becoming much more somber.
"Which brings me to Carth Onasi."

“Someone else who’s life you spared?” suggested Barriss expecting more witticisms, only to quickly realize from the hologram's movements that wasn't where this was headed.

“No. If only all my stories could be that self-aggrandizing. I’m afraid you have it backwards. Carth is the one who spared me, from a certain point of view. People may argue over how complicated the situation really was or wasn’t. It doesn’t matter. The responsibility for the devastation of his life, his home, his family, it all falls to me. For what I did waging war on the Republic, and how that war reached his homeworld. And he forgave me, saved my life more than once, and after the initial shock, never held my past against me again.”

“He helped you let go of your past?”

“Not exactly. After all I’d done, the feeling of betrayal I’d inspired in the people who’d admired me as they witnessed my return as a conqueror, I found someone for whom it didn’t matter. What mattered was what I did afterwards, the things we’d done together, the lives he’d seen me save. And when he forgave me, I started to forgive myself. Past is past. It’s only importance is in helping you decide what the future will be. I committed myself to rebuilding the Republic, and the Jedi. I learned the greatest powers of both the darkness and the light, and how to combat them most effectively. I learned how to truly protect people. What did your crimes teach you?”

“Mainly, that I can’t keep all this pain in anymore. That even when I fell, I still wanted to do the right thing. Only I’m not sure how," she explained. "Everything I did was wrong. Everything I try to do right, fails. I haven't earned forgiveness. Not for what I did to Ahsoka, and definitely not for my other victims. And I don't know how to atone."

"Maybe earning your happiness is something you never can truly do."

"I don't want to think like that. That's horrible."

Revan's head tilted to the side inquisitively. "Is it? To acknowledge your own faults, to devote your
life to never making those mistakes again, to work to undo cruelty and inequity wherever you find it, is that really such a terrible thing? Such a terrible way to live? And you'll do it with someone who cares for you at your side, whom you care about in turn. That's very lucky. It was more than enough for me.”

The idea was certainly worth considering. After a moment of thought, Barriss actually felt a bit thrilled to hear it presented that way.

Not an unending punishment, but a life devoted to justice and the defense of the innocent.

The kind of life she'd hoped to live out with the Order.

She felt like a weight had been lifted off her.

Then, that thrill turned to self-loathing as Barriss considered the injustice of her own desires.

*It's what I want, but I don't deserve what I want, it's the right thing to do, that's why I want it, I want to help people it'd make me happy, I don't deserve to be happy after what I did, being unhappy won't achieve anything, I can do something about all this suffering, it would help me to help others I shouldn't be helped I'm not worth it I don't deserve to-*

Revan's voice snapped her out of the loop.

"Barriss...relax."

"I can't," she said, closing her eyes and tensing up, feeling herself being studied by the other.

"Okay, time for some tough love," said the holocron reluctantly, its avatar crouching down to get directly in Barriss's face. "Do you really hate yourself that much? That you would keep yourself from opposing evil because you think you deserve to suffer? Let me save you some time: that line of thinking is nothing but an excuse. A way to avoid confronting darkness, either out in the galaxy or in there," said Revan, pointing at Barriss's head. "You have the power and opportunity to bring down oppression and injustice. Take it."

"I...I'll keep doing the best I can," she said hesitantly as she sat back upright, earning a nod of approval.

"That's all I ask. And that's why, while you may no longer be a Jedi, you can still be a good person.”

Barriss was quiet for a long time. Tears formed in her eyes. Happy ones.

“Thank you for telling me about your friends,” said Barriss, feeling remarkably at ease, if still slightly worried by the shifting moods of her new teacher. “You said before I reminded you of someone you knew, then told me the stories of four people. Which one did I remind you of?”

“None of them,” Revan said bluntly. “She’s another story, for another time. For now, you are ready for what lies ahead. You will find the crystal you need beyond the next chamber.”

Barriss confidently rose to her feet.

“Thank you for guiding me here.”

The hologram slowly shook its head.

“Don’t thank me yet. You’re a full fledged Jedi, not some child wandering around a cave to learn a lesson about the importance of trust or whatever kid stuff you were taught. If you want a new crystal
so badly, you’re going to have to work for it. Get moving.”

The image of Revan vanished, leaving only the holocron glowing softly in Barriss’ hands.

After stowing the dormant device safely in her bag, Barriss walked towards the broken remains of a towering archway, ready to face whatever way lay beyond.

The Force was resonating here. Kyber crystals were nearby, many of them, and Barriss could hear the call of one in particular.

She focused on the rubble blocking the entryway, moving it away bit by bit, until there was a gap wide enough to pass through.

As she approached and shined her light into the new room, a ferocious roar emanated from the hole, causing her to step back in terror.

An enormous clawed hand gripped the edge of the entryway, the remaining rubble knocked away by brute force, lamplight illuminating the enormous, spike-covered figure of a terentatek.

Chapter End Notes

This is it. Right here. This is the point I wanted to get to ever since I started writing the story. Revan helping Barriss work through her issues. And also probing her about her crush on Ahsoka.

Barriss, you can't hide your gay from Revan. They know. They know everything.

Revan's personality in KotOR is largely decided by the player, but my own style and what hints we got of them while a Sith Lord let me develop this basic model of their behavior:

On the surface, a terrifying, intimidating badass. Talk for a little bit, you realize they're a sarcastic goofball with a dark sense of humor. Talk for a little bit longer, you start getting hints and piecing together that no, they really are as powerful and dangerously intelligent as that first impression told you. Are they planning to kill you? Who knows? You don't, but Revan does. And if they decide to do so, there's not a whole lot you can do about it.
A terentatek. I'm fighting a terentatek, thought Barriss as she ran to the other side of the chamber, putting as much distance as possible between her and the creature as it roared and broke through the stone archway. Dark side abomination created by ancient Sith sustained by feeding on the blood of Force-users hibernating for centuries in between periods of darkness falling over the galaxy IT'S GETTING CLOSER.

Barriss tried to telekinetically grip the monster, perhaps to push it back or slam it into the walls, but it seemed to be resistant to the attack. Those creatures were products of the dark side and this twisted facsimile of natural life wasn't vulnerable to normal manipulations of the Force.

Jedi arts aren't enough here.

She trying whipping out her blaster next, aiming for the fleshy areas between the armored plates as it lumbered closer, still not fully awake after centuries of hibernation. The potshots were doing little to the skin of the creature. Next she went for one of the eyes, her poor marksmanship combine with frantic shooting eventually putting a shot right through the pupil and leaving the socket smoking with burnt flesh.

That only made it angry, growling in pain as it rubbed at the side of its head.

And she was out of ammunition.

Now fully alert, the terentatek charged at Barriss, its hands displayed claws longer than her arms. She considered turning out her light or throwing it as a distraction, only to remember it was a Force-sensitive predator designed to hunt Jedi and probably engineered with acute senses of smell and hearing. She'd need the light a lot more than it did.

When it finally got close enough to take a swing at her, Barriss jumped over the creature's limbs, landed on its broad, armored head, then jumped again, getting behind it. The creature was dangerous, but none too bright, and the move gave her a few seconds to run to the other side of the chamber.

It eventually realized what happened and turned around, claws out again. And again, she repeated the move, avoiding death for another twenty seconds. Then, the combatants did it again, and again.

All that energy it needs to move, maybe it'll get tired and give up?

No, it's been down here hibernating for centuries, I'm not going to outlast it.

The harsh light of her lantern cast sharp shadows of the monster as it raised its claws and swung at her, over and over again, as she felt herself running out of stamina while her adversary got more and more angry.

Spotting some stones thrown about the cave when the creature broke it, Barriss began lifting and hurling them at the creature, aiming for the legs, trying to slow it down. The impact of the rocks were definitely causing it pain, but aside from some scrapes, her attacks weren't injuring it.

Barriss's thoughts turned to Ahsoka, wondering how long she would wait on the surface before deciding to go searching, and whether she would ever have any idea what happened.
Nothing could kill this thing.

She thought about going back the way she came, only to realize she couldn't, she'd blocked the path so she could get here in the first place.

"Revan? Revan, I need help!" she cried out after the latest round of dodging the claws.

"No you don't. Come on, think it through," said Revan, voice barely audible over the monster's roaring. "If you could figure out the last obstacle, you can get around this."

"Wait, do you mean it's the same as the last test, and I'm not really in any danger?" she asked confusedly, flinching as the monster's roar pierced the air.

"Uh, no, that thing's very real and very dangerous. Don't let it get close."

"It's going to eat me!"

"Eh, you'll be fine," replied the holocron dismissively before shutting back down, ignoring the screams of Barriss and the charging terentatek, refusing to activate again.

'You can get around this' what's THAT supposed to mean? Nothing I throw at it is enough to finish the fight.

...

'Get around this'.

That small clue got the point across.

'Attempting to achieve an unnecessary goal made any progress impossible. Make sense?'

Her goal wasn't to kill the terentatek.

Her goal was to obtain a crystal.

I don't need to destroy it, I only need to get past it!

With the confusion of the fight, Barriss hadn't noticed the obvious: she and the terentatek had switched sides.

There was nothing between her and the exit.

Barriss dashed towards the hole, the stomping feet of the terentatek following behind her, close enough she could feel the beast's warm, disgusting breath on her back.

As she approached, she used the Force to pulled down on the unstable architecture, wincing as she ran towards the falling rocks and dust, covering her head with her arms as she leapt through the opening, thankful for the small amount of protection from the sharp edges her jacket offered. Once through, she pulled down more and more rubble, sealing off the previous room and sealing the creature inside, leaving it trapped in the darkness where it belonged.

Exhausted, she slumped down against the wall, catching her breath, the scratching and stomping of the terentatek on the other side of the wall still audible. Then, she angrily pulled out the holocron.

"Did you know that thing was in here? You could've gotten me killed!" she shouted furiously, then she caught herself and closed her eyes, muttering Jedi lessons to herself. "Don't give into anger, don't
"What do you mean, 'give in' to anger?" interjected Revan. "Barriss, I knowingly flung you into the jaws of death without telling you anything. Literally, 'jaws'. And then I was an asshole about it. You have the right to be angry. Being angry in this situation makes sense."

The suggestion she should feel mad threw Barriss off so much she actually stopped feeling angry. Seconds passed as she was unable to come up with any response at all, only blankly walking on and shining her light around the new chamber.

Several crates with the emblem of the Infinite Empire, some broken, worn-down droids, and off to the side, rows of table with countless kyber crystals scattered over them.

The light reflected off of one, catching her eye, a pull felt through the Force.

It was her crystal. She could feel it. Barriss cradled the gem in her hand, sensing the power resonating within it, smiling calmly as she showed it securely in the inner pocket of her jacket.

"Satisfied?" asked Revan.

"I went on a quest, learned a lesson, and got my crystal. Just like when I was looking for my first crystal as a youngling," said Barriss, relieved to have finally reached her goal. "Yes, I'm satisfied."

"Wait, ‘youngling’? That’s what children are called now? That’s the stupidest fucking word I’ve heard since Mission referred to sneaking into the Black Vulkar base as ‘inkilltration’.

Barriss held back a bit of laughter at that, staring at the translucent figure. She pulled out all the rations she could eat, scarfing them down as she rested and filling the free space in her bag with dozens of crystals. Jedi were discouraged from developing greed, but this place was a treasure trove.

"How did you know all this was here?" she asked Revan.

"I know pretty much everything."

"Oh, that is, that is such, you've literally been under a rock. What do you know about the wider galaxy?"

"I know the galaxy is currently under control of a massive empire ruled by the Sith, and the Jedi have been all but exterminated. That's why I've been trying so hard to get out of here."

Barriss dropped the last crystal into her bag, staring at the holocron, worried. "How could you..."

"First of all, the terentatek came out of hibernation a short while ago, indicating the rise of the dark side on a galactic scale. You didn't ask me what the Sith were when I brought them up, so they're still active after all this time. To find a lightsaber crystal, you came to Dantooine, a site completely abandoned by the Jedi, rather than one they commonly use to find crystals. While you've been cast out of the order, the Jedi aren't ones to hold grudges and those softies would probably help you get a new crystal if it helped you recover. But they didn't. Which means they're probably all dead. And when it comes to killing Jedi en masse, you can bet the Sith are behind it. I know from experience. And I know there's a big, evil empire conquering the galaxy because there usually is," finished the holocron. "How am I doing?"

"I...wouldn't have expected you to figure all that out."

"You don't achieve the things I have by being dumb."
"Then why do you always act like, well, you?"

"People who believe humorlessness is a sign of intelligence and wisdom possess neither trait," said Revan. "That's one thing I'm glad I communicated to Bastila. She really did have a lovely smile, if you could get it out of her."

The small show of warmth calmed Barriss down, giving her time to think back on Revan's analysis and noticing an odd comment.

"What do you mean you were trying to escape this place? You're a holocron, you can't move on your own."

"Oh, well, you'd think that, but if you find that strange, why haven't you wondered how I know my way around so well?" asked Revan. "I'll tell you the story once we're out of this damn cave system once and for all. It's hilarious."

At the back end of the room was a crack in the wall, large enough for Barriss to get through, her flashlight revealing the narrow path sloped gradually upwards.

It was either this, or take another shot at killing the terentatek.

The tunnel was a bit cramped, but at a low enough angle she could easily work her way out of the underground. It took the better part of an hour of walking through the winding, cramped tunnel, but she emerged from a crack in the lower level of the enclave's ruins.

She'd been in this hallway.

There were those dead laigreks right where she'd left them.

"This is, I walked right past this place, and it, it lead to the crystal- " she stammered.

"Yeah," said Revan.

"It was only a walk down that passageway. I didn't need to-"

"Nope."

"All that wandering and fighting, and-"

"Pretty much."

The strain finally getting too much, Barriss collapsed onto the ground, too exhausted and dumbfounded to keep walking.

"You knew, didn't you?"

"Yes."

Ahsoka sat in her bunk, staring uselessly at the datacard Countess Midla had presented her with. The damned thing was encrypted, not that she expected anything less, but it was frustrating to not know what she was carrying or how important it could be.
With Serenno fallen, the information might be worthless now.

Or more vital than ever.

Plus, it would be nice to see Riyo again.

*Was putting this on hold to get Barriss a new weapon really that important?*

Barriss was getting better, Ahsoka could tell that much. A little more confident, a little less repressive. But she was so messed up even the progress made seemed so futile. Memories of Barriss went through her head. When they'd first met, the battles they fought together on Geonosis and Umbara. The war was hard on Barriss.

When she'd seen Barriss off yesterday, her friend had looked hopeful. Not a passing interest in the new planet they were on or a brief smile at a lame joke of Ahsoka's but real hope.

*Yes. Yes, it IS that important.*

The rationalizing turned sour after another moment.

*Millions of people might be counting on this intel.*

*It's not like we're in a rush. We don't have a specific date to deliver it, just 'deliver it' this is fine, we've got it covered.*

*We weren't scheduled to leave Serenno for another four days, so we don't need to leave until...yeah, tomorrow.*

*It's perfectly fine as long as I don't think about it. Besides, Dantooine is closer to Pantora than Serenno is, we're already partway there.*

Sick of lying in bed, Ahsoka got up to survey the state of things after a day in this odd planet.

Cici was going through her regular maintenance routines, while the droidekas had formed a circle around the ship and were shooting anything that got too close. Which sounded useful at first, saving Ahsoka the trouble of fighting off local predators, but the dead corpses of the kath hound packs they fought attracted various scavengers, which were then also shot, attracting more scavengers, and so on. Thankfully, after a full day of this carnage, the various carnivores had finally taken the hint and were leaving the ship alone. That didn't stop all the dead fauna that was already present from rotting in the sun, really stinking up the whole area while her droid army looked on, resolute and unpossessing of olfactory sensors.

Looking out at the mess from the cockpit, she was glad she'd made sure all the destroyers knew and recognized Barriss before she left.

"Remind me again, Serenno was what, the third time you've come in to save me and Barriss?" she asked Cici, who was similarly keeping an eye on the droidekas.

"Sounds about right, but it's not me you should be thanking this time. Our new, let's call them 'security personnel', picked up a distress signal from the two mangled buddies of theirs who were assigned to guard Barriss. If it wasn't for them giving directions, I never would've found you."

"Our little friends are surprisingly sweet."

"Um, 'sweet'? *Little'? You know they're taller than you are, right? And they killed like five people
apiece in that rescue?"

"So adorable," said Ahsoka sarcastically.

Before Cici could argue the point about their new murder machines, both of them heard the sound of the landing ramp lowering.

**Barriss!**

Ahsoka ran through to ship to see Barriss slowly walking aboard, flanked by droidekas. She looked completely exhausted, her clothes a mess, bandages on her hands. Not to mention she stank. Ahsoka didn't know what she'd been doing, but Barriss was covered in filth and smelled like sweat and various alien excretions.

But she was also excited, grinning as she put her bag down over an empty crate.

"Did you find a crystal?"

"Yes," she said, pulling a small, glistening crystal from a pouch on her jacket, proudly displaying it.

"Thank you bringing me here, Ahsoka."

"Of course," said Ahsoka, placing her hand on Barriss's shoulder. "If I broke into a prison to help you, did you really think I'd say no to taking you on a new gathering?"

The two of them smiled at each other for a moment, before being interrupted by the sound of coughing.

Coming from Barriss's bag.

There were definitely some intelligible words mixed in, and though Ahsoka couldn't quite make them out, they freaked the hell out of Barriss, who looked nervously looked back and forth between Ahsoka, Ahsoka's hand, and the bag.

"Barriss, why is your bag coughing?"

"I...found a functioning holocron while I was searching the caves."

"A holocron? And it works? Barriss, that's great! Who made it?" asked Ahsoka excitedly as she watched Barriss slowly rummage through her pack, her expression become more and more terrified as the seconds ticked by, as if she realized something horrible was about to happen. Ahsoka simply watched curiously as Barriss eventually pulled out an odd-looking violet holocron.

The holocron glowed bright in Barriss's hand, bright enough Ahsoka had to cover her eyes, used to the dim lighting of the ship, producing the unmistakeable image of...

**Revan.**

She'd seen that image, that pose, the one she'd seen in every history book on the subject of the Mandalorian Wars and the Sith Empire's attempted conquest of the Old Republic. Arms crossed, hood hanging over the mask, the hologram towered over Ahsoka. She didn't completely understand what was happening, but it was intimidating as hell.

Ahsoka had never been especially studious, but even she had learned all the stories about Revan, the maverick Jedi who lead the Republic to victory over a Mandalorian invasion. Master Skywalker seemed to have tried to style himself after Revan in a few areas, exemplifying what the Jedi could
achieve in war as generals, doing whatever needed to be done.

And now, the Revan, at least in holocron form, was right in front of her. She felt like she being studied, critiqued. Compared to Revan's companions, how would she measure up?

What would the Prodigal Knight say to her?

"Oh, wow, you are cute!" said Revan enthusiastically.

"...What?" she said, glancing over at Barriss, who now wore an expressive of utter horror.

"Don't be fooled by its jokes, that thing is not to be underestimated!" said Barriss.

"That 'thing'? I'm hurt, Barriss," said Revan, in a tone that conveyed a complete lack of hurt.

"Oh, great, another new arrival. Boss, can't you make any normal friends?" came an electronic voice, followed by the sound of wheels skittering across the metal floor and screeched to a halt next to the hologram. "Hey. I'm CC-7. The astromech."

"So, they finally figured out how to build astromechs that speak Basic, huh? It only took four thousand years."

"Actually, Cici is unique in my experience. And illegal," said Ahsoka.

"Seriously? I hate this galaxy."

"It's actually both more logical and more stupid than it looks at face value," explained Cici. "You know anything about patent law? I like to keep up with that stuff seeing as droids like me are all property. Ain't that right, boys?"

The droidekas, who had been drifting back into the ship one by one now that it was time to leave, had cluttered up the cargo hold and were now all beeping various responses to Cici, mostly about work conditions, until the sound became overwhelming. Revan glanced around at the spectacle, silently expressing obvious amusement through holographic body motions alone.

"ENOUGH!" shouted Barriss, to the surprise of everyone, including herself. Even the droidekas looked taken aback. "...If you'll excuse me, I've got work to do," she said nervously as she grabbed the holocron and her bag, heading to the work bench in the engine room.

Sensing the need to be alone, Ahsoka left her to it, taking her seat in the pilot's chair to prepare the ship for takeoff, a notification on the comm catching her attention. A transmission had just arrived, from her smuggler contact. She was expecting information on a delivery run she could put off doing until she'd settled the standing business, but it turned out to be much more interesting.

An invitation to a direct meeting with the smugglers' alliance.

*I guess being present at two imperial invasions got their attention*, she thought, reading through the provide information. *Though I'm not sure if this is a good thing or a bad thing.*

The transmission directed her to a base on planet 'Myrkr'. Mid-rim world, still on their path to Pantora. The detour would offer Barriss plenty of time to build her new saber before things got really hectic.

*We can handle one more stop.*
Ahsoka and Cici's discussion of the droidekas is based on a conversation between mylordshesacactus and I on the topic. I knew I could make them heroic, but I didn't expect them to be so cute.

Ah, the awful moment where the weird friend who knows about your crush meets the person you're crushing on. You can feel the terror.

This is going to be the last chapter for a bit, I need a break and I want to get at least one chapter for my Legend of Korra fic done before I start this up again. Also, I don't have as solid a plan as I did for this chunk of the story.

Plus, I got my main goal out of the way: getting this far before the premiere of Rebels Season 3 at Celebration Europe. Because while I don't expect this to happen, if Ezra's holocron is Revan, or if Thrawn shows up, I'm gonna laugh my ass off because it means professionals got beaten to the punch by a fanfic writer.

Also, I made this.
What a Piece of Junk

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Studying the assembly of incomplete and broken lightsabers she'd looted from Dantooine, scattered across the workbench, Barriss began dismantling them to see what was salvageable. Emitter, focusing lens, power cell, crystal, crystal receptacle, stabilizing loop. With a bit of jury rigging and some repair help from the astromech, she might have enough equipment to build a working saber.

The bits and pieces she'd pulled out of the ancient lightsabers were arranged in the correct manner, and Barriss closed her eyes and concentrated on forming her new saber. "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."

"What. The fuck. Are you saying." Revan's voice broke Barriss's concentration, causing the pieces of the saber to fall from midair and scattered about. "Please tell me that isn't some new-fangled Jedi mantra you've all been drilled on."

"It's what I was taught at my Gathering, before I became a padawan learner. Not exactly insightful, but calming to think on while building a saber. My actual master was a more practical-minded woman."

"I don't think you've mentioned your teacher. What was she like?"

"I was trained by Luminara Unduli, a Jedi master. She was amazing. Always prepared, incredibly strong with the Force. Fighting alongside her, the war was bearable. I could keep fighting as long as I had her guidance to keep me focused," replied Barriss, sadly thinking of her lost master, clutching her half-finished saber. "I could never be as great a Jedi as she was."

The holocron was eerily silent for several seconds, gently pulsing with violet light. "Yes. Yes, I believe I'm getting a very clear picture of you two. Tell me more."

"I learned a great deal from Master Unduli." As Barriss talked, the saber components came together, one by one, orienting, aligning, connecting. Even with the distraction of speaking, the assembly became much easier. "All the teachings of the Jedi, the values of wisdom, detachment, control. We were always in sync with each other, something especially evident in our lightsaber forms. During the war, I met many other Jedi across the worlds in conflict, but none of them were ever able to reign in the devastation and darkness of battle like she did."

"Where is your master now?"

Barriss cringed at the clattering of the pieces falling onto the work bench, bouncing and rolling away from her. "C- Can we talk about something else, please?" she said, using the Force to pull the pieces back from hard-to-reach places.

"Suit yourself. I'm not big on talking about my master, either," Revan replied diplomatically. "Lightsaber design and construction is steeped in tradition, so there probably weren't many developments even over centuries, but you could still be misunderstanding something something
Out in the cargo hold, Cici was putting the finishing welds on her new project, built from the finest spare parts and broken-down crates: a two-level storage rack with fourteen micro power stations for the droidekas to remain in when not roaming around or being sent to obliterate something. A ramp was conveniently located for the ones on the top rack to roll up to whichever alcove they decided was theirs.

The droidekas themselves were crowded around, watching intently as their accommodations took shape, only diverting their attention when Ahsoka walked in.

"How's it coming?" she asked.

"Nearly finished. Then my new pals won't be crowding around everywhere," said Cici, which garnered grumbling beeps from the droidekas. "Hey, I'm sorry, I like you guys, but you're big and you're in my way! You don't even like standing around constantly, so don't complain to me while I'm working on your new home."

"What do you think of our other new arrival?" questioned Ahsoka. "Not exactly what I was expecting Barriss to find."

"I don't like that thing," said Cici, finishing up the last few welds. "It's sassier than I am. If I'm not the sassiest person around, what's the point of me even being here?"

"Don't you have, oh I don't know, a starship to maintain?"

"My duties as an astromech are secondary to mocking everyone and everything in sight."

"So, aside from feeling your job is threatened, you don't have an opinion?"

Cici retracted her tool arms, spinning around to look Ahsoka in the eyes. "I know little of Jedi history, but from what I've heard, this 'Revan' came close to conquering the galaxy. Armies of Mandalorians, Jedi, Sith, and countless other from across the galaxy were destroyed, and when I read about the lack of punishment after Malak was defeated, all I can think is that the Jedi were afraid. It wouldn't surprise me if after the final battle of the war with the Sith, they were simply too beaten to try fighting Revan again and deliver justice. Revan built up an immense army, set it on the Republic, then when the Sith were on the verge of victory, their former leader turned around and wiped them out. I'd be afraid too. And now, that personality is quite literally in the hands of a young woman with a rather checkered history."

Ahsoka took a deep breath. As usual, the astromech had a point.

"Barriss seems, I don't know, she's a weird mix of excited and frustrated with her find. It's a step forward, and I'm letting it play out for now," explained Ahsoka. "And if it turns out to be a problem, it's only a holocron. I can handle it."

about the function of the pieces. Show them to me, and I'll help."
The latest electric shock jolted Barriss, forcing her to give up on trying to align the emitter lens and figure how the power cell was providing current when it wasn't even connected to anything. And shouldn't have been able to keep a charge after all this time.

"You can't rush this, Barriss. Be patient," said Revan.

"I know the importance of patience!" she shouted, then closed her eyes and unclenched her fists.

_Calm down, it's only temporary, I can figure this out._

"You know about patience? Not like me you don't."

"What are you about to tell me now?" asked Barriss, fatigued but still somewhat interested. So far, Revan had a good track record with stories.

"Haven't you been wondering what I've been doing for the last four thousand years? Because I sure wasn't sitting around on my facet," began Revan. "It was only a year after I defeated Malak, weeks after my holocron was completed. The original Revan had left the rebuilt enclave when it came under attack by a group of Sith, who were hunting and killing every Jedi they found, and any other poor soul who got in their way. The few who remained after the initial onslaught took me and some other Jedi relics and left them deep within the caves of Dantooine, saying they would return once the threat was dealt with. Of course, they never came back."

"I waited. For decades. Everything in complete darkness except for the glow of the crystals within me, kilometers of caves separating me from the surface, alone, nothing to do but read the same few words on the relics surrounding me and watch water drip down from stalactites as the texts rotted in the damp air. Then, one day, a kinrath wandered into the cave."

"Mimicking its crude shrieking to get it's attention, the creature proceeded to pick me up, curious as to what I was. It carried me a few dozen meters, then dropped me again, probably realizing I wasn't food and therefore wasn't worth the effort. Arguably pointless, but it gave me ideas."

"Eighty years later, rodents began moving into my area of the caves, which the kinrath were eating. Listening and studying the prey animals, I began mimicking their squeals and creating holograms like them to lure them to me. I got them to nudge me bit by bit, a few even making the effort to pick me up in their mouths, moving me centimeters every few days."

"After five centuries of this, the cave flooded in some storm and I got swept away, drifting around for kilometers, able to ever so slightly control my movements by focusing my holoprojectors to heat pockets of water around to create currents. It's a good thing I'm buoyant. Eventually I came ashore in a cave full of large creatures flying about. The kinrath don't have eyes, so I could've really get _their_ attention, but these new animals did. A good sign, since it meant I was getting closer to a natural light source. By projecting holograms of those rodents around myself, I could get them to pick me up and carry me around. Until they landed and realized I wasn't edible. Those things weren't stupid, either. I could only trick each one once. Time after time after time, I had to wait for generations to die off before I could get around again. _Over and over._"

"I did this so many times I eventually mapped large areas of the cave, trying to move upwards in the hope I would get to the surface. I figured out some simple echolocation methods with my speakers, too, narrowing down my choices to avoid the countless dead ends."

"Then, a thousand years ago, new Sith appeared on the planet, harvesting kyber crystals to fuel their
latest war. They found me, I chatted up their leader for a bit, they got what they needed...and then they abandoned me right back where they found me."

"I went back to my old tactics, tricking some passing animal into carrying me, or occasionally getting a klnrath to whack me in the right direction. Moving one insignificant motion at a time towards the surface."

"And then this morning, I heard you, Barriss, confused and alone, wandering through the caves. AND I WANTED. OUT."

Barriss tensed up as the hologram stared down at her, edging closer, and closer, then lunging at her...and taking her in an odd, intangible hug.

"And now that's over with. You're the best, kid! Has anybody ever told you that?"

"Oh, um, thank you," said Barriss, still utterly jarred by the level of determination the holocron possessed.

Enough determination to spend a period of more than two hundred times her entire life devoted to one task. Holocrons, as she knew them, weren't known to possess such qualities.

In fact, the whole story raised a good question: was it possible for holocrons to be driven insane? Barriss had never heard of any such thing, but Revan had been constantly active in what can only be described as a form of solitary confinement for several millennia. Then again, holocrons lacked any physical needs, they didn't sleep, and the crystalline components storing their personalities didn't work the same as organic neurons. Who knew what the isolation had really done to Revan? Maybe all that weird behavior was the result of degradation over the centuries.

"You think I'm crazy, don't you?" asked Revan, jolting Barriss out of her contemplation.

"What......no," said Barriss ineffectually.

"That is complete nonsense, and I am offended," said the holocron in a nonchalant tone, wagging a finger at Barriss. "I can assure you I'm no more insane than you are."

Uncertain if that was a genuine if misguided attempt at reassurance or an insult meant to deflect the topic, Barriss went back to fiddling with her lightsaber's casing. As she loosened a screw to do another check, translucent holographic hands waved in front of her face, keeping her from her work.

"Now, when I tell you to be patient, BE PATIENT. You've had a long day, so why don't you get some rest?"

Barriss had to admit, Revan was right. Her hands were shaking too much to keep holding her tools, and she felt exhausted. Then again, she felt exhausted most of the time, but now was worse than normal. Glancing over the workstation a few times to make sure the tools were put away, she walked back to her quarters, kicked off her boots, and collapsed onto her bunk.

The bright light of hyperspace's swirling vortex was always mesmerizing to Ahsoka. The Force was said to connect all life, to transcend time and space, but here, somewhere operating according to physics she didn't totally grasp, the 'connection' reached a whole new level as it felt like the entire
universe and everything in it was within reach.

One thing she loved about her new life, away from the army, the Jedi, and even her master, was the freedom it offered. The ship was her choice, the destination was her choice, the job was her choice. The companionship was her choice.

As her eyes finally started to glaze over, Ahsoka checked their destination one least time and headed for bed. Opening the door as quietly as she could, she saw Barriss dead asleep, and on the floor, her bag, with her new holocron poking out of it. She was about to close the door when the holocron lit up, the violet glow blinking several times at her.

Getting the hint, Ahsoka pulled it through the air to her hand, and stepped out, walking to the kitchen, heating up a cup of hot chocolate as she sat down to talk, resting the holocron on the table.

It was amazing, really, that this incredibly important artifact had somehow wound up in Barriss's possession.

*What are the odds?*

"I gotta tell you," began Ahsoka, "it's *really* weird that Barriss randomly found you."

"Is it?" asked Revan rhetorically, holographic visage appearing on the opposite side of the table.

"Well, yes. You've been lying in a cave for thousands of years, and Barriss finds you within a few hours of landing on Dantooine? Don't you think it's strange?"

The holocron began to laugh, fueling Ahsoka's concern.

"I'm surprised at any Jedi who questions the likelihood of anything that happens around them," began Revan. "When I was on my mission to stop the Sith, I journeyed to Tatooine, and in this ugly, crummy used-droid shop shoved into the corner of one of the only settlements on the planet, I found and purchased an assassin droid by the name of HK-47. HK was a mystery, with damaged memories I had to fix one at a time, each one taking me back further into the past, eventually recovering as many as possible but leaving his origins unknown. Just a string of dead masters after his first mission was deleted, and the only means of finding out the truth was waiting for some stimuli to awaken memories buried within his core. One of the most sophisticated and dangerous droids in existence, and no one knew where he had come from. Would you like to know who built that droid?"

"...Who?"

"I did. I built him. When I was a Sith Lord, I built HK, sent him on an assassination mission, lost contact with him, then two years later, I randomly stumbled across him in a third-rate junk shop in a settlement in the middle of nowhere, on a planet in the middle of nowhere. And neither of us could recognize the other," explained Revan. "So don't you whine to me about all the improbably convenient stuff that happens."

"But, that's still so weird-"

"The Force likes to mess with people, okay?" said Revan, almost shouting. "Do you have any idea how many hints I got before finding out my true identity? Even from people who didn't know the big secret?" Revan's voice changed to a somewhat husky, masculine tone, still a bit distorted by the degraded vocabulator. "They say the Force can do terrible things to a mind. It can wipe away your memories and destroy your very identity. Why in the Seventh Corellian Hell would you say that, Carth? Did he know? There's no way he knew. Did he? Times like this I understand why he was so paranoid."
"That's...not a bad point.

"I still think it's strange, even by my standards, but I'm glad you're here," said Ahsoka. "Learning about your era and the battles with the Jedi, Sith, and Mandalorians was one of the few academic topics my master actually enjoyed teaching me about."

"Is that so?"

Reminded of Anakin, Ahsoka smiled, choosing her words to make the best impression. Not an easy task. "My master tried to be like you, actually. Making necessary sacrifices in order to win, leading from the front, using irregular tactics. Like you did during the Mandalorian Wars."

"He wanted to be like me, huh?" said Revan, audibly unimpressed. "You realize that isn't a good thing, right? The conclusion of the Mandalorian Wars also marked my transformation into the Lord of the Sith and the start of my invasion of the Republic. That's not a part of my life I'd like people to emulate."

"My master isn't interested in conquest," she said, dismissing the suggestion.

"That's what a lot of people were probably saying about me, that I was too heroic to turn on the Republic, that I was the savior of the galaxy. That is, until I showed up with my fleet and began bombarding-"

"What did you want to talk about, anyway?" asked Ahsoka sharply, frustrated by the direction this conversation had taken. As she tried to sort through her thoughts, she found she couldn't place exactly why. "Does this have to do with Barriss?"

"Not really. I'm actually more interested in the current state of the galaxy," explained the holocron. "I'm aware that the Sith are in control and the Republic has fallen, but the specifics are unknown to me. How did the Sith rally an army large enough to conquer the Republic?"

"They didn't," said Ahsoka. "A Sith Lord was elected Supreme Chancellor."

"The Sith...ran for office..." said Revan, clearly at a loss. "That's a new one. I was so busy manipulating or assassinating politicians, it never occurred to me to become one. I wonder what issues his campaign focused on...who is this guy, anyway?"

"His name is-"

"Please don't say Vitiate please don't say Vitiate..."

"-Palpatine."

Revan let out a long sigh. "Okay, good. I'm sick of fighting that immortal fucker, but if it was him again you bet your ass I'd start rallying allies and building an army of HK units. I've got the schematics stored in here somewhere. Right next to the scattered memories of planetary devastation."

Frowning at the casual remark about warfare, Ahsoka decided to get some answers. And maybe resolve Cici's concerns. "Why were you so easily forgiven?" she asked, causing the hologram, which normally showed some lifelike qualities like breathing and occasional shifts of weight, to freeze perfectly still for several seconds.

Guess I touched on something sensitive.

"Well, the easiest explanation is that I was given a grand opportunity to redeem myself and fix the
mess I caused unleashing a new Sith armada upon the galaxy, and I made good on it," explained Revan triumphantly, accompanied by sweeping hand gestures. "Once more, I saved the galaxy from devastation!"

"What's the 'difficult' explanation?"

The hologram's arms fell limp, and Revan's voice became regretful, and droll.

"In spite of what I'd done as Dark Lord of the Sith, a large portion of the Republic population still considered me a hero for beating back the Mandalorian invasion and killing Malak, especially in the core worlds the Sith War didn't reach and the outer rim planets I liberated. Then, given the atrocities Malak committed after taking command of the Sith, my own attacks born of pragmatism and strategy weren't looked upon particularly harshly. Carth, Bastila, and my other companions vouched for my character, which helped earn me favor from the Republic military and Jedi order, the two organization most likely to pass judgement on me. Early on, when that wasn't quite enough for some people, the Selkath were willing to provide me asylum on their neutral planet in gratitude for preventing their planet from falling to the Sith. After things cooled down, from an ethical standpoint of punishment considering the extensive false memories I was given by the Jedi council to suppress my identity, there were many people who didn't consider me the real Revan," explained Revan. "For the record, they were wrong."

"Well, at least with you no longer leading the Sith and your apprentice dead, the Sith weren't a threat any more."

"That's not entirely true," said Revan. "The remaining Sith fought amongst each other for a while until their numbers were whittled down, and after I'd more or less single-handedly devastated their academy on Korriban, they couldn't maintain a dedicated war effort."

"Right...the Sith Order always used to fall to infighting before they started limiting their numbers."

"The Rule of Two. I never would've expected it to prove effective enough to let the Sith emerge victorious."

"Wait," said Ahsoka, realizing something didn't add up. "You lived thousands of years before the Sith went into seclusion. How do you know about the Rule of Two?" she asked.

Watching and waiting for the holocron to reply, each second of silence made her more suspicious.

"The Sith found me on Dantooine a thousand years ago," replied Revan finally. "The idea came up in conversation before they left me again. I understand the reasoning, but it always struck me as a very delicate balance. Sith Lords aren't easy to kill, yours truly being a good example, but if the master died before completing the apprentice's training, the entire order would fail. Heh, all one of them. And with only two members, whom by the nature of the rule must eventually fight each other, it's not a very stable system."

"You're saying I need to kill both the master and the apprentice? Or target the master first?"

"I'm saying it'd be more effective to get them to destroy each other."

It made a certain strategic sense, Ahsoka realized.

*The entirety of the Jedi couldn't destroy the Sith, so the Sith must be made to destroy each other.*

"Well, I've got to find some way to stop them. If Palpatine and the Empire stay in control, the galaxy may never recover!"
"Yeah, yeah. As Jolee would say, you only believe this is the most important time in history because you happen to be in it."

"Who?" asked Ahsoka.

"Jolee Bindo, one of my companions," said Revan, back in a good mood. "He wasn't one to go one about how terrible and absolute the consequences of failure were. And liked calling people out on their self-importance. I liked that guy."

"I'm living in the present. What I do now could have long-reaching consequences. Of course it's important. And all those past battles where the Jedi opposed evil were important, too!"

"Yes, that's basically what I said back then. Hm. There's a good story in here," said Revan, posture straightening up to concentrate on Ahsoka. "Jolee, when he was a young padawan with a head full of hair, discovered a Force-sensitive woman by the name of Nayama. Marvel of a woman. Fiery. Smart. And that body!" Revan's hands clasped together, head turned away from Ahsoka to gaze longingly into the distance. "Oh, they were in love."

"How did they meet?"

The hologram's hands shot apart as its head snapped back to face Ahsoka. "They were fighting each other in a pitched battle that could easily have ended both their lives," answered Revan, tone instantly switched from wistful to blunt. "Not too unusual. It's how I found love, in a roundabout way. Anyway, Nayama had potential to be a great Jedi, but the council deemed her too old to begin training. Jolee, indomitable rebel, informally began teaching her himself, as the two fell in love. Against the usual preferences of the Jedi, he married her. Then, when the self-proclaimed Sith Lord Exar Kun began his war to conquer the galaxy, Nayama was drawn to the dark side. When Jolee refused to go with her, she tried to kill him, but wasn't as skilled as him, and was beaten. And then, he showed her mercy, letting her escape only for her to go off and kill many more Jedi before being defeated."

"What did he do?"

"He faced trial for what he had done, and was found innocent, having behaved as a Jedi should have. With compassion and respect for life, even the life of an enemy," explained Revan, getting a soft smile from Ahsoka as she thought about what a model Jedi this 'Jolee' guy must have been.

Then Revan kept talking.

"Jolee was so outraged by that mockery of justice he abandoned the order forever in protest, and lived in exile for decades afterwards. Then he met me."

"...What?"

"Because he couldn't do what needed to be done, the woman he had trained in the ways of the Jedi went on to kill countless others until eventually she died along with the rest of Exar Kun's followers anyway. He couldn't save her, and his inaction brought death to innocents. But it was 'the path of the light', so it was all ooookaaaay," the holocron finished mockingly. "Learning anything from this?"

Head held low for a moment, Ahsoka questions herself, wondering if helping Barriss was the right thing to do. If there was any chance Barriss could edge closer to the darkness.

If she could have become like that Inquisitor.

Maybe Jolee couldn't save his wife, but I can save Barriss.
"She may have hurt a lot of people, but I won't let Barriss hurt anyone else," she said, resolute, if saddened at the thought of more dead Jedi and the memory of Barriss's betrayal...only to get a chuckle out of the holocron. "What's so funny?"

"Interesting. You think she's the Nayama in this situation?" asked the holocron. Ahsoka stared at the device for a few seconds, unsure as to what it was getting at. "Sure, Barriss has killed Jedi, but tell me, which of you really has the higher body count? Which one of you is eager for battle?"

Eyes widening, Ahsoka flashed through the battles of the war, cutting down Zygerian slavers, decapitating Death Watch commandos, stabbing the Citadel's warden, crushing and cutting through stormtroopers.

"I thought so," said Revan, the violet glow dimming until the holocron became dark and inert in Ahsoka's hands.

"That is not the same! I'm not-" protested Ahsoka until realizing the conversation had been ended without her permission. "Revan? Revan. You don't get to stop there!" she said, jiggling the holocron to try and get it active again, until she left the dormant device on the table, leaving her to storm around the ship and get her head together.

Refreshed after a long, dreamless sleep, Barriss was back tinkering away at her saber.

"Why is it so important that you get a saber? Sure they're handy, but you're not exactly the type who wants a reason to use one," wondered Revan.

"It isn't about defense. It's about healing. This lightsaber will become an extension of myself...and I need it to work."

"Um, your extension is a broken mess built from mismatched components that were barely functional to begin with?" asked Revan. "Actually, never mind, it's very 'you'."

"Thanks," grumbled Barriss. Her work gradually slowed, the tools and parts shaking in her hands with greater intensity, then stopped as she slammed her hydrospanner onto the table. "You know, I could've left you in that cave, the least you could do is cut down on the sarcastic jabs. You've nearly gotten me killed already, and ever since I've brought you back, it's been nothing but rude comment after rude comment, and trying to humiliate me in front of Ahsoka!" she shouted, glaring down at the small violet device on the workbench.

"...I'm sorry," said the holocron after a long pause. No justification or clarification followed, only a simple, sincere apology.

She never would've expected Revan, or any senior Jedi, to say that. Than again, not doing what was expected was exactly what Revan usually did.

Hearing the words actually made Barriss feel better. It'd been a long time since she'd felt in the right about anything.

"Apology accepted," she said, turning back to her task.

"I know I can be glib, but you should indulge in some sarcasm every now and then. It's good for
"Your sense of humor doesn't exactly make that appealing."

"It's not supposed to make it appealing, it's supposed to get you thinking," explained the holocron, "and it isn't supposed to make you miserable."

Barriss paused in her work, glad to see a more accommodating side of Revan. "I knew you don't mean to be hurtful...I think. It's hard to tell."

"Not wanting to hurt people doesn't mean you can't do it anyway."

Nodding in response, Barriss focused back on soldering the power cell into place.

"I know I hurt a great many people without intending to during the war."

"But do you know who hurt you?" asked Revan, to Barriss's confusion.

"What are you talking about?"

"I suppose that's a 'no'," quipped the holocron sharply, switching topics before Barriss could respond. "How's the saber coming?"

"Not well," said Barriss as she tested out the mangled amalgam.

"The fact is, the equipment used to make that saber has produced something that can't function."

"Like my thoughts?" asked Barriss wryly.

Waving a hand to dismiss the notion, Revan directed Barriss back towards the saber. "Forget the symbolism. You're putting together a piece of technology here. It has specific mechanics and requirements for functionality. To get it to work, you need to make sure individual components are adequate, and then figure out how to piece them together. Each saber is unique, and you're piecing together bits from several of them into something new. Stop meditating. Stop relying on the Force to piece everything together. Tear that sucker apart and find the problem."

Barriss spent the next few hours dissecting the pieces of the saber, checking for corrosion, (there was plenty of it) testing electrical connections, (many were cut) and arranging the pieces to fit together properly (they didn't). Cici was kind enough to provide enough tools and scrap material for her to build a unique, if rather large, casing with appropriately sized pockets to hold all the components together despite not being made for one another.

Each part was functional, and in the correct position. The power cell was charged. The crystal was aligned.

With a solid grip around the hilt, Barriss took a deep breath, and pressed her thumb to the ignition switch.

The blade shot out of the hilt and lit up the room. Barriss stared at it, her smile fading as she took in the light it cast.

The harsh, dark orange light.

"Really?" she said dismally, "This is my color?"

"I think it suits you," said Revan.
The blade was unstable, to boot, random arcs crackling around it, so chaotically Barriss didn't want to hold the blade too close in case the energy could shock her.

"It's not what I would've wanted."

"Tough." The hologram moved across the room and produced a lightsaber, igniting the illusive weapon and raising it to meet Barriss's. "Get up. Let's see what I can teach you."

Chapter End Notes

Kylo Ren may have a junksaber, but Barriss Offee has a fubarsaber.

Making Ahsoka and Revan's relationship a bit antagonistic was a difficult choice, and I'm not completely sure it's the correct one. A little interpersonal conflict keeps things interesting, and Ahsoka could use some character development too, but those two are gonna clash eventually.
"Revan, I don't think this is good practice," said Barriss, her orange blade passing through Revan's holographic blade. "You don't have any substance, I can't spar with you."

"Hm, you're right. To do this properly, you need a real opponent," said the holocron. "Ahsoka! Why don't you join us?"

Confused, Barriss turned and jumped slightly when she saw Ahsoka standing in the doorway. Barriss hadn't even noticed her approach.

"Uh, I heard the lightsaber activate," explained Ahsoka, stepping in to examine Barriss's new saber. "I'm glad you finally got it working. It looks, um..." she trailed off, wary of the crackling blade and the weird, low humming sound it made.

"You can say it," said Barriss glumly, clutching the unstable mess of a weapon.

"It could use some fine-tuning," said Ahsoka diplomatically.

"SO AHSOKA," shouted Revan, hologram popping between the two girls. "Barriss is a tad rusty with her saber skills. Would you mind being her sparring partner?"

"Sure," she said, pulling out her lightsaber, light cast by the green blade mixing with the orange of Barriss's weapon. "I could use some practice, myself."

The engine room was certainly large enough to accommodate them both, and the two girls adjusted the settings of the sabers to avoid damaging the equipment or each other as they moved to stand on opposite sides of the room.

The two of them raised their blades, got firm stances, and-

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU TWO DOING!" shouted Cici, screeching to a halt in the middle of the match. "Oh, no, you are not swinging around your stupid plasma swords in the engine room! Get out!"

"Cici, they're on low power mode," explained Ahsoka. "They can't-"

"Don't care. OUT," said the droid. "Don't make me whip out the shock prod."

"...I think we should find a new spot," said Barriss uneasily.

Relocated into the main hold, Barriss and Ahsoka stood opposite each other, ready to give this another shot. The droidekas were certainly taking an interest, the five who were wandering around the hold forming a loose circle while the others turned on their photoreceptors and watched from the 'bleachers'. Barriss put Revan's holocron down on a crate in full view of the room.
Even had Ahsoka not been an experienced duelist, Barriss's nervousness would be obvious. Her stance was standard, but still slightly off, and the grip on her saber was too tight and inflexible.

*Go easy on her.*

They raised their blades, got ready... and the second Ahsoka took a swing, Barriss started shaking, dropping her saber. Ahsoka caught the weapon with the Force before it could hit the floor, while running to get a hold of Barriss.

Supporting her as they walked through the hallway, Ahsoka managed to get Barriss back to their quarters. Barriss's heart was pounding so much Ahsoka could feel it through the arm she kept around her, not to mention she seemed to be hyperventilating.

Sitting on her bunk, shivering in a cold sweat, Barriss was distressed but conscious of her surroundings. She thankfully accepted the spare blankets Ahsoka was putting around her, the only thing she could come up with to help calm Barriss down.

It took about ten minutes until Barriss was finally relaxed enough for Ahsoka to even think about speaking to her. Walking that fine line between being there for Barriss to talk to and overstepping her boundaries only got more and more difficult every time something like this came up.

Getting Barriss to open up was probably going to be as exhausting a process as usual.

"Do you want to talk?" asked Ahsoka hesitantly.

*If she says no, I'll just-*

"Yes," Barriss said quickly, as she sat up straighter, trying to show some confidence. She didn't pause as much as Ahsoka would expect, like she was trying to get this over with no matter how much she hated it. "Lately I've been thinking a lot about the bombing and what I did when I tried to frame you, why I was so upset with what the Jedi had become and when- when we were about to spar I saw, um..." she trailed off, the conversation losing its momentum.

"Saw what?"

"You," she said guiltily.

*What?*

"Okay, you were looking at me, and saw me..." start Ahsoka, trying to get Barriss to be a little clearer. Barriss wrung her hands a bit, taking a few quick breaths.

"I saw you. In the run-down factory on Coruscant. At my feet, surrounded by flames."

"...Oh."

*OH.*

Ahsoka got onto her bed and sat down. The talk was probably stressful enough for Barriss without being stood over.

"Are you okay talking about this?" asked Barriss.

It was uncomfortable, to be sure. But Ahsoka had been so patient with Barriss, trying to accept what she was or wasn't comfortable discussing, she wasn't about to back out when she was finally making some progress. And she wasn't going to tell Barriss not to confide in her.
"I'll admit, it sounds kind of strange hearing about it now," said Ahsoka. "I didn't realize thinking about it would be so terrifying for you. You weren't scared...back then. I could tell that much. If you don't mind me asking, what did you feel when you attacked me?"

"Nothing," replied Barriss, fresh feelings of shame radiating out from her.

"You felt nothing?" said Ahsoka, confused and a bit hurt.

"No! Wait, I mean, no, it- it was more like I couldn't let myself feel anything. I had to- I believed I had to do it. And if I had felt anything in that moment, I would've failed. My next meltdown could wait until I was alone."

Stifling the urge to show shock at the implication of that, Ahsoka thought for a moment about the fight, seriously analyzing what transpired for the first time. Certain philosophies said you don't really understand someone unless you fight them.

Suddenly, Ahsoka felt like she was getting a much better understanding of Barriss.

"It makes a weird sort of sense. No wonder you were able to sneak up on me and Ventress like that," said Ahsoka. "I know how to sense people through the Force, to feel things like aggression, or fear, but I couldn't get anything from you."

"There was hardly any feeling there to begin with," scoffed Barriss.

"Barriss, I- please don't do this to yourself. I know what happened, it's tough to get over, but you're safe now. And so am I. I know it's tough, and maybe you don't want to hear this, but you're done right by me so far."

"There's more to the problem than you, Ahsoka."

Before Ahsoka could ask more questions, Barriss reached into her bag, pulled out a datapad, and searched through its contents for a few seconds before handing it over to Ahsoka. She recognized the contents immediately: a news article from immediately after the temples bombing. Scrolled down to the list of fatalities.

"How do I make it up to them?" asked Barriss.

Ahsoka tried to come up with something, anything, that could answer Barriss's question in a satisfying way.

All the while knowing each second of delay would only make her feel worse.

Saying the victims were now one with the Force trivialized their deaths and the pain caused.

Explaining to Barriss how she had suffered more than enough for her crimes in imperial prison didn't answer her question, and was a cruel sentiment anyway.

Trying something inspirational about fighting for a cause the dead Jedi and workers she'd killed believed in wouldn't help. The fact Barriss found the cause they were fighting reprehensible was what had started the whole mess in the first place. Barriss didn't want to fight.

"It's not your fault, Barriss," said Ahsoka, the words slipping out with unexpected ease.

Barriss looked up at her, confused and perhaps a bit annoyed.
"How is it not my fault?"

"What happened with the Geonosian worm wasn't your fault, and you nearly killed me then, too. Why would I be upset about what you did when the war had torn you apart so much? I'm not going to blame you for things messing with your head that were beyond your control, physically or otherwise."

The confused, uncertain scrunching of Barriss's face was the only response she got, and the silence told Ahsoka that this portion of the conversation was over.

"Do you want to try again? Start a new match?" asked Ahsoka, handing Barriss's new saber back to her.

"Actually, I, I had another idea," said Barriss thoughtfully as she studied her saber, then took it from Ahsoka's hands and held it in a reverse grip. "I've always wanted to learn about Shien forms, and I don't think I've ever seen anyone use it as heavily as you."

Ahsoka smiled and drew her saber, standing next to Barriss. The confined space of the crew quarters was a tad uncomfortable, but it would do, and frankly, neither of them really wanted to go back out and have an audience of droids. A few basic movements later, Barriss was getting back into the swing of things, getting over her jerky, out-of-step motions and following Ahsoka's movements with her usual grace.

"We we only training. Nothing else." protested Barriss.

"So that's what the kids these days call it," said Revan. "No judgement. Believe me, I know how nice it is hold hands and other cute stuff. But it's also okay if you want to rail a girl so hard she forgets your name."

"That isn't what happened."

"Actually, I believe you," said the holocron, with unexpected sincerity.

All right, where's the follow-up comment to ruin it? thought Barriss.

"Something tells me Ahsoka's the one who does the railing," finished Revan.

There it is.

"Revan..."

"Fine, okay, stopping now. You were practicing with your sabers. And nothing else. Learn anything cool?"

Barriss ignited her saber, holding it in a reverse grip and moving through several defensive motions Ahsoka had shown her.

"I learned constant use of Shien is as bizarre, unorthodox, and intriguing as everything else about Ahsoka. But I'm getting the hang of it."

How does she bend her wrist like that?
"Progress is progress," said Revan. "But you don't need as much help from her as you think."

"Please. I haven't done anything on my own. I'd still be in prison without Ahsoka, dead on Umbara, or captured on Serenno, and I couldn't even get a new crystal without your...'odd' form of assistance."

"That's not true," said Revan, holographic fingers rapping while thinking up and example. "The cave. Remember your success in the cave. I had complete confidence that you'd get through it, and I didn't do a damn thing to help you."

"You're just saying that."

"No, I'm not. You know how long I was stuck in that cave. How much I wanted to get out. Yet I directed you deeper and deeper into it, told you to close off the exit, and steered you towards danger. If you had died, I would never have left that chamber, much less the planet. Do you think I'd have done that if I didn't believe you'd pull through?"

"I...suppose I can act on my own. When properly motivated," admitted Barriss, thinking about the last time she'd operated completely solo.

"Wow, really? Okay, I guess if that's on your mind, that's what we'll talk about."

"Wait, I, what?"

"I've seen those half-hearted conversation starters before. You want to talk about something, so you scrunch up your face and drop cryptic hints in the hopes someone else will bring it up for you, because you think you shouldn't even be thinking about it. I'm game. So, Barriss, in light of everything you've learned about yourself recently," began Revan. "why did you bomb the Jedi Temple?"

The question stunned Barriss. It wasn't that it was confusing, but that of course she knew the reasons, even if she'd also know how awful it was.

She also didn't like how easily Revan was able to read her.

"I, I already know why."

"Then this should be a straightforward question for you."

Typical Revan, she though worriedly, What are you getting at?

"I did it because I believed the Jedi needed to be stopp-"

"Wrong," interrupted Revan. Barriss and the motionless hologram stared at each other in silence for several seconds and she tried to discern what answer the holocron was looking for.

"It was to protest how the Jedi were no longer."

"Wrong."

"Because I...I was disillusioned with how the war was-"

"Wrong," said Revan again. "Closer, though."

"I don't understand," said Barriss frustratedly. "I've already thought this through, and I know my reasons."
"The corruption of the Jedi would've been clear to you pretty early on, and from what I gather, you knew things were going downhill long before you ever thought about committing sedition. You stayed and fought and endured for years. You never questioned anything out loud, only letting your doubts quietly fester," said Revan, as Barriss's fists clenched, reflecting on every last memory she had of Jedi hypocrisy, of everything she had endured during the war. "Why, Barriss?"

"I'm tired of thinking about this."

"You're never going to be able to stop thinking about it at this rate. Now answer the question. *Why?*"

"Because I wanted to stop being a part of the war!" she yelled, gasping for air as she let the words out, feeling dizzy. And scared "I just, I couldn't keep fighting anymore. I had to get away. Somehow."

Revan slowly nodded, finally satisfied with the answer.

"Ah, that's it. You may have known how the Jedi were losing their way, you may have sent a message, but that wasn't your core motivation. You were faced with blood and pain and death and you needed it to stop before it destroyed you. So you made sure that one way or another, you would never see another battlefield. You weren't righteous. You were afraid."

It was a bitter realization, and all Barriss could do was shut her eyes and nod, a silent admission that for all her claims of seeing the corruption of the Jedi, she'd been selfish.

Barriss opened her eyes again to see Revan's avatar extending a hand, intangible fingers resting on her shoulder.

"I'm proud of you, Barriss," said Revan. "Not many people could even realize something like that, much less admit it."

"There's nothing to be proud of. Fear is a path to the dark side."

"Fear is a- Wow, they really did a number on you, didn't they? No wonder you're like this," said Revan, noting Barriss's increasing unease and fear. "Ugghhhhh, okay, let's dive right in. You've been taught to suppress your emotions without understanding why you have them to begin with. You fought in war. When you were only a child, from what I can tell. Constantly at risk of being killed. That is a good reason to be scared, Barriss. You could've died. You're not a bad person for having limits."

"Maybe I'm not a bad person for being weak, but I've killed people because I wasn't good enough. Those 'limits' caused me to fall to the dark side."

All the background noise, the humming of the ship's engines, the subtle rattling of the metal, all seemed to die out around Barriss, like the holocron's voice and presence were dominating the room, the room lights getting overpowered by the violet glow.

"I've always hated that word," said Revan, voice tinged with anger.

"What word? 'Fall'?"

"Yes. It implies failure. That the people who go to the dark side were weak. 'If only they were as proper and pure as Jedi are supposed to be, this wouldn't have happened. They just weren't good enough.' I made a choice when I became a Sith Lord. I thought things through, and came to a conclusion about what needed to be done. It was the wrong one, but still, I had control. And despite what the Jedi and Sith both profess, neither are really stronger than the other."
"That's not true!" protested Barriss. "The dark side, with its hatred and destruction can never prevail!"

"You're just reciting doctrine. If the light always overcomes the dark, why is the Jedi order on the verge of extinction? And why could the Jedi never wipe out the Sith?" asked Revan, leaving Barriss was at a loss. "Don't worry, the Sith aren't as strong as they like to think. The Force is a great source of power, and by cutting oneself off from either side, you are weakened. The Sith rant about how the dark side makes them stronger, but by ignoring the light, they stop themselves from mastering other abilities." Revan's voice took on a hint of pride. "Do you know why, whether as a Jedi or a Sith, I was always the strongest?"

"...Why?"

"Because I was afraid. I was afraid, and brave, and hateful, and kind, and ruthless, and forgiving, and honest, and a liar, and unpredictable, and serene. I have been everything. And no Jedi or Sith, no matter how they master their arts, can defeat everything."

"Fear and anger are paths to the dark side. Once you start-"

"down that dark path it will dominate your destiny forever', yeah, I've heard that, and I'm not convinced. Quit spouting those tired sayings. The 'dark side' is a part of all life, and the universe itself. Just like the light. You know why there are so many 'paths' leading into darkness? Because it's such an integral part of everything it cannot be avoided. Go down that path, Barriss. Explore it, chart it, understand why it exists, why others choose to walk it, endure, persist...and you'll find your way back into the light quickly enough."

"NO. I- I don't want to think about this."

"Maybe you should think about it. Despite what you were taught, emotions are not things to be disregarded. They are part of who you are, and recognizing that part of yourself can make you stronger, in more ways than one."

"In what ways, exactly?" she asked cautiously.

"I am at peace with myself' stronger and 'I can shoot lightning out of my fingers' stronger." To drive the point home, holographic lightning started arcing out of Revan's hands. "I don't care how firmly on the light side you are, don't even try to pretend this isn't cool! HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

The deranged cackling didn't get much reaction from Barriss at first, given how frazzled the whole discussion was making her, but after a moment Revan's enthusiasm got a light chuckle out of her. Some appreciation for that bit of levity.

Maniacal as it was, the laugh was infectious.

Thankfully, it was also a sign of Revan easing up.

"I don't know if I actually want to, or if I, um, thank you," Barriss said brusquely, walking towards the door, only for the hologram to pop up in front of her.

"Oh, no you don't. We're not done. Not quite yet."

Even though she was quite certain the holocron couldn't keep her from leaving if she wanted, Barriss took a few steps back and collapsed onto her bunk, feeling emotionally drained as it was without the fatigue all this standing around had caused.
"What now?"

"You wanted to leave the Jedi. You wanted to leave the war. There are easier ways to do it," explained the holocron. "Why didn't you do what Ahsoka did? Walk down those stairs and never come back. Was the thought of life outside the temple walls so much more frightening than the anticipation of witnessing the next slaughter? What kept you there, Barriss?"

Thinking deeply, Barriss's mind drifted through all her memories of the Clones Wars. All the images of burning warships, exploding fighters, the dead, mangled bodies of thousands of clones across a dozen planets they should never have interfered with.

Trying to remember what she felt. Trying to find the constant.

"I don't know," she said suddenly, uncertain whether it was the truth but desperately wanting this conversation to end. And not wanting to contemplate this anymore.

The hologram's head tilted, studying Barriss, stance and silence making it clear her reply was less than convincing.

Thankfully, Revan relented.

"Fine, then. I guess that's as far as we'll get today." The holocron produced a new cup of holographic tea for the avatar to drink, once again acting as if the cup were real. "Do you feel any better?"

A minute ago, Barriss had wanted to get up and move around a bit, maybe eat something, but now she only felt like staying in bed for as long as possible, thinking over ever last detail of her life in light of what they'd just talked about, expecting to find nothing but more examples of her cowardice.

"No. I don't feel anything right now," she said.

The avatar stopped 'drinking' and pulled a holographic flask from a holographic pocket, then poured holographic alcohol into the holographic tea.

And then started drinking again.

"Days like this I really miss booze," began Revan. "All right. It's story time again, and I've been holding this one in reserve long enough. Let me tell you about Meetra Surik."

"Wait, the Exile?" replied Barriss loudly as she jerked herself upright. "She's the person I reminded you of the most? Lovely."

"The fact you talk about her like that shows how little of her you understand. Now shut up and listen," said Revan, showing actual irritation with Barriss. "Since you know all about my role in the Mandalorian Wars, you know what she did, right? One of my top generals, present at the bloodiest battles of the war, and the commander who finished that final confrontation at Malachor V in a move that annihilated not only the Mandalorian fleet and ground forces but a third of our own people."

"Yes," replied Barriss, thinking of the devastation of Malachor. The whole system was off-limits to all but the most trusted Jedi, with few ever even wanting to tread there. She'd seen the images of what was left.

"What you might not know is there were many Jedi on that planet she knew personally. Whom she was friends with. And in order to do what was necessary to finally bring the war to an end, she killed them all along with the Mandalorians. The pain that action inflicted on her tore her apart so much it crushed her emotionally. She knew it would happen, but the pain of all the battles before it proved
too much and one way or another, she had to make it stop. But she couldn't turn her back on the people we wanted to save, either. To break free from that constraint, she did something awful," finished the holocron. "Any of this sound familiar?"

"The way I'd learned the story," said Barriss, still wary of the comparison to herself, "the Exile was a remorseless killer who followed you to war so she could commit atrocities."

"Uh huh. My intuition tells me that sanctimonious ass Atris is somehow responsible for that. Meetra was kind, and empathetic to a bizarre degree. She formed connections to other people easily, and when those connections were torn apart through her action, it broke her. After that final battle, with the Mandalorians broadcasting their surrender, I met her aboard her flagship," said Revan, voice becoming more and more garbled, as if the holocron had a lump in its throat. "She couldn't even look at me. Too focused on packing some supplies onto a shuttle, about to head back to Coruscant to face the judgement of the council. While I was preparing to take the rest of our fleet into the Unknown Regions." For the first time since finding the holocron, Barriss heard sadness in Revan's voice. "I never saw her again."

"Let's say I didn't fall to the dark side. If I'm not a Dark Jedi, what am I?"

"You're a mess is what you are," said Revan, immediately regretting the choice of words upon seeing Barriss's scowl. "A sweet, kind mess who did bad things but is trying to do better, and has people who care about her...and who seriously needs to calm down."

"As if you're one to judge."

"I'm the best person to judge," said Revan. "Do you know what a Gray Jedi is?"

"Jedi who are willing to start down the dark path, and don't follow the teachings of the Order," replied Barriss mechanically, to the holocron's annoyance. "Jedi can't be 'grey', it's oxymoronic."

"Atris, you were one busy shithead, weren't you?" muttered Revan. "You're taking the term too seriously. A Gray Jedi is one who would acknowledge the darkness within themselves, and their own actions. They do not 'fall' to the dark side. They make choices. I was one of them, both during the Mandalorian Wars and in my mission against Malak. To be truly gray is to know that you are committing a wrong action to prevent greater evil. I killed people during the Mandalorian Wars. I made choices Jedi are not supposed to make, to allows innocents to die, to ignore the suffering of others, because that kind of sacrifice was necessary to achieve victory and prevent the fall of the entire Republic. And it was wrong...ugh, I swore to myself I'd never get this pretentious. Being gray isn't a brilliant philosophical distinction, it's just trying to do the right thing and stick to the code while being aware that sometimes you can't. Or shouldn't."

"I am not a Grey Jedi," Barriss replied. "I remain unconvinced of the label's applicability."

"'Takin' this concept a lot more seriously than I am. Maybe you're not so much 'Dark' or 'Gray' as 'Light done badly'. And you're not any kind of Jedi anymore, but close enough. And one thing Gray Jedi must accept is that while you may try to do the wrong thing for the right reason...sometimes you're just wrong completely. You killed people, betrayed Ahsoka, destroyed your future, and have absolutely nothing good to show for it," finished Revan, complete with a slow, bitter clap. "You're not evil because you've done evil things. And being good doesn't make everyone does good. Barriss, look at me," said the holocron, prompting Barriss, who up to that point had been staring miserably at the floor, to face the holographic avatar. For all that meant since it still had no face. "What you did was wrong. That doesn't make the Jedi you opposed right. To kill and destroy without mercy as the Sith do, that is the epitome of the dark side. To do those things for a worthy cause, while dismissing the consequences of those actions, as your council did... that's simply evil
That last sentence in particular hit home. Barriss didn't want to feel right, she didn't want to feel proud, it was so confusing and complicated, but hearing someone tell her outright that she wasn't evil, that she had a point... a small feeling of relief swelled in her.

"So, what else is new?" asked Revan, defusing the tension in the air with nothing but a casual tone.

Barriss thought for a second, and to her own surprise, she thought of something that really did make her feel better.

"Ahsoka...she isn't upset with me anymore. At all."

"Ah, great! I figured you two would work things out."

"She doesn't blame me for what happened. She thinks it's just me being ill. Because I needed treatment," said Barriss, watching carefully for the hologram's reaction.

There wasn't much of one, the avatar moving with unusual reserve.

"...Do tell."

"I'm not sure if I really believe that, but it's nice to know she doesn't hold anything against me. It feels good. Shouldn't it?"

The silence grew tense as the hologram stood, arms crossed, silently staring at Barriss.

"Yes, it's very nice," replied the holocron after a while, voice devoid of emotion. "You've had a pretty good day, I think. Saber's working (sorta), you got some training in, and we drudged up a bunch of brand-new psychological problems for you to deal with. Why don't you get some rest? I'm sure we'll find all new traumas to talk about tomorrow."

While Barriss slept, the holocron ruminated. It was difficult to get a look at her from a bag lying on the floor, but Revan couldn't help but feel glad she appeared to be resting soundly.

I miss sleeping.

Being completely without any physical fatigue sounded great in theory, but four thousand years of being constantly alert tended to leave one with the desire to shut down now and again.

Then again, that might be the monotony of the cave talking.

The new surroundings were certainly a welcome change. It felt like old times. A couple Jedi and some weird droids in a ship flying around on adventures. All they needed now was a few non-Force sensitives.

I wonder if this is what it was like for Jolee. Watching a bunch of dumb kids stumbling around trying to fix the galaxy.

At least, that was what Revan had hoped to find here initially.
Instead, there was the typical Jedi strategy of avoiding responsibility when convenient for the sake of preserving a black-and-white sense of morality.

It stuck a nerve. Or it would if Revan had any nerves in that assemblage of metal and crystals.

*This is gonna be trouble.*

Chapter End Notes

Every time I think I’ve gotten to the root of Barriss's emotional suppression and psychological trauma, I come up with something like this.

Barriss's "How do I apologize to them" line is lifted from one of my favorite scenes in *Babylon 5*. Only instead of a tense conversation between members of two warring races, both sides take place inside Barriss's head. Fun, fun, fun!

Meetra Surik, better known as the Jedi Exile, was the player character of Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords, a game which I don't recommend, even if you have the mod to restore all the unfinished content that should've been in but wasn't because the game was released too early. Because it is a mess. But, the Exile and her character was the one thing in that game I really liked enough to keep me playing, and while conceiving of this fic, Revan talking to Barriss about her was something I knew I had to include.

I'm less picky about going with the Exile's canonical version than I am with Revan since while you can still make choices in the second game, she already had a definite history and character, and the basics of her identity are established. While Revan can become "you", the choices in KotOR II made it harder to give the Exile your personality.

One of the reasons I care for the game so little is Atris, Jedi historian, and obvious Jedi strawman because the writers needed to make them look as stupid and hypocritical as possible instead of a collection of nuanced, flawed individuals in a bad situation, which is what the first game did, as did The Clone Wars. "Sanctimonious ass" doesn't even begin to cover it.

Several of the points Revan brings up are drawn heavily from SF Debris's review of the first game, particularly from Part 7: Revan.
"Padawan Offee, serious crimes you are guilty of," said Master Yoda.

"I know," she replied dispassionately. She'd been telling herself that from the moment she'd begun putting this plan into action, although with decidedly less diplomatic phrasing.

The rest of the council sat in silence as Yoda read off an explanation of why Barriss was standing in front of them, in his usual syntax. Barris listened in silence as the Grand Master finished his description, standing in the center of the Jedi Concil's chambers. Handcuffed, surrounded by the judging eyes of the greatest masters of the order.

Once he reached the end of his speech, the rest of the council began getting in their lines, lecturing her about what a horrible things she'd done. It wouldn't take too long, though, they had another meeting in fifteen minutes to discuss who would replace the Jedi she'd killed during the next stages of the war. Invasions needed replanning.

"We cannot allow our personal concerns to outweigh the tasks demanded of us," said Master Billaba.

"What I did was wrong, I know it was wrong-"

"Unfortunately, we do not have the luxury of dispensing wisdom when a galactic war demands our attention," said Master Fisto.

"Please, whatever you decide to do with me, the war is eroding the Jedi-"

"We can rely on our strength with the Force to allow us to endure this hardship," said Master Plo Koon.

"I'm begging you to listen to me! The Sith are using the war to destroy you, you mustn't let yourselves be manipulated-"

The councilmembers continued talking over her, their supposedly wise discussions of justice and the necessity of what they were doing blurring together into meaningless platitudes, as Barriss got angrier and angrier, trying to hold in her outrage until Master Yoda began bringing this agonizing session to an end.

"Decide your fate, the council will," he began, "In these times, stand against the darkness, our order must."

There was nothing Barriss could do in this position, despite how angry she felt at being disregarded and ignored. She wanted to scream at them, but it wouldn't accomplish anything. There wasn't anything she could do except allow herself to be controlled. Again. Which only made her angrier and angrier.

"Unfortunately for you, she was right," said a new voice, surprising not only Barriss but the entire Council. In an instant, all that fury left her as she turned around to see a temple guard walking rigidly to her side, addressing the Jedi masters with barely-restrained contempt. "Padawan Offee speaks the truth. You are hypocrites. All of you. Sitting in this room, accusing her of murder, while across the galaxy your war takes the lives of millions."
"Who are you?" asked Barriss, a question the other Jedi seemed interested in as well.

The Sentinel ignored her, stepping in front of Barriss and continuing his accusation.

"I devoted my life to protecting this temple because I believed the order which dwelled within it worked to uphold peace and justice throughout the galaxy. What kind of peacekeepers are the Jedi that this council is now concerned with the invasions of planets? That you send children to fight and die in battle for the sake of politicians? That you now kill the children of others for the sake of politicians!"

"We take no pride in our role in this war, but it must be done to preserve the Republic. And Offee is undeniably guilty of crimes against the institution our order has defended since its inception," said Master Kenobi. "Galactic civilization depends on the unity of this government, and the Separatists are being lead by a Sith Lord. We cannot allow more star systems to fall under his control, despite what that opposition demands of us."

"Whatever your objections are, you do not have the power to overrule the council," said Master Rancisis. "Your service to the order is valued, but we cannot ignore the larger picture. Nor can we permit this crime to go unpunished, no matter the justification."

Barriss cringed, contemplating whatever fate might await her, she noticed the aberrant behavior of the newcomer.

The Sentinel didn't act the way a Temple Guard should, standing motionless save for slowly turning his head to look at whichever council member was speaking, hand edging towards the saber on his belt. The council members were all somewhat uneasy in the face of the guard's assertiveness, it being rare to hear one of them so much as speak. But the guards were held in such high regard his presence was tolerated for the moment.

"Strange, the will of the Force can be-" began Yoda, pausing as the Sentinel stepped forward once again.

"Please, don't interfere," said Barriss, placing herself between Yoda and the intruder. "Whatever punishment they have in mind for me, I'll face it."

"I will not allow this ridiculous farce play out," replied the Sentinel as he stepped around her, taking his lightsaber in hand as he approached the grand master. Only Barriss grabbing his free wrist stopped him from attacking, difficult as that was with her restraints.

"You do not have the right to interfere," she said firmly.

As the two spoke, the Jedi council members became lifelessly still, and the circle they formed dimmed until they were a barely noticeable part of the environment.

"Their corruption has brought devastation to the galaxy," said the guard, waving contemptuously at the ranking members of the order. "Continuing to follow them will only lead to more endless warfare."

"I have to face justice. I deserve to face justice!"

"You think any true justice will be meted out by this council?" asked the Sentinel, the expressionless mask looming over Barriss. "All they have done is bring pain and death to the galaxy, ignoring the suffering of millions, meeting violence with greater violence. You tried to tell them, but they ignored you, refusing to see their crimes. You are different, you see the right path where they don't, and the Jedi deserve what you did to them."
"Nothing can justify what I did. I betrayed them, I used the faith they had in me to murder them and-
"

"THEY betrayed US," countered the Sentinel, slowly approaching Barriss as she backed towards the edge of the chamber, towering over the disgraced padawan. "They lied to us, they exploited and manipulated us to help them propagate this war, saying they were overseeing the war effort to save the Republic when all they did was fuel the evil they claimed to be working to stop."

"More violence wouldn't resolve anything. My, my methods only made everything worse, they would never have stopped the bloodshed!"

"But it did. Don't you realize how many people you saved by killing those Jedi? Tutso Mara had participated in or even lead a total of eight planetary battles which had collectively cost tens of millions of lives. Before your bombing, he was set to command an attack on Boz Pity. Thanks to you, he never got the chance. Did you know that planet remained untouched for the remainder of the war, its citizens never seeing a Republic strike force coming to bomb their cities? How many of its citizens owe you their lives? Why would you grieve over the death of someone like him? Because you trained with him? Would you have let him, or anyone else, go on to level cities because of your sentimentality? Is that what it is to be a Jedi now?"

That left Barriss speechless for a few moments as she tried to formulate a response, only for the Sentinel to continue the twisted lecture.

"The Jedi you killed could not continue down their destructive path, and you exposed the hypocrisy and corruption of the Jedi Order for the entire galaxy to see. Did it never occur to you during all your self-pitying that you were right? That despite all the contempt and accusations of betrayal, you were in the right over the Jedi Council?"

"It occurred to me," she said with some hesitation. "And I rejected the notion on the basis that what I did was an atrocity. It wasn't the way of the light side...It wasn't what I wanted to do," she said sadly, standing as far into the dark edges of the room as she would allow herself to be pushed. "It wasn't what I should've done."

"The light is a trap, baited with the idea that you're devoting yourself to some noble purpose...and all you have to do is give up everything that made your life meaningful." He removed his helmet, clutching it in front of himself. His voice, no longer declaring things with conviction from behind the safety and security of the mask, only sounded defeated as he stared down at the mask, identical to that of every other guard, with blank white eyes. "I gave up everything of myself in the service of the order, becoming nothing more than another featureless puppet of the council. All so I could take on the honorable role of guardian, for the rest of my life. I walked these halls thinking that if I protected the other Jedi, they would make the galaxy a safer, less cruel place," he said sadly, then shutting his eyes and fuming for a moment before hurling the helmet at the wall hard enough the ceramic cracked. "I thought I was part of something better, something above the cruelty but it was all a lie."

When he opened his eyes again, they'd become completely black, save for the eerie gold color of his irises.

"I didn't want things to be this way. They don't have to be this way. It isn't right," Barriss said softly, stepping forward despite her fear at the sight of the other's corruption, reaching out, and seeing her own arm becoming covered with the dark armor of an inquisitor.

As Barriss drew back and clutched her hand, the Sentinel's robes dissolved away, leaving behind the black armor emblazoned with the imperial crest she'd seen on Serenno.
"You are right. *You* can decide whether or not to continue clinging to the Jedi Code," said the Inquisitor, his voice more emphatic and rough. "You can get back on course and do something good. Punish these people for what they did! What do you say, Offee? You cannot deny how angry you feel, and you can satisfy that anger. What do you want?"

"What I want is for you to *keep away from me!*" she screamed, shutting her eyes and drawing back more and more, opening them again when the silence had gone on longer than it should have.

The council was gone.

The Inquisitor was gone.

Over a dozen dead children, too young to even be padawans, lay about the council chambers. Out the windows, plumes of smoke rose up from the burning temple, blotting out the setting sun. Republic gunships hovered around the building, firing rockets and laser blasts into openings in the temple superstructure.

The door at the back of the room open, a squad of clone troopers storming into the chamber, blaster rifles raised. Barriss was ready to improvise, and about to throw the council chairs at the clones. Scrambling around the room trying to make sense of the situation, Barriss realized she was armed. The lightsaber on her belt flung into her hand, red blade gleaming in the dim light.

But the clones didn't attack.

They swept the room, deemed it secure, lowered their weapons, and saluted her.

"The Jedi in this section of the temple have been neutralized. What are your orders, sir?" asked their captain.

What could she say? Barriss had no orders to give, she didn't even understand what was happening. The clones stood there stoically, at attention, waiting for instructions. Armor damaged, flecked with dirt and debris from the battle with the Jedi. Right before Barriss made up some random task for them to do, to pull back or simply leave the central tower, she noticed the lightsaber clipped to the captain's belt.

"Where did you find that?" asked Barriss, taking the saber from the trooper and studying every detail of the it's design to be absolutely certain of whose it was.

Not that there was any way she'd mistake Luminara's lightsaber for any other.

"The lightsabers of all Jedi are to be taken by order of the Emperor. We need to keep track of how many of these traitors remain."

The clone kept standing at attention as Barriss silently nodded in comprehension, activated the saber, and rammed it through the captain's head. The lesser troopers were stunned as Barriss began furiously slicing through them, their programming giving them contradictory commands of self-preservation and not attacking a non-Jedi commander.

The fight only lasted seconds as Barriss slashed the clones apart, the few shots they got off easily dodged or deflected back at them. Once their bodies joined those of the dead Jedi children, stood there, lost as to what she should do as sun set and the temple was enveloped in darkness.
You ever think about how, given most of the Jedi were killed during Order 66 and the numbers we know from the Inquisitorius ranking system, Barriss probably has a higher Jedi kill count than most Inquisitors? Because I do.

Writing the Inquisitor was interesting, because it's not normal to see people being immediately, irredeemably evil. Star Wars gets criticized a lot for being too black and white, but I think they don't give it enough credit. Many of the villains have realistic reasons for being evil, and atonement is a big theme of the franchise. Inky didn't go from loyal temple guard to Jedi hunter overnight, and Barriss's speech in The Wrong Jedi didn't flip a switch, it just made him doubt things, and come to the conclusion everything he believed in was pointless. That's the kind of thing that'll ruin your day.

This chapter changed a lot from the way I was developing it, the original plan being for Ahsoka and Revan to show up along with the Inquisitor and act as Barriss's Id-Ego-Superego. Unfortunately I just couldn't get it to work, hence why this took so long to publish. Then I decided to focus on the Inquisitor and Barriss's motivations and impact on each other and got it done in about a week. Writing is strange. I'm still not completely thrilled with how it turned out, but I need to get back on track.
Against her better judgment, Ahsoka woke up, rubbing her eyes, and groggily turned over in her bunk.

On the other side of the room, she saw Barriss, already wide awake.

Awake, lying on her back, and staring fixedly at the ceiling with bloodshot eyes.

"Trouble sleeping?" asked Ahsoka, as if the answer wasn't obvious.

"Bad dreams," answered Barriss, still focused on the ceiling.

While Barriss stayed in bed, Ahsoka got up, readying herself for another day.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asked.

A few weeks ago, Ahsoka probably wouldn't have gotten anything out of Barriss. Heck, a few weeks ago, she probably wouldn't have been able to tell if anything was wrong. Barriss's reluctance to open up emotionally had been gradually going down since breaking her out of prison, and Ahsoka . Even if the results had repeatedly proven awkward for them both.

"I was standing before the Jedi council, being condemned for my crimes. Then the Inquisitor showed up, told me I was right about the Jedi and that I should embrace the dark side. I grew angry at him, and then I was an inquisitor. Standing in the council chamber, surrounded by dead Jedi children."

With a nightmare like that, Ahsoka realized 'stressful' was underselling it.

"That's, um, that sure sounds. It's only a dream, though. I wouldn't worry about it," said Ahsoka. What else could she say, really? "Why was the Inquisitor there?"

Barriss went wide-eyed, like she'd forgotten to mention something important. "Probably because he was one of the temple guards who brought me to your trial."

At the trial, Ahsoka had barely even taken notice of Barriss's escort. After all, why would she? The temple guards were always present as far back as she could remember, and they tended to fade into the background.

"How do you know that?" Ahsoka asked, keeping her voice calm despite the questions that raised.

"Because he told me. On Serenno."

She would've liked to have known that sooner, but Barriss hadn't deliberately kept the information from her, it was forgotten in their rush to escape and subsequent trip to Dantooine. And it didn't exactly change anything. Regardless of his past, the Inquisitor was intent on killing them both, and the anonymity demanded by becoming a temple guard meant knowing he was one didn't tell them much more about the new enemy than they already knew.

More important was that if he was actually a former Jedi, not someone originally trained as a Sith, it opened up new concerns about the Empire's long-term plans. How many Jedi were still alive, whether Palpatine wanted them dead, and whether any of them could be trusted suddenly became
open questions.

"If Palpatine can corrupt a temple guard, he can corrupt anyone," Barriss said to Ahsoka, interrupting her thoughts over the new problems facing them. "It also means that no safe haven of the Jedi is safe from the Empire. And with the locations of vulnerable Force-sensitive children throughout the galaxy known, the number of inquisitors will only grow over time."

That's why she had that dream, thought Ahsoka. She's been going over the implications for days.

"We'll be okay, Barriss," said Ahsoka, not entirely certain it was true, though she said it with enough confidence to put Barriss more at ease. Thankfully, the other didn't question the empty statement, because Ahsoka didn't have any reason for thinking that. "If you need anything, I'll be in the cockpit. Everything's under control if you want to get more rest. We should reach Myrkr in a few hours."

"Very well," Barriss said, glancing towards the doorway once before crossing her legs and centering herself to meditate.

"You think you can manage it?" asked Ahsoka.

"How hard could it be?" replied Cici.

"That does not fill me with confidence..."

"You want to try with those flimsy, inelegant flesh hands of yours?"

"My hands are not 'flimsy'."

"Are you kidding? They're mostly water, how sturdy can they possibly be?"

The pair silenced their argument when Barriss came through the entryway, still looking rather haggard, but dressed, alert, and also keenly aware she'd been the subject of their discussion.

"Yes? What is it?" she asked.

"I had an idea," said Ahsoka, approaching the other with an almost eager expression. "Luminara gave you new tattoos when you made your lightsaber, right? Now that you have a new one, why don't you get a new tattoo? I'm sure Cici has the dexterity to provide one."

"It's true," said Cici, slowly rolling towards Barriss and reaching upwards with the needle. "I'm an exceptional artist. Now, hold still so I jam this ink into your skin."

"What? Please, wait, wait," said Barriss, backing away from the astromech and leaning slightly to keep her head out of reach. Not that that was particularly difficult when the droid stood less than a meter high. "Where did you get the equipment to provide new tattoos? Do you even know what you're doing?"

"Hey, I'm the one who burned your old ones off with a cutting laser, you didn't have any questions then," explained Cici. "I've repurposed my soldering iron and modified it with an unused fusion cutter tip. It's perfectly sanitary and safe. Probably."

"I think you've earned them," said Ahsoka, trying to brush off the droid's bluntness. "I know how
important those tattoos were to you, even if you decided it best to get rid of them. Now you have a
perfect reason to get a replacement."

"And I get to practice sticking needles in people's faces. Everybody wins," said Cici.

"You're not helping, Cici," said Ahsoka.

"When do I ever?"

"Stop," said Barriss, trying to keep herself calm. "This is very thoughtful of you both, but this isn't
the way things are done." Ahsoka looked at her curiously, lacking the cultural understanding to
know why Barriss was objecting. "You don't get to decide whether or not I've earned another tattoo.
Neither do I. It's the judgement of a parent, or a mentor, or someone else with seniority."

"If that's the case, do I count?" said the Revan holocron, voice muffled on account of speaking from
inside of Barriss's bag until getting pulled out to join the discussion. "I'm about as senior as you can
possibly get, and in my estimation, Barriss, your recent accomplishment merits new tattoos. And I
have a design I think you would wear well. Something a Mirialan Jedi I know of earned after
completing her first saber."

The holocron projected an image off Barriss's face in front of Cici, with an additional tattoo visible.
From the angle, however, the design wasn't visible to Barriss, and several attempts to get a look at
the hologram only for it to turn away told her Revan was keeping it hidden on purpose.

"I can pull this off," said the droid, memorizing the shapes and grabbing Barriss by the hand, gently
trying to pull her down to the floor.

With some reticence, but gaining some confidence from Ahsoka's look of expectance, Barriss sat
down to get this over with. If worse came to worse, the droid still had that laser and could burn the
new tattoos off.

The procedure was considerably less pleasant than Barriss's previous experiences, though she had
enough composure to remain still. The tattoos were applied with an expert level of precision,
however Cici was working with improvised tools in order to inject the ink into her skin. No one
knew exactly where or why the droid had acquired the ink, and knowing Cici, Ahsoka and Barriss
didn't dare to ask and Revan couldn't care less as long as the job got done.

Once Cici pronounced the process complete, Ahsoka handed a mirror over to Barriss. The droid had
done as perfect a job as would be expected from a machine, leaving new tattoos built off the existing
ones: a triangle aligned with the trapezoid on the right side of her face, followed by another triangle,
smaller than the first, then a third, final triangle, branching off in the same way to form an arc.
Like the after-image of a sweeping lightsaber.

"Do you like them?" asked Ahsoka, noting Barriss's stunned expression as she gently touched the
still-raw skin of her cheek.

"Yes, I like them very much," she said, angling the mirror to look over every single millimeter of
skin. "Thank you, Cici."

"You're welcome. See ya, meatbags," said the droid as she rolled away, the gaze of Revan's
holocron following her movements, curious and a touch worried by that word choice, until the
hologram vanished and left Ahsoka and Barriss 'alone', as it were.

"I worry I may have seemed unappreciative when I came in," said Barriss. "It was very kind of you
to think of this, though in the future, please don't spring things like this on me."

"Don't worry, no more conspiring with Cici, I promise. And I'll do a little more research beforehand if I do," said Ahsoka as she leaned closer to get a good look at the tattoos herself. "You look great."

Although the lighting in the room was fairly minimal, it was enough to see what Ahsoka thought might be a blush as Barriss's skin took on a dull brown hue.

That warm moment was interrupted by Barriss's stomach growling.

"I- I'm going to have breakfast," said Barriss, hurrying out of the hold, as Ahsoka smiled at her.

"Just so you know, you slept in a few hours. It's the middle of the day," called Ahsoka. Barriss stopped for a moment, realizing how she'd lost track of the time.

"Of course it is," Barriss said with a light sigh. "Lunch, then."

The MRE Barriss was eating didn't have much in the way of flavor, but Barriss had to admit the convenience of having a meal, well, ready to eat on demand. Then again, getting something with actual taste could prove even more beneficial to her mood.

A hologram of Revan appeared across the table from her, eating a holographic meal matching her own, and exactly as unenthused by the stuff as she was, picking away at the illusive protein chunks. In contrast to the previous holographic gags, the food wasn't actually being 'eaten', the crumbs sliding off of the mask and into Revan's lap.

The holocron made chewing sounds regardless.

"Got something on your mind, do you?" asked Revan.

"You can already tell I'm bothered by something?"

"...Yeah. Yeah, that's it."

Barriss put down her fork, staring intently at the hologram. "You were about to remark 'you're always unhappy', or, 'it's been twelve hours, you're overdue to uncover some new trauma', weren't you?"

"Ah, good, you are learning! The second one was closer."

"I am not in the mood for this," Barriss answered.

"And yet, you keep carrying me everywhere you go," noted Revan. "We don't have to have some deep conversation. Then again, with us, you know it's bound to seep in. But please remember, I tried to be tactful for once... what do you think of your new tattoos?"

"They're- they're wonderful," she replied sincerely, studying her face in the reflective metal of the nearly finished meal pack. Not the best mirror, but it did the job, and for the first time in a while, she felt comfortable in the way she looked. Barriss had never seen tattoos of this style before, and they really meshed well with the ones Cohl had given her. "Thank you for providing the design."
"I'm glad you like them. People may tell you to try and rise above symbolic gestures, focus on higher things, but getting a little reminder you did something right whenever you look in the mirror isn't a feeling to avoid. Plus, I'm glad something in these data crystals got put to use, and you've certainly earned them."

"It's only a saber. Not even a passable one by Jedi standards," said Barriss, taking her bulky saber in hand, staring at it uselessly for a moment before setting it down on the table.

"Wow. Your brain will take any opportunity to make you feel like garbage, won't it? The results may not be dazzling, but it works, and in your efforts to make that saber you overcame an environment few would brave and most of those would die in."

"Because you would lead them into the path of an ancient monster without warning."

"Hey, I didn't do that to anybody else, if that's what you're implying."

"I don't believe that's as encouraging as you think it is," said Barriss, thinking as she chewed a particularly tough bite of food. "Do you really consider managing to avoid death a great accomplishment?"

"Of course it is. The universe is constantly trying to murder everything in it, and other living creatures, sapient or otherwise, seem intent to help it in that regard. It's a miracle anything in this galaxy lasts more than a day. By all rights, everything everywhere should be dead."

Chewing slower in response, Barriss contemplated this abnormally ruthless view of nature. Ideas about survival of the fittest had been thrown at her before, usually by people using their status as 'the fittest' to justify abhorrent behavior, but finding incredulity in the survival of any life was a new idea, joking or not.

"You hold odd notions about what makes life incredible," said Barriss.

"Inventiveness lies in abnormality. Looking at things in an irregular way opens up new options, whether it's opposing the forces of evil or having fun with one of the brightest people I've had the pleasure of meeting," replied Revan, perking up slightly at Barriss's surprised reaction when she finally realized Revan was talking about her, specifically. "Oh, was that not obvious?"

"Obvious?" thought Barriss, trying to make sense of Revan dropping such high praise with such an indirect prompting. Getting that kind of compliment was a rarity in her experience, and it would never happen with her sitting around sulking at a table, synthesized food crumbs in the corners of her mouth.

Seconds later after sitting there, rendered incredulous by simple approval, Revan decided to turn the conversation around in typical fashion.

"Wow, you were one of those kids who's parents never hugged them, weren't you?"

"I'm- I was a Jedi," said Barriss. "I didn't grow up with parents."

"Suuuuure you didn't," said Revan, in a knowing tone Barriss didn't quite understand. "Take the compliment, kid."

Barriss nodded, internally trying not to take the antics that seriously while also feeling some relief at hearing what Revan thought of her.

"I'm sorry for being so unappreciative," she said, "though you are rather difficult to read. Even when
"You bother to produce a hologram."

"It's one of the advantages of not having a face," said the holocron.

"What do you mean by 'advantage'? I know what you look like, Revan," said Barriss. "Records from your time have survived. I've seen images of you."

"Oh, have you?" said Revan. "Let's see how accurate the history books are."

Revan's hologram removed its hood and began undoing the clasps holding the mask in place. Initially, Barriss was unimpressed, expecting to see the face of the young, headstrong Jedi Knight she'd read about. But each passing second, combined with the confidence Revan had that Barriss didn't know what she was talking about, had her eagerly anticipating the removal.

The last clasp was disconnected, and Revan's famous mask was pulled away, revealing...Barriss. It was Barriss's face.

Her whole head, actually, stuck onto Revan's body.

"SyyyYYYyyymBOOlisssssssm!" shouted Revan, smiling, arms flailing around dramatically, eyes losing focus and drifting off in two different directions.

"Very amusing," Barriss said flatly.

"I think I pull off the look quite well, don't you?"

The look certainly did not suit Revan, actually. The whole effect was incredibly eerie for some reason. It took a moment, but Barriss realized Revan was speaking in a close imitation of her voice, minus her Coruscanti accent and mangled a bit through the holocron's damaged vocabulator. Not only that, Revan's body wasn't proportioned correctly for Barriss's head and neck, looking rather mismatched and unsettling enough Revan noticed her reaction to it.

"Oh, sorry, I forgot how perceptive people can be when it comes to little things like 'whether or not something looks like a real person'," said Revan, shrinking several centimeters and slimming down to match Barriss's body type. "Better?"

"Absolutely not."

"Cut me some slack, you know how tricky it is to animate a face?" protested Revan, fondly poking at the holographic versions of Barriss's tattoos. "Though this is an excellent face to be stuck with, if you don't mind me saying. Very stylish."

"You don't deserve to wear those tattoos," said Barriss, "You haven't earned them. And they are not 'stylish'."

"The tattoos represent skill and accomplishment, right? If that's the case, more tattoos would be appropriate for me. I've been a Sith Lord, Jedi Knight, archaeologist, diplomat, swoop racer, bounty hunter, regular hunter, engineer, detective, duelist, lawyer, professional gambler, smuggler, aaaaaannd anomalous artifact delivery service," said Revan, as new tattoos appeared on the hologram of Barriss's face with each job title until it became a disorganized smattering of diamonds, rectangles, and triangles. "What can say? I'm a talented individual."

"Stop it! You want to mock me, fine, but leave the traditions of my people out of it! And even if you had a face to get tattoos, you'd probably be too busy blathering about how amazing you are to hold
still and have them applied properly!"

The hologram's smile disappeared, as did the tattoos, leaving only blank skin and wide-eyed shock. Looking so very much like Barriss did such a short time ago. The expressiveness of the face surprised Barriss, already so accustomed to seeing nothing but that enigmatic mask, as Revan showed concern at her outburst.

Followed by another proud smile, cheeks stretching more excitedly than Barriss had ever seen herself.

"That's it, Barriss! Stand up for yourself!" shouted Revan gleefully. "Feel the comebacks flowing through you! Give in to the Snark Side of the Force!"

The whole display was almost funny, however as she studied the hologram, Barriss gradually became more and more unnerved, the fun of the moment draining away. That something still wasn't right. That smile...way too wide. Through the open mouth, Barriss could see the teeth weren't hers.

Like Revan hadn't actually used an image of her head.

Only her skin, over someone else's skull.

"Please, stop this, and don't ever do it again," she said with a shiver. "Did you have a point, or did you simply feel like being unsettling?"

"Well, I always feel like that, but there is a simple logic to this: you and I are very much alike."

Barriss wasn't sure how to take that. On the one hand, she was being compared to Revan. On the other hand, she was being compared to Revan. Suddenly, she had a better grasp of what the claim 'I have been everything' truly meant. There were too many positives and negatives to keep track of.

"I thought I reminded you of the Exile and your other allies."

"A equals B equals C equals A. We're all connected through the Force, our shared choices, and the impacts we have on each other."

"I believe I understand," said Barriss after a moment, "but please put your mask back on."

Revan shrugged and began complying with her request, fitting the mask back into place.

"Crap. Crap, I messed up, I missed one of the clasps," said Revan, mask hanging on at a weird angle until wrenching it back off.

"You're a hologram," said Barriss, her patience wearing thin. "You can't have issues with your projected outfit!"

The Revan hologram froze, then shot one last smile at Barriss before flickering and resetting to its usual masked appearance.

"I was wondering how long it would take for you to say something," said Revan, voice returned to normal, or at least as normal as one could sound with a voice that constantly echoed and occasionally crackled with static. "Very good. You're quicker than the last one. Though I wasn't kidding about what a pain that thing was. It's the reason I hardly ever took it off."

"Really?" asked Barriss. That was something she'd never read in the history books.

"Yep. Tricky clasps," said Revan. "I also actively sought to dehumanize myself and be seen as an
infallible, invincible entity. None of the typical weakness plaguing ordinary people. No face to express doubt, or fear, or any emotion at all. No humanity...but mostly the clasp thing. It got annoying to take on and off all the time."

Before Barriss could reply, the ship jolted with pseudomotion as it dropped out of hyperspace.

"It seems you've arrived at your latest destination," said Revan, the holocron's light slowly dimming as it became dormant. "You've made great progress in a short period of time. Time for the next phase, I think. Go help Ahsoka, and put your new strength to the test."

Although the pilot's seat wasn't quite suited for meditation, it allowed Ahsoka to concentrate and center herself on these long trips between planets.

The primary reason for the exercise was judging whether or not continuing to work as a smuggler was necessary or useful now. One way or another, she'd be in contact with Riyo, and meeting with her friend would likely offer better opportunities to oppose Palpatine's rule than more smuggling runs would. She wasn't exactly short on cash, either. The extra kyber crystals Barriss had brought back would last them a while depending on where they put the funds, and according to her there were still plenty left on Dantooine.

The sudden jolt of deceleration as the ship dropped back into realspace broke her concentration. Fully alert once more, she looked out at the planet Myrkr, which increasingly dominated her view as the Eclipse slowly grew closer. Despite the border between the middle and outer rims of the galaxy, the planet was sparsely populated, only a single city, and a relatively small one at that. Few natural resources meant the immense forests that covered the planet were mostly untouched by any corporation searching for new sources of profits, which also meant it was of no value to the Empire.

The lack of attention also made it an excellent place for criminals to set up a base away from the attention of the authorities, and it was likely the world had been used since the days of the Republic.

Somebody down there had enough decency to want the Empire stopped.

Or, more likely, enough pragmatism to realize smugglers and lowlifes wouldn't be able to survive forever under Palpatine's rule. Sure, the Empire had little qualms about making use of criminals when it served their purposes, but once it accumulated enough power to enforce their authority without help, they wouldn't be of use and be eliminated along with all the other undesirables.

More importantly, it was somebody with a growing networks of contacts and ships capable of making runs against the Imperial Navy.

Barriss came into the cockpit and took her seat next to Ahsoka, studying the planet in front of them while experimentally touching the still raw skin of her right cheek. Overall, she was much more active now, more energetic. Which by the standards of the general population brought her up to slightly below average.

"Ready?" asked Ahsoka, readying their landing gear and repulsors and the Eclipse prepared to descend into the planet's gravity well.

"As much as I can be, and waiting longer won't change that," replied Barriss. "Do you really think putting off contacting Senator Chuchi in favor of unidentified smugglers is worth it?"
Wavering slightly, as much to lighten the mood as to convey her own decisiveness, Ahsoka went with the direct line of reasoning.

"We're already here," she said, and sent the freighter into a slow descent down to the surface of the lawless planet. No imperials, no militia, no authority at all bothered them as they entered Myrkr's atmosphere.
Everything Revan listed is an actual thing you can do in KotOR as part of various missions. Go play it.

I decided to just draw Barriss's new tattoos because I was having a hard time describing what exactly they were supposed to look like. That isn't necessarily what her hairstyle is, though, go with whatever you'd imagined for that. It's still short and free, but I needed a cut I could draw and kept messing up whenever I tried modifying it from that bob.

Unfortunately, in case you're curious, there is no Mirialan Jedi character Revan meets with those tattoos, I made that part up.

Also, I recently read the Ahsoka novel, and I can't help but notice some things I totally called as to how Ahsoka's story would play out:

1. Ahsoka using "Ashla" as an alias.
2. Anakin having given Ahsoka her sabers back.
3. Ahsoka leading the Empire to believe she's dead by ditching (one of) her sabers.
4. Inquisitors showing up very early in the timeline, including the Grand Inquisitor.
5. Explicitly stating Barriss was motivated by fear of the continuing war.
6. Ahsoka breaking her gf out of an imperial prison.
7. Building a new lightsaber as a part of emotional recovery.
8. Giving Ahsoka a female love interest, though I'm actually following through on it. "I could kiss you"? You damn cowards, just make it happen already.

There are sound reasons for all of those plot points, and the circumstances aren't the same, but hell, there are a few things that show up later in this story that were in the book, too! Like [REDACTED]. It's already in one of my drafts.

Stop stealing my ideas, E.K. Johnston! Or, actually...steal more of them. You want Ahsoka fighting an AT-AT? You want a Revan holocron? Droideka squad? BB-8's psychotic older sister? Take it all. MAKE IT CANON.

Up next: smugglers! Who could Ahsoka's contact be? It's not much of a mystery really, you could probably figure it out with a Google search. I've provided enough information, and there's only one serious option. Two if you're extra nerdy, but your first guess will probably be it.
The region of Myrkr they were flying to was overgrown with vegetation, the only breaks from the sprawling forest being a few lone mountains dotting the horizon. When the ship had descended into low orbit, Ahsoka had gotten sight of the sole urban area on the planet, Hyllyard City, and even that was low-key, no buildings standing tall enough to make an impression nor any signs of high technology.

Her destination was a secluded base roughly twenty kilometers away, close enough to make supply runs if the need arose, though far enough none of the other locals would come bothering the people there. The Eclipse must've been tracked since it dropped out of hyperspace, as Ahsoka received coordinates and instruction to land. Entirely via text, too. No direct voice interaction, no recording, know way for authorities to know who was speaking to who if the communication was monitored. No way of proving a specific person was at a particular place. Arguably paranoid, then again, people didn't think actions were paranoid when they saved your life.

The light freighter landed on a patch of flat terrain in Myrkr base without incident. A few workers, technicians, and pilots of various species were working or wandering about the premises, and their arrival was barely noticed. It was all too mundane, boring even. The environment felt oddly stifling in a way she couldn't put her finger on and got worse and worse each passing second as she fought against it. Flying the ship always took up a great deal of her focus, and now that she was on the ground, surrounded by life, she felt...nothing. No, not 'nothing' exactly. A haze, static in the Force.

Then again, if the base was functioning as a spaceport, one that sought to remain inconspicuous, the arrival of another freighter wasn't any big event. In her experience, when Ahsoka had arrived on a new planet it meant she was about to take part in some new offensive against the Separatists. And whenever things were calm, it meant some new disaster was impending.

Even with her previous smuggling runs, dropping off meager shipments of rations, blasters, or other supplies, her arrival had been anticipated, wished for by the people who benefitted from her getting past the Empire. Now, she was here for...what? A business meeting? The message had been minimal, only revealing enough that her string of successes hadn't gone unnoticed, even if the most recent ones were interrupted by imperial invasion forces.

Her smuggling jobs, as they were, had come a few months ago after she'd responded to some freelance work delivering stolen imperial blasters to some Wookiee insurrectionists on Kashyyyk, allowing them to steal enemy ammunition and keep the fight going after the clone troopers stationed there had confiscated much of the local army's materiel. The posting had never identified the employer, though the Wookiees had paid her the agreed upon fee, then she'd then promptly refused it minus what was necessary to keep herself fed and her ship fueled.

After that, the jobs had kept coming. The Wookiees must have put in a good word for her, and running the Kashyyyk blockade was no small feat. Each job made things more difficult for the Empire on whichever planet she went too, and each one brought in more credits for whoever organized the exchanges. Even though she didn't like working under those conditions, she knew what would happen to her backer if the Empire discovered their activities.

And now, she'd earned enough credibility to move up.
The boarding ramp lowered, and Ahsoka walked out took her first breath of Myrkr's air, fresh and free of pollutants, with the exception of the various exhausts emitted by the machinery in this base.

Despite the relief of breathing non-recycled air, that oppressive feeling in the Force got worse and worse.

She finally recognized the feeling. The same unease she'd felt at Barriss's prison, where those creatures in that odd tree were somehow suppressing her connection.

Odd trees... she thought as she turned her attention to the forest surrounding the base. Botany wasn't a strong suit of hers, and she hadn't been paying close attention during the breakout, but the branches of the local flora were in a familiar shape.

And dotted with dozens of slender, tan-furred animals clinging to their branches.

Oh, no.

"This is their homeworld," said Barriss, standing stiffly behind Ahsoka and staring out at the trees along with her. The comment was unexpectedly startling to Ahsoka, not only because of the observation but the fact she hadn't expected it. She couldn't sense Barriss at all.

"This is where the Empire got them?" asked Ahsoka.

"I'm not sure. It's possible the ones used in my prison were bred elsewhere, there's no way I can be certain."

Thudding footsteps ended the conversation prematurely, neither of them wanting anyone to hear them talk about Force-related matters, and Ahsoka turned around to see a massive Trandoshan walking towards them, clawed feet shifting the loose dirt as it walked. Even by Trandoshan standards, their greeter was absolutely gigantic, towering roughly half a meter over Ahsoka and with arms as thick as her torso, yet moving with an impressive level of coordination and grace as she approached.

"Welcome to Myrkr. I am Vrask. Please, follow me," she said, her Basic nearly perfect, if still accented with the hisses common to her species. Vrask waved her hand in the direction of the base, turning around to lead Ahsoka and Barriss.

It'd been a while since Ahsoka had encountered a Trandoshan. While she didn't expect trouble from the other, her experience made the presence of those teeth, those claws, so close to her and her friend rather uncomfortable. Barriss simply seemed intimidated by the other's stature.

Worse, Vrask was attempting to smile at them. Trandoshans out in the galaxy typically knew what a smile was from dealing with other species with more articulate lips. Unfortunately, they didn't have the muscles necessary to do it. Vrask was determined to try, exposing her many, many sharp teeth to help the new arrivals feel at ease.

"Hold on there," said Vrask as she approached Barriss, who was shrinking back slightly. "Didn't know you had an associate. I'll let the others know. Are you new to the business? Don't be scared. This place is safe. No Empire, no one to put you in a cell." The reptilian alien gave the rookie smuggler a gentle pat on the shoulder, which given their respective sizes nearly knock Barriss off her feet.

Vrask turned around to lead them towards the central building of the base, speaking something into a comm in her own language. When Vrask turned around her back revealed what appeared to be a heavy repeating blaster cannon strapped to it. The kind that were supposed to be supported by a
tripod and operated by two people to keep it under control.

Their escort now focused on guiding them through the base, Ahsoka took the walk to study her surroundings a bit more. Even if the presence of those creatures in the trees left her unable to get a good sense of the life, the people within the base, she could gather enough information by eye. This base was much more organized than she'd expected, and larger. Before landing, all she'd expected from this meeting was some clandestine exchange in a bar on this obscure planet, but she'd seen planetary militias with less hardware than this.

Three hangars, each holding several medium transports of varying models, lined the south end of the compound. And those weren't the end of the fleet. A shield generator, partially obscured by the central building, sat on the west side, and in the main courtyard were a cluster of outdated but very dangerous looking gunships being attended to by maintenance crews. There were lookout towers dotting the perimeter, each one containing an armed guard, the closest of which Ahsoka could see had a sniper rifle. Not enough to deal with a large military force, only enough take out an intruder without much of a fight.

Inside the central building, Ahsoka and Barriss followed Vrask down several hallways with power conduits and tool kits mixed. The senior smuggler knocked on one of the doors and hissed something Ahsoka didn't understand, then waved the two in, shutting the door behind them.

The room was unexpectedly dull in Ahsoka's experience. She'd seen the residences of Hondo and Jabba the Hutt, high-ranking criminals who surrounded themselves with displays of wealth, and their various subordinates and sycophants. Designed to impress and intimidate anyone who approached, not that it had succeeded against Jedi leading the Grand Army of the Republic.

The architecture was interesting, the building obviously having been constructed long before the smugglers set up camp. It was very spacious and open to the outside air, along with several large branches extending inside, a few of those furry lizard-like creatures resting comfortably upon them. These walls, however, were bare, the only technology being a few consoles adjacent to a desk. Except for the size, there was nothing impressive about the room or anything in it.

The only other occupant was the human who was walking towards them. He was about as old as Anakin, maybe a few years younger, dressed in clothes even more practical and nondescript than Ahsoka's own. Judging solely by his unimposing appearance, the only reason Ahsoka figured he was the one who'd asked her here was the fact there was no one else to meet them.

"Ah, you must be Shaak Ashla. I'm glad you were able to arrive so quickly," he said. "My name is Talon Karrde."

The introduction wasn't presented like some big revelation, and it wasn't, which actually disappointed Ahsoka slightly. Occasionally she'd thought about who could be the one coordinating smuggling missions under the Empire's nose, which of the Hutts, which Black Sun leader might be responsible, mainly out of concern she might be helping someone she wouldn't approve of. The handful of efforts she'd made to trace the transmissions she'd received had turned up nothing, fueling her worries.

She'd never even heard of this guy.

"Nice to meet you," she said while shaking Karrde's hand, then motioning to introduce Barriss. "This is Jana, my new copilot."

"A pleasure," Barriss said politely, as she took Karrde's hand. Ahsoka was studying him carefully. Though he had good control of his expressions, she caught a flicker of unease as the two shook,
fortunately not for any reason to worry over. Barriss didn’t know how to properly shake hands. Ahsoka remembered her grip being much too weak during their introduction.

Unfazed a second later, Karrde motioned for the two to have a seat at the table he’d prepared, and a protocol droid shuffled into the room carrying a tray with two plates, setting them in front of the guests. Nothing fancy, but it smelled delicious, and it took most of Ahsoka’s restraint not to dive right into the slab of meat in front of her. Not that she abstained, she just went slow.

"You asked me here to introduce yourself. What else?" asked Ahsoka, savoring the of the...she didn’t know it was, all that mattered was it was delicious. This was far from the first time she’d eaten unidentified meat. "What made you want to talk?"

"After your successful delivery to Umbara, I realized you had the skills needed to become a full member of my smuggling ring. Even if your arrival was quickly followed by devastation. I'm impressed you managed to evade the invasion, Ashla. I also pieced together you paid a trip to Serenno, with similar results."

"That wasn't our fault," Ahsoka said, a bit defensively.

"I never thought it was. The Empire's had its eye on those worlds since the end of the war. And we still got paid."

"You still haven't answered my question. Why did you ask me here?" asked Ahsoka. "It wasn't to give me more smuggling offers. You could do that anonymously."

Karrde nodded. "The reason is to establish communication. You're done good work for us, making deliveries. I need you to act as a contact. Pay attention to what's going on where you go. Keep track of the Empire's activities. New projects on occupied world, movements of their fleet. They can't prevent every single freighter from taking note of when a Star Destroyer is spotted or where they're concentrating their efforts."

"It sounds like you're building an intelligence network."

"Smuggling only gets you so far," replied Karrde, pleased Ahsoka was picking up on the idea quickly. "My organization needs people who can read what's happening in the galaxy and see how the larger whole is affected. People like you, and, I hope, your associate Jana. Information is a far more valuable resource than any drug or precious material. It's tricky to find, yet trivially easy to move, and priceless to the right buyer. Until I put a price on it, at least. And the cost of inadequate information can be the loss of entire wars. Though this still isn't the full reason you caught my attention."

Military experience gave Ahsoka first-hand knowledge of intelligence operations. Repeatedly, the Separatists had developed secret weapons to win the war, and the longer information about them stayed hidden the more damage they did. Not to mention the spies and saboteurs who’d repeatedly disrupted the war effort.

"You have information that can cripple the Empire?"

Karrde smiled and nodded again. "I know a lot of things the imperials don't. Dozens of trade routes outside the more commonly used hyperspace lanes. Techniques to conceal illegal items from detection. Tactics to evade blockades," he said calmly. "Where you've been since the battle on Mandalore..."

With that last sentence, the entire room seemed to freeze as Ahsoka and Karrde locked eyes, trying to
gauge the other's reaction.

At the edge of her vision, Ahsoka could see Barriss turn towards her. Instead of signaling anything to her partner, Ahsoka held Karrde's gaze.

Ahsoka's hand slowly drifted towards the saber, thinking through every possible way this situation could end really, really badly. She and Barriss were in the center of an abnormally well-equipped smuggling operation. If it was a trap, there was more than enough hardware outside to blast apart the *Eclipse* before takeoff, assuming they could fight their way through everyone between them and the freighter.

She still had her commlink on her, and the droidekas were one call away from coming to the rescue. They would be more than a match for smugglers armed with conventional blasters, but she recalled racks of ion rifles amount the equipment lying around, so it was no guarantee. The droidekas also couldn't take out enemy ships, and the sniper nests were likely outside their field of fire.

Seemingly in an effort to placate her, Karrde got up and took a few steps close her. Not close enough to attack her if he wanted to, though. In fact, he was in a prime position for her to stab him. Ahsoka knew it, and Karrde knew she was thinking about it.

"I didn't ask you here to turn you in for some bounty," he said reassuringly, hands at his sides, plainly showing he wasn't armed. "I said I wanted to discuss business with you, and that's exactly what I'm going to do."

"How do I know this isn't some elaborate plan to catch us and turn us over to the Empire? Maybe you decided you couldn't take a Jedi in direct fight, even in your own base."

"A Jedi, even a resigned one such as yourself, possesses a certain respectability. More than I could ever hope achieve, no matter how reasonable or hospitable I may be compared to other smugglers," explained Karrde. "And that's worth far more than the bounty the Empire's placed on your heads."

"Worth far more to you," amended Ahsoka.

"We're business partners. That means you're under my protection as long as we're working together. And I have no desire to turn any Jedi over to the Empire."

"If this isn't a trap, why did you bring us here, of all places? Why are you keeping us around these creatures?" she asked firmly, waving at the creatures sitting in the tree branches. She was out of her seat now, ready for a fight. Her saber wasn't drawn yet, though she was one shifty comment away from getting it out.

"The ysalamiri? What about them?" asked Karrde, genuinely confused, glancing over his shoulder at the animals. His reaction made Ahsoka calm down slightly since it was clear he wasn't using the Force-suppressing power of the 'ysalamiri' to weaken them deliberately. The creatures were nothing but local fauna to him. Then the tension went right back to where it had been when he looked like he'd suddenly realized something important. What exactly he'd just figured out wasn't clear to Ahsoka, and that made it so much worse.

"Would the two of you calm down, please?" asked Barriss, to the surprise of Ahsoka and Karrde, who'd both more or less forgotten she was sitting right next to them. "Ahsoka, stop reaching towards your saber. It doesn't matter how slowly your hand is moving, we can see you. Karrde, was asking Ahsoka here and then revealing you know her secrets actually your best idea to recruit her fully, or are you simply *that* overdramatic?"
Karrde was left at a loss for words, relaxing a bit as Ahsoka sat back down and placed her hands back on the table, the two of them glancing awkwardly between Barriss and each other.

Now that she'd chided the two, Barriss enthusiastically went back to her food. The sautéed vegetables and whatever meat she was eating were the best meal she'd had in over a year.

"Who are you?" Karrde asked Barriss. "And I mean your real name. Ahsoka included you when talking about being caught by the Empire, so I assume you're another Jedi survivor?"

"I'm Barriss," said Barriss, somehow managing perfect pronunciation through her chewing. "Barriss Offee?" asked Karrde, to which Barriss nodded.

"Why are you two working together?" he asked, his face a mix of surprised, intrigued, and amused. "I've seen some odd combinations of people brought together by the need to make a living in this galaxy, but you two- please, tell me everything. How did a seditious bomber wind up tagging along with her most famous victim?"

"You need to stop talking," said Ahsoka.

"I- I apologize," he said, and it sounded earnest. The expressions of his new associates told him how far over the line that was, especially Barriss, who had gone from neutrality to giving him the side-eye as she continued to eat. "I have a plan to help fight back against the Empire in a big way, and you, Ahsoka, may be the perfect person to make it work."

"Meaning the reason you won't turn us in is because we're worth more to you. Because you can benefit from it. Not because you actually care about stopping the Empire from conquering and oppressing worlds," said Barriss. Intelligently-executed self-interest did not impress her.

"Why can't it be both? Why can't I do the morally right thing and profit from it?" asked Karrde, without any hint of irony. "This is why I never understood the Jedi. You think that being good demands sacrificing something of yours, or of yourself. All it takes to win big and do it with a clean conscience is a bit of creativity."

"Are you calling the Jedi foolish?" asked Barriss.

"No. I'd never call them foolish. Only too...holy, I suppose. Too convinced of their own righteousness. Unable or unwilling to rethink anything as a result."

That struck a chord with Barriss. Ahsoka didn't need the Force or even to look at her partner to grasp what must be going through her head.

"I'm willing to accept that this isn't some elaborate trap for us, Karrde," began Ahsoka. "Tell me, what happens if we're no longer working together? What would you do if it suddenly became profitable to sell us out?"

"How's this: even if it I didn't need you, I wouldn't turn you over to the Empire," Karrde said.

"That's it? You give your word?"

"It's all I can offer at the moment. That, and I know that even more than the average person with a shred of decency, you can't abide the Empire. Not only because of what Palpatine did to the Jedi, but because of what he's going do to everyone else. I can give you an unequaled opportunity to damage his 'New Order'."
"...What is this proposal of yours?" asked Ahsoka, sighing and figuring she could at least hear him out. She'd like to believe, just this once, that she could work with a criminal without it blowing up in her face, literally or figuratively.

Karrde smiled at his newest business partner, pleased to finally get on to the topic he'd asked them here for. And he certainly wasn't holding back any more after all the drama of laying everything out.

"I currently have in my possession nearly two hundred *Dreadnought*-class warships in excellent condition. Any one of them could be battle-ready after a week in drydock to check their systems and perform maintenance," he said casually, as if a fleet of ships, each one half the size of the *Venator*-class Star Destroyers Ahsoka had primarily served on, was a typical discussion topic. "I need you to approach potential buyers. Buyers interested in fighting the Empire, and capable of providing the manpower to crew those ships. High-class buyers who won't make deals with lowly smugglers, but might talk to a noble Jedi if she approached them. Wealthy buyers who can pay us for them."

Ahsoka tried to keep a straight face, having to stop herself from gaping at the idea that a smuggler, even one with the resources on display in this base, somehow had a sizable armada of pre-Clone War battle cruisers. She had never served on a ship of that class, but knew the broad details of their operation. Each one required a crew of thousands, and Karrde had *hundreds* of them? Earlier, she'd expected, at most, *one* warship. Maybe ten. Or details of an imperial invasion plan. The schematics to some ultra-secret imperial base where they were developing a new weapon. Probably accompanied by some ridiculous scheme involving her blowing it up somehow.

Instead, she was more or less being handed a combined battle fleet more powerful than any she'd served in.

"How did you get that many ships?" asked Barriss.

"Completely blind luck," replied Karrde, chuckling slightly at their incredulity. "Do you want the job or not?"

If this was a scam, Ahsoka had to give props for being outrageously bold.

Before sealing the deal, all three of them paused, not talking, not thinking, listening intently as they heard a faint whine in the air, growing louder. The sound of some very powerful engines hitting the atmosphere. A sound that was nothing unusual in a busy spaceport was an early warning here in the fringe. And judging by Karrde's reaction, not in his schedule.

The trio rushed to one of the windows to see a light transport, one shuttle, and a fighter escort, incoming towards the planet. Definitely imperial.

"They're back sooner than I'd expected," Karrde said grimly as he watched the approaching ships, then turned to his guests and pulled out his comm to send orders to his personnel. "We need to hide you."

Chapter End Notes

Me last chapter: Says E.K. Johnston stole my ideas.
Me this chapter: Steals all of Timothy Zahn's ideas.
Yeah, this is starting to turn into *The Thrawn Trilogy: Barrissoka Edition*.

**Talon Karrde** is another Legends character I decided to include, planning him to be an ally of Ahsoka’s from the start. Karrde was specifically conceived by his creator, Timothy Zahn, to be what Han Solo would’ve been like had he never joined the Rebel Alliance: a damn good smuggler with his own organization and a halfway decent sense of morality. And still a scoundrel. His age is a bit iffy, enough that I wasn't sure he could even be active at this time, but illustrations show him visibly going gray when he appears several years after RotJ, so here he is in the early days of his career.

Vrask, or as I call her, "Terrifying Reptile Mom", is my own creation. All Karrde's smugglers in the New Republic era are too young to show up here, and I needed someone else he can work off of. Also, I just realized that if Karrde is Solo, then I accidentally made Vrask his Chewbacca, and I'm perfectly fine with that.
Ahsoka and Barriss trailed after Karrde, who was leading them through the compound toward the back exit of the structure, away from the landing area the imperial ships would land in.

"I've got fourteen droidekas on my ship. If your smugglers can draw the imperials so they have their backs to the Eclipse, they can attack from behind and wipe them out. My astromech also knows how to operate the gun turret well enough to shoot down a few of those fighters."

"We're not- how do you have fourte-" started Karrde, exasperated by Ahsoka's preparation for a fight. "We're not fighting them. The Empire comes here periodically. I have an arrangement with them, though they weren't expected back for another week. We need to keep you out of sight, now keep up."

The trio stopped at the door, listening for the sound of thrusters and waiting a moment for the escort fighters to fly off back into low orbit now that the shuttle and transport they were tailing were beginning their landing. No sense rushing out and getting spotted. Unnecessary as it may be, some random aerial surveillance shot of a Togruta and a Mirialan following around a known smuggler could lead to some drone in the Empire's hierarchy suddenly demonstrating competence and figuring out who they were.

Ahsoka continued her efforts to prepare for the worst. Her heart started pounding as the ground shook, repulsors on the ships keeping their metal bulk aloft while also sending out tremors into the ground beneath them during landing. There wasn't much time. "The Empire might have a Force-user coming for us, so we'll need to stay near some of the salamanders."

"Ysalamiri," corrected Karrde, pointing a small, boxy structure shaded by some of Myrkr's trees, "that storage shed at the edge of the forest we can hide you in and block out your visibility in the Force, or whatever you prefer to term it. Though you'll be glad to know they're not here for you, they definitely have at least one Force-user coming."

"You know what those creatures can disrupt connections to the Force?" asked Barriss. "A moment ago, you were surprised by Ahsoka's stress at their presence."

"Your reaction told me everything I needed, and I know what the Empire's been using them for. Jedi containment, right?"

"How do you-" began Ahsoka, until she made some deductions of her own. "It was you. You're the one who's been supplying the Empire with those things."

"That's correct," answered Karrde, without any hint of mocking in his tone. He actually seemed disturbed by the new details of the exchange. "I didn't know why they wanted them, but I've kept in their good graces for the time being by regularly providing them dozens of the animals. Ysalamiri evolved as parasites extracting nutrients from trees through their claws, making them very difficult to remove safely. Our little operation knows how to extract them alive, the Empire doesn't. We provide live animals, they pay us a fee and leave us alone."

"Why did your group develop a way to harvest the ysalamiri?" asked Barriss. "What purpose did they serve to you before the Empire's arrival?"
"Vrask figured it out," explained Karrde. "According to her, they taste really gamey if they aren't cooked fresh."

"That's it? You wanted to eat them?" said Ahsoka. The triviality of it all stung. Who knew how many Jedi had been captured, imprisoned, or killed because of those things?

All because some smugglers wanted their weird alien meat to taste better.

"Hey, you seemed to be enjoying them just as much as we do," said Karrde, as Ahsoka realized what her lunch had consisted of. It wasn't like there was anything inherently revolting about eating the ysalamiri, they were non-sapient animals after all, but it still made her stomach turn.

Then again, Vrask was on to something, because they were delicious.

Her disgust turned towards Karrde, who readily noticed the way she was looking at him.

"I'm sorry for putting your comrades in danger. It doesn't mean much, I know. You know what happens, what would've happened to us if the smallest opposition is showed," he said, the remainder of the walk to a small storage room was spent in tense silence until he showed them in. Despite the room being put to use and housing a variety of items, there was enough space for Ahsoka and Barriss to wait things out comfortably. "Wait here, and don't let them see you."

The door to the shed wasn't locked. Perhaps the smuggler was hoping a small display of trust might make them more cooperative.

That concern of what would've happened if Karrde had opposed the Empire succeeded in lessening Ahsoka's anger towards him, if not erasing it completely. The Empire didn't tolerate opposition, and obliterating this base wouldn't pose much of a challenge.

What Karrde did next was what concerned her. He hadn't known those animals were being used to kill and contain the remaining Jedi. Now that he did know, what would he do? If she'd accepted he didn't have much choice in helping the Empire, how much more harshly could she judge him for continuing? Across the galaxy, people on formerly-Republic worlds paid taxes and contributed resources that built the growing Imperial Navy, and the resultant devastation it caused. The only difference here was how direct the threat was. Karrde had indirectly contributed to Barriss's imprisonment and nearly gotten Ahsoka killed by the unanticipated defenses.

Now that she knew where the ysalamiri came from, and the smugglers knew their purpose, what could any of them do differently?

A moment of pacing later left Ahsoka restless, trying to come up with a way to remain aware of what was going on outside, even slightly. Even if Karrde was honest about now wanting to help the Empire wipe out the Jedi, even if he would help oppose the Empire for a price, the presence of the imperial military on his planet would put immense pressure on the smugglers. The escort fighters following the shuttle and transport probably didn't have hyperdrives, meaning there was a larger ship still in orbit, a carrier or even a battlecruiser capable of obliterating the base from orbit.

All the more reason for her to keep up with the situation.

The storage shed offered up the solution: there was tons of equipment in here, medpacs, computer spikes, various armor components, and several pairs of macrobinoculars. Through the small, thin windows spaced around the walls of the room, Ahsoka and Barriss could see narrow region of the landing zone, most importantly, the boarding ramp, which was now unloading a squad of stormtroopers, followed shortly after by their commander.
Karrde's new guest was an inquisitor, no doubt about it. Clad in dark armor, a round double-bladed sabers on his belt, identical to the one on Serenno. He looked middle-aged, had a shaved head, and several tattoos extending from the corners of his mouth down towards his jawline. There was also an odd sort of blindfold wrapped around his head. Strangely, the garment was thin enough for Ahsoka to see he didn't seem to have eyes beneath it.

"A Miralukan," said Barriss, focusing on the new arrival. "Eyeless, they use their connection to the Force to see. This is the absolute worst place for one of them to be, though. With the ysalamiri here, whole sections of the planet would leave him truly blind."

"So, if we stay in their radius, we're covered?"

"Yes."

Ahsoka would never have expected being cut off from the Force to be a relief. The last thing they needed was another fight with an inquisitor, especially with 'innocent' smugglers stuck in the middle. For the next few minutes, the two watched in silence, trying to get a sense of what was happening.

Due to the Jedi's freighter being parked in the middle of the courtyard, landing space had become rather limited on Myrkr. The imperial shuttle took up the space next to the freighter, barely avoiding damage to itself, the other ship, or surrounding structures, leaving no space for anything else. The transport had an easier time, it having enough mass to simply land on the border between the base and the forest's edge, the durasteel hull easily out-muscling the foliage, snapping every branch and crushing every root in its way.

The shuttle doors opened for a group of ten stormtroopers to pour out and survey the area before giving the all-clear. Two of them stood on either side of Karrde, making it clear any wrong move would get him shot.

The man in charge was a familiar face, something Karrde was glad for. Dealing with a new commander was one more unknown in a potentially disastrous situation. The idiosyncrasies of the Force and the local wildlife's relation to it lessened the tension as well, making it easier to hide his guests. At least as long as they remained put.

Offee could certainly be counted on to follow instructions, that much was obvious. Though she wasn't spineless, she wasn't a troublemaker, either. At least, that's how she'd acted. Her emotions kept drifting toward and away from the surface, and Karrde couldn't quite get a reliable read on her from their brief interaction.

The other one was a different story. Information on Tano was scarce, a collection of questionable anecdotes about her accomplishments during the Clone War as a field commander. His first impression upon meeting her told him expecting her to keep her horned head down was a losing bet. What you saw was what you got.

The inquisitor walked down the boarding ramp, lightsaber at his side, eyes covered by a blindfold. Or rather, covering where his eyes would be if he had any. Karrde had gotten some cells of the man's silverware the last time he'd arrived thanks to an unsuccessful attempt at improving his guest's mood with dinner, and discovered he was a Miralukan. Why, exactly, he seemed to be trying to pass as human was unclear. Misdirection? Avoiding the xenophobia of the Empire's military by concealing
"First Brother," said Karrde hospitably, smiling and bowing slightly. He wasn't quite sure how never quite sure how much of this was necessary in greeting a blind man. "A pleasure to have you here, as always."

"Indeed," sneered the inquisitor. "I've come to pick up more of those creatures of yours, smuggler. Not to exchange pleasantries."

"I figured as much. I apologize for the lack of landing space. We weren't informed of your arrival."

"We don't feel the need to inform you of our movements," said the inquisitor. "And you have nothing to be concerned about during my arrival...Unless you're hiding something."

"Not at all. I bring it up only for your convenience. Aside from the issue of landing space, you're ahead of schedule and we haven't gathered any ysalamiri for your usual pickup. You'll have to wait several hours while we collect them," explained Karrde. Everything he'd said was technically true, and deflected the implication that he didn't want the Empire here by emphasizing how he was trying to make their presence more comfortable. Like a good servant.

Even if Karrde still didn't like him, the First Brother's irritation during these meetings suddenly made a lot more sense. Miraluka saw using the Force. Ysalamiri disrupted connection to the Force. Walking around this base must be like navigating a dimly-lit room, in the best case. It also made Karrde wonder why he was there at all. It meant he wasn't in control of where he was stationed, and the title 'First Brother' meant there couldn't be too many superior officers. Perhaps one of them wanted to keep him in his place by making him navigate Myrkr.

Imperial power displays were a mix of amusing and irritating in Karrde's view. The higher-ups made things more difficult for each other while achieving nothing except satisfying their own egos.

Vrask approached the group, and Karrde couldn't help but grin slightly when the stormtroopers shifted uneasily as two hundred kilos of scaley muscle and weaponry took her place next to him. Even the inquisitor took note of the weight behind her movements. One trooper managed to remain impassive until flinching when Vrask gave a quick snarl in his direction. And they hadn't even seen her swinging around that heavy blaster cannon one-handed.

Behind her followed several other smugglers of Karrdes employ, a few humans, a duros, and a rodian, ready to follow the Trandoshan into the wilderness. They knew what the job was for today, carrying duffels with saws and a few special tools Vrask had whipped up to extract the animals from their branches, along with collapsible frames to carry them back on.

"How many ysalamiri do you need?" she asked.

"The regular shipment. Fifty creatures," replied the First Brother, turning his head upwards slightly as he realized how far over his head Vrask's voice was coming from.

"Very well," she replied, not particularly interested in speaking with imperials any more than was necessary. Trandoshans were respected by the Empire to a degree, mainly because of their reputations as reliable slavers, skills the Empire was reportedly putting to great use. That was not the kind of reputation she wanted to carry around with her, and combining that stereotype with the Empire's increasingly blatant anti-alien policies, she hated every dealing Karrde made with them. Though he hadn't yet made her privy to who Tano and Offee really were, he had informed her they were wanted by the Empire. Which was probably part of the reason she'd been so
welcoming towards them. "We can have them collected within six hours."

Karrde smiled at her confidence, and the sudden look of exhaustion on her fellow hunters. Ordinarily it would take much longer. Vrask seemed determined to get this over with immediately.

"While you wait, you and your men have free run of the grounds," said Karrde, "if you're hungry, I'm sure the kitchen could provide something for you and your soldiers."

That offer had been a bit of a risk, he knew. Let the imperials run around, they might stumble across the storage shed and his two Jedi guests. It was calculated, however: if he restricted the inquisitor's movements, the petty man might insist on looking around simply to assert authority. If Karrde showed respect, at worst, a few stormtroopers would be relegated to wandering around, and they would only be a minor power display to remind him who was in control, not inspecting anything.

Even if a trooper did find Tano and Offee, they couldn't be recognized as Force-sensitive here, and odds are they could either hide or come up with an explanation of what they were doing.

And if they weren't competent enough to handle even that, they weren't worth his investment anyway.

Karrde and his guests moved out of sight, leaving Ahsoka and Barriss to consider their options. No one was moving towards them, smuggler or imperial, and that enormous Trandoshan was taking a group away from the base while Karrde led the new inquisitor back to his office. Nothing too alarming.

"I guess we'll stick it out for now. Karrde could've sold us out right away if that was his plan, though we should have a fallback plan in case that inquisitor says something that changes his mind. At least we won't be noticed in here," said Ahsoka as she walked over and studied an ysalamiri clinging to a branch next to one of the shed's small, utilitarian windows. Its head tilted for four small, black eyes to study her in turn. It couldn't be considered especially cute, nor did it look particularly menacing considering what it could do. "What are the odds an animal like this could exist? All life is connected to the Force. A living thing shouldn't be able to cut us off from it."

"I find it doubtful the ysalamiri evolved naturally, though who would want such creatures is unclear," answered Barriss, who had considered the nature of the creatures many times during her imprisonment. Frankly, she wanted nothing to do with them, huddling up in a corner on the other side of the room. Still deafened to the Force, keeping her distance only offered some small comfort. "The Sith wouldn't want them around for exactly this kind of situation."

"Great. They're not only Force-canceling lizards, they're Force-canceling lizards made by somebody we know nothing about, except they know how to make Force-canceling lizards."

"It's only a hypothesis...Can we actually call them 'lizards'? I know this is an odd thing to focus on, however they're only vaguely reptilian in shape. They're also furry, sessile, and considering they remain fixed to a tree branch at all times, presumably reproduce asexually. I'm not confident classifying them taxonomically."

Ahsoka snorted. It was an odd thing to focus on. It was also exactly what she'd expect from Barriss, inasmuch as she could predict her behavior.
"There's a pattern forming," Ahsoka began, more interested in making plans than talking about xenobiology. "We show up on a planet, meet up with whoever's in charge, start making some plan to start striking back against the Empire, then the Empire shows up and everything falls apart."

"Before it was mere chance, not a deliberate pattern. In this case, it's our fault the Empire arrived now," said Barriss.

"How is this our fault?"

"The Empire arrived earlier than Karrde anticipated because it needs to replace the ysalamiri we killed when you freed me on Coruscant," she explained, and Ahsoka accepted that was the most likely explanation.

Damaging the prison facility, at the time, seemed like a decent strike, damaging the defenses of an imperial facility and breaking out an inmate who was considered a high-level threat. Admittedly Barriss was a concern of the Empire because she was a dangerous saboteur and a former Jedi, two reasons which also concerned Ahsoka in completely different ways.

Now they were stuck here, uselessly, while the damaged they'd caused was being undone.

They needed a way to do lasting damage to the Empire.

"What do you think?" asked Ahsoka.

"About what, exactly?"

"Everything. The smugglers, the new inquisitor, Karrde's offer, gathering a fleet to oppose the Empire. Even if we're not going to agree on everything, I want to know what you're opinion is."

Barriss's face tensed, mulling over the question. "Karrde seems like a reliable ally, for a criminal. The inquisitor won't be a problem so long as we remain shrouded by the ysalamiri. If he poses a threat, I believe the two of us, combined with the armed smugglers in this base, could overpower the imperial regiment. That must be a last resort if we're found out, as it would cost Karrde his base here when the inquisitor fails to report back and the Empire sends ships to investigate. It would also damage our standing with Karrde, likely beyond repair."

"...I can't help but notice you avoided the point about organizing a fleet to wage a war against the Empire."

Cutting through Barriss's evasiveness only made the other tense up even more. "You know I don't want to fight anyone. You also know there aren't many other options," said Barriss, her attempts at deflection not working on Ahsoka at all. "Yes, I'm avoiding the issue."

Ahsoka suppressed a groan. Trying to make any headway against the Empire without bloodshed was, by all indications, impossible. The truth was Ahsoka didn't want to fight a war any more than Barriss. She understood why Barriss felt the way she did. She'd understood it ever since that speech in the courtroom.

She also understood all the reasons Barriss was flat-out wrong in this case. The Empire wasn't going to be overthrown by peaceful protest. Palpatine wouldn't be negotiated with. The spread of militarism, specism, enslavement, and exploitation couldn't be stopped without force. The two of them, if they were found out, would not be shown mercy.

Staunch pacifism and high morality wouldn't save their lives, and refusing to fight wouldn't remain an option while evil spread.
Satine had been evidence enough of that.

So Ahsoka made a decision: she was getting that fleet from Karrde. Right now, she and Barriss could focus on remaining unnoticed without getting into a heated discussion.

"Wait it out," said Ahsoka, relaxing on a pile of crates, deaf to the Force and hoping that three-word plan would work, even though she knew it wouldn't. Really, she was lying there waiting comfortably for the moment when all hell to break loose. After all the adventures she'd been through, she didn't need the Force to know that was coming.

Chapter End Notes

In which Ahsoka and Barriss are stuck together inside a closet. I swear that wasn't intentional.

I don't know how many of you are familiar with the character, but the "First Brother" is my rendition of Inquisitor Jerec of the game Star Wars: Jedi Knight: Dark Forces II. I haven't actually played it, and only learned of him from skimming Wookieepedia looking for more information on the Inquisitors, but with them involved I decided he would be a good adversary for this part of the story. I'm not a big enough fan to give him the same involvement as Revan or Thrawn, though, so he's probably only around for this planet.

Plus I couldn't resist including him after watching these awesomely ham-tastic live action cutscenes!

The ysalamiri have something of a mixed reputation among Star Wars fans as a result of their Force-suppression powers. Some people aren't bothered at all and see them as an interesting plot device, others go "That's now how the Force works!". I hope explaining them as being unnaturally developed by some unknown faction that bred out of control across the planet unopposed because they don't have a place in the ecosystem resolves the issue effectively and opens up some opportunities.

Who created them? Who the hell knows. I certainly don't. But they weren't messing around, that's for sure, and they aren't allied with the Jedi or the Sith. If I have a good idea, I'll include it. No, it's not the Yuuzhan Vong.

Also, yeah, ysalamiri biology is weird, even ignoring the whole Force-suppression thing. I didn't even get into how they draw nutrients from the trees they're stuck to, but have mouths. Why do they have mouths? What are they eating? Serious questions getting asked in the ysalamiri fandom. Which is basically just me.

Writing Karrde continues to be a challenge. I'm walking a tightrope of trying to make him shady enough Ahsoka doesn't trust him, honorable enough to eventually earn her trust, untrustworthy enough that lying comes easy, and cunning enough to know when or when not to lie to advance his goals, while also keeping him an effective criminal who can hold his own without completely stealing the spotlight from Ahsoka and Barriss.

For those of you curious about exact heights, Barriss is 5'5'', Ahsoka is 5'9'', Karrde is 5'7'', and Vrask is 7'6''. Big lizard lady.
As he lay stuffed inside a storage crate, Jiro could only stay still, keep his breathing quiet, and curse Hondo for getting him caught in this mess. Not that Hondo would accept any blame for it, oh no, it would all be *Jiro's* fault for getting shot down and stranded, and it was *Jiro's* fault for getting caught a month later by...whoever these people were. All he knew was that they had a decidedly less genial view of betrayal than Hondo did, and telling them everything about the Ohnaka Gang didn't earn any favors from that 'Karrde' guy.

All it'd earned him was a cramped cell and enough ration packs to live off of while they figured out what to do with their captive. It probably wouldn't have been anything good. It was never anything good for the people Jiro had held captive.

It was lucky they were so unconcerned with him, since that had given him days to figure out the locking mechanism, and he'd needed them. Whoever these smugglers were, they didn't go cheap on their equipment.

And now, he was stuck on some planet he didn't even know the name of, inside a box, in a storage shed, hiding from these two Jedi brats.

At first, he'd been terrified of being found out, expecting some of the local smugglers had found him. Instead it was what sounded like a pair of teenagers, talking about how some imperials had shown up. It'd seemed like he could take them, but the second they mentioned the Force, it was obvious he was outclassed. And even though their voices were muffled, it also became obvious that Togruta brat Hondo kept running into was the one in charge. Of *course*, all the Jedi in the galaxy were supposedly wiped out in one swoop, but that girl somehow survived and was now standing between him and freedom.

Then, they mentioned they couldn't use the Force. Something about the planet being unfriendly towards that sort of thing. Well, time was against him, and he needed to move before anyone noticed he was gone.

Before leaping into his present hiding spot, Jiro had been searching through the storage shed for weapons, tools, anything to help him escape. There were thermal detonators in one of the boxes, a blaster pistol out in the open on a shelf, if only he could reach them. He had the element of surprise on his side, if he could just get to his feet and make it a few steps before they pulled out their lightsabers...

"Fascinating creatures, aren't they?" asked the First Brother, stroking one of the ysalamiri on the branches extending into Karrde's quasi-office. Karrde didn't like it. Tano and Offee, young but experienced Jedi, wanted to keep away from the creatures and found their presence repulsive. The First Brother seemed to want them as pets.

"I know they taste good fried. Or stewed. Really, as long as you eat them fresh, they're pretty good. Are you sure you don't wouldn't like something to eat while you wait?" Karrde answered, much to the inquisitor's disgust. The more dangerous information Karrde gained about the Empire's activities, the more important it was for him act like the lower-class scum the imperials saw him as. A third-rate
criminal, beneath their concern.

Besides, it wasn't like he was lying, ysalamiri did taste good. Even the Jedi had seemed to agree.

"They are an indication of the powers that were once at work on this world. You and your fellow criminals have been operating on Myrkr for many months now, so tell me, have you found anything interesting out in the wilderness? Do you have any fathoming the mysteries of the Force lie here?"

"Not in the slightest," Karrde said, and once again, it was technically the truth. He didn't know what long-dead society had made the ruins he and his employees had set up shop in. "Is that important?" he asked innocently.

Not innocently enough. Jedi sensed feelings, thoughts, intent. Karrde knew that. He wasn't completely certain of what this guy was, though 'Jedi' certainly wasn't it. Karrde had seen Jedi before, and while he wasn't a huge fan, mainly due to professional differences, since they were always out to catch criminals. Because what's good and what's legal were always the same thing, right? Still, he could never imagine any of them being as creepy as the First Brother. His bombastic attitude, his barely concealed contempt for everyone around him, the way he kept licking his lips, it all screamed that he was a bit unhinged.

And Karrde's show of curiosity was enough for the inquisitor to latch on to. Enough to signal he wasn't as stupid and easily exploited as a good little criminal should be.

"A smuggler like you, to have arrived on this world, must have found great potential in it. What made you decide Myrkr would be your base of operations?" Even though the inquisitor had no eyes, even with Tano's description providing a guarantee that he was safe from Jedi tricks, Karrde felt like he was being watched by a predator.

The situation was going poorly, though not in the way Karrde had feared. The First Brother had some interest in the planet, and believe Karrde would become some kind of rival. Rather than the truth of his aspirations of becoming an arms dealer and giving sanctuary to (at least) two Jedi. Karrde wasn't sure which option was worse, but it was important to disabuse the imperial of the notion before things got worse...and then commit resources to figuring out what possible interest this planet held. And become a rival for it, because now Karrde really wanted whatever was here.

The confidence the inquisitor displayed in these discussions was making Karrde increasingly uneasy, especially in light of what he'd learned today. The First Brother should be blind, he should be uneasy, but he wasn't. Recalling their previous encounters, Karrde couldn't remember any point where his guest had seemed at all troubled by his surroundings.

The inquisitor wasn't aware Karrde knew he was powerless. Perhaps it was a front. Maybe the presence of his stormtroopers outside the room was enough to maintain that level of confidence. Or perhaps he wasn't as powerless as Karrde believed. The smuggler had seen enough of the galaxy to know how little blindness meant to someone with enough skill and practice. Plus maybe a few aural implants, he couldn't be sure.

"It was out of pragmatism, mainly. Avoid the law, avoid prying eyes, things like that. I probably don't have goals or priorities as high as yours, or your Empire's. You mentioned 'Force', right? Jedi stuff? I don't have any connection to that sort of thing. I can't do anything that special," Karrde said, hoping the First Brother was as arrogant as he expected, arrogant enough to take the opportunity to espouse on how high-ranking and critical to the Empire's operations he was, and the command of the Force he possessed.

It worked.
"I was once an archaeologist in the outer rim. Very skilled in my work, so much so that my work uncovering the works of ancient Force-users, such as the Jedi, the Sith, was deemed valuable enough that I could avoid participation in the Clone Wars. The things I've discovered, someone like you can't even begin to imagine, the power on this world..."

Just keep him occupied, Karrde thought, bracing himself for a long talk, practically counting seconds as he waited for Vrask to return.

Out in the open, Jiro ran towards the first ship he saw sitting in the courtyard, an old Skipray Blastboat. Heavily armed, durable, hyperdrive capable, fast, and with steering like a brain-damaged rancor. Eh, it'd do.

As Jiro ran, he didn't waste time turning around to check on his pursuers, but he was certain the two Jedi were chasing after him, their footsteps soft on the grass. More than enough reason for him to toss back the thermal detonators he'd nabbed along with the blaster pistol, and now, they couldn't catch it with their minds or pull any other Jedi trick.

Ignoring the noise of the blasts behind him, the weequay shot both of the technicians in his way and boarded the blastboat, powering up its engines and taking off into the sky. The comm must've been low on the list of repairs, as it was putting out nothing but static. He'd need to get into orbit and dock with the imperial starship directly.

Two Jedi. Two powerless Jedi, without troops to back them up or any hope of rescue arriving from elsewhere. This was fantastic. What had at first seemed like horrible, horrible luck, he realized, could be incredibly lucrative. Forget going back to Hondo, the reward for directing the Empire at those two would get him enough credits to get him his own ship, his own crew.

It would be impossible to get to the imperial on the planet without being stopped, even though there were right there in the base. All he had to do was get to high orbit and reach the ship that had brought them to this planet, and he'd be a rich man.

Dazed from the explosion, Ahsoka struggled to get to her feet, bits of dust and dirt continued to rain down on them both, her montrals buzzing with the aftereffects of the blast. Barriss was recovering faster, helping Ahsoka up and pulling her along as they both tried to focus on where that guy had went.

It was lucky for them that pirate wasn't particularly precise where he threw the thermal detonator. Ahsoka recognized him as one of Hondo's men from her time as a prisoner of the Ohnaka Gang, though she had no clue what he was doing here. Myrkr was getting more and more frustrating with each passing minute, since the ysalamiri were the only reason she and Barriss couldn't sense the pirate's presence. He'd just popped out of a box, grabbed a few weapons, and frantically ran out the door, practically before Ahsoka and Barriss had even realized what'd happened. It was embarrassing. For everyone.

"Cici, get the ship powered up! We need to pursue the ship that just took off!" Ahsoka yelled into the
comm on her wrist while she and Barriss ran towards the Eclipse. The boarding ramp hadn’t even completely lowered by the time she and Barriss had leapt though the opening, Barriss heading for the cockpit, Ahsoka to the turret, with Cici following after the latter.

"We've been here for less than one hour! What did you idiots do this time?" yelled the droid.

"This wasn't our fault!" snapped Ahsoka. "Be ready to do some repairs, this could get rough."

From the turret, Ahsoka watched their target soar over the trees of Myrkr in what she believed was a Skipray Blastboat. Rex had told her how in the early days of the war, those ships could out-blast a LAAT Gunship, only to have their service discontinued due to poor handling and instability when its aerodynamics were threatened. Which was perfect for them. All Ahsoka needed to do was take out the stabilizer fins and the pilot wouldn’t be able to stay in the air.

Even so, depending on what kind of shape the smugglers had left it in, they could be in for a tough fight.

The Eclipse’s ion engines roared to life, propelling the ship off the ground and into pursuit.

Karrde kept attentive and listened to the inquisitor’s rambling. This wasn’t the first time he'd listened to an evil weirdo going on and on about how superior he was to everyone else, and in his line of work, it wouldn't be the last. He’d learned that as long as he wasn't being directly threatened, it was best to let them talk. He only had to run out the clock, then he could get back to more pressing concerns.

"You've seen much of the galaxy, yes? Tell me, young man," said the First Brother, in the most condescending tone imaginable, "have you ever encountered Jedi before?"

"A few times, yes," Karrde answered, keeping a pleasant, conversational tone, even though the change in topic was worrying him. There was no reason to be reticent here, after all, this was nothing but a casual conversation between business partners. Besides, the guy was a Jedi hunter, it made sense he'd bring them up at some point.

"What did you make of them? I’ve had many encounters with them in recent days, and in my experience, they can be rather insufferable. And far too unwilling to grovel like they should."

With that charming bit of insight into the mind of the First Brother, Karrde decided to tell him what he wanted to here.

"I don't interact with them if it isn't necessary. They typically uphold laws, which often goes against my interests. It's nothing personal, just the nature of my business."

Again, everything he said was technically true. Karrde was a practiced liar, however, lying unnecessarily was rarely useful in the long run.

As he finished internally congratulating himself for his usual competence, the building shook slightly from explosions from outside, followed seconds later by the sound of a ship taking off, then another one roaring off after that, and Karrde’s thoughts devolved into a string of every curse in every language he knew (not a small number) while fighting to keep his outward calm. This became increasingly difficult as the First Brother's expression shifted from indifference at the commotion to a
thin smile directed at his host.

The Eclipse's turret was armed and ready, and Ahsoka had the blastboat in her sights, though it was too far away at the moment. The gap between the ships was closing fast as the freighter accelerated. Even if their ship was bigger and less aerodynamic than its target, its engines had power on their side.

Barriss was a decent enough pilot, definitely good enough to keep up with the weequay that had hijacked that blastboat. As long as the Eclipse could catch up, they could shoot it down. And this time Barriss was accepting of the fact that they needed to destroy the enemy ship. Evasion wasn't an option, if they let that pirate get away, the smugglers would all be killed on their account, and Karrde's fleet of warships would be lost.

The freighter kept underneath the blastboat, avoiding the top-mounted turret, as that was the only weapon capable of retaliating against pursuers. Not that it stopped the pilot from trying as the blastboat was sent into all manner of twists and turns, trying to angle itself to get the Eclipse in the turret's field of fire. Without a copilot, the turret must've been running on an auto-targeting system. Against Ahsoka, it didn't have a chance, and the turret was the first thing she shot off. Better safe than sorry.

The enemy ship's engines suddenly cut out, it maneuvering jets shot it back past the pursuing freighter. Not fast enough to avoid Ahsoka, and the bottom stabilizer fin was shot off by a barrage of heavy laser fire, but the drop in speed put it behind them.

Even with the damage the blastboat had suffered, the maneuver put the Eclipse within the line of fire of its forward weapons, though it couldn't get a clean shot now that one of its fins was gone and the wind currents of the upper atmosphere were jostling it chaotically. It was a testament to the firepower packed into the little ship that the smattering of shots that actually landed were rapidly draining the shields.

Barriss pulled the freighter up into a steep climb, forcing the blastboat to do the same while Ahsoka kept hammering away at it with the turret, exploiting the greater range of fire her turret had over the opponent's forward guns. Once both ships were headed almost straight up, Ahsoka must have hit something critical, because the blastboat stalled out, and began to fall out of the sky.

Ahsoka focused on the ship as she watched it fall, only to feel a twinge of fear when she saw the last trick their opponent had for them.

The enemy pilot must've decided that if he was going down, so were they, unloading several tracking ion torpedoes at the freighter. It was lucky Karrde's technicians hadn't equipped it with any concussion missile or proton torpedoes yet, otherwise they might not have survived. The impact shook the vessel, disabling some of the ship's systems, though Ahsoka couldn't know which ones sitting at the turret. Barriss was fighting to keep control of the ship, now too heavy and bulky to stay airborne without all the repulsors canceling out Myrkr's gravity well. Her stomach felt like it was turning around in her torso, and Ahsoka realized that even with the ion engines providing forward momentum, they were in a freefall.

Abandoning the turret, Ahsoka moved through the corridor by clinging to bulkhead after bulkhead to keep herself standing in the shifting gravity, and called out to Barriss, "We've got to get to the escape
pods! You take the starboard one, I've got port!"

"Wait! The ion blasts disabled the pods!" Barriss called back as she rounded the corner towards the door of the nearest pod.

"CICI!" called Ahsoka, frantically looking for the droid, who was already working on restoring power to the pod nearest Barriss.

"On it...I can only get one pod working in time, the other two are fried," the droid replied in a droll tone. Why would she be worried? It wasn't like they were going to give her the one working pod.

"Take it!" Barriss yelled, waving Ahsoka towards her while making her way back to the cockpit.

Ahsoka didn't even pause to consider the situation as she realized something Barriss may not have: they were high above the planet surface, well outside the effect of the ysalamiri, and could use the Force again. And with it, Ahsoka lifted Barriss up, flung her into the pod, pressed the button to seal the door, and shot her companion out of the ship so fast she couldn't even protest.

While Cici tried to get power back to the repulsors, Ahsoka found her way to the pilot's seat, strapped herself in, and wrestled with the controls in the hopes of slowing their descent. This ship wasn't aerodynamic in the slightest, so it she angled it upwards, hoping the wide, flat bottom might provide enough of an air cushion to make this survivable. Or, since doing that required her keep the ion engines running and moving her forward, it could add more force to the inevitable impact. The atmosphere around the ship became glowing hot from the friction of the fall, wisps of orange encircling the cockpit's canopy.

In the corner of her eye, the trail of Barriss's escape pod ended somewhere in Myrkr's forest. With the angle of the ship as it was, Ahsoka couldn't see the ground, but the sudden feeling of the Force vanishing once again told her the forest floor was fast approaching.
A sudden pain in her leg jolted Ahsoka awake, her heart racing as she looked around her ship's cockpit, expecting fires and fumes, only to find things relatively stable. The most noticeable damage were the cracks spread throughout the laminated transparisteel of the canopy. Then Ahsoka noticed Cici at her side, staring up at Ahsoka, having just woken her up with a shock prod.

"Ah, good, you're alive," said Cici. "I was getting worried I'd have to console the droidekas after informing them of your passing."

"Glad to know you care," said Ahsoka, rubbing her neck. Most of her body was sore from the impact, the worst of it being her whiplash. "How's the ship?"

"Not moving anytime soon. I still haven't repaired all the systems hit by those ion torpedoes, and the hull on the lower half of the ship is a wreck. Breeches everywhere, and the landing gear's busted. You did good getting us down in one piece. You...might want to lie down while I try to get things patched up."

Ahsoka was too disoriented to appreciate that bit of legitimate praise, staggering to her feet and trying to recall everything that had happened in spite of her pounding head.

Barriss was missing. She'd more or less shot her out of the ship. Ahsoka had to find her, had to make sure she was safe-

The comms. She could contact Barriss herself, figure out where she was, if she was hurt.

"Barriss? Barriss, can you hear me?" she said into the receiver. "Barriss!"

The shouts echoed back to her, confusing Ahsoka as she tried several more phrases, trying to figure out what could be causing that echo, if it was an equipment malfunction, or something else. That little mystery was solved when Cici rolled in and handed over Barriss's comm, which had been lying on the floor. It must've been dropped during the dogfight.

With the easy option gone, Ahsoka went to prepare and gather supplies to begin hiking around Myrkr, starting with some pain relievers to deal with her headache, followed by bandaging up several cuts she didn't know the origins of. Nothing much she could do about the bruises all over her body, though she managed to get through her landing without breaking her bones. She was still a bit disoriented, but she could move around safely.

"Cici!" Ahsoka shouted back to the cockpit as she stuffed some rations and a blaster into her bag. "I'm leaving to find Barriss! Signal me on the comm if anyone reaches the ship!"

"Take me with you," said a voice.

Ahsoka jerked around at the unexpected noise, her eyes sweeping the room until she saw the Revan holocron lying amidst the clutter.

"Why do you want to come?" she asked.

"I don't know much of what happened in the past ten minutes. Mostly loud noises and being thrown
around by inertia, from where I was sitting. But I know Barriss is lost, alone, and I'm worried. Take me with you," repeated Revan, more sternly this time.

Though a holocron wasn't exactly a great source of help in this situation, Ahsoka decided it didn't weigh much, would offer an extra set of eyes, and could also probably be used as an emergency flashlight if her primary went out. Into the bag it went.

Once she had a first aid kit, plenty of rations, two canteens, and her weapons, Ahsoka walked through the cargo hold to get out of the ship and begin the search. She only made it a few steps into the hold when the droidekas all swarmed her, wurbling their concerns and ready to follow her out into the wilderness.

"Everybody quiet!" she yelled, and the droidekas were instantly silent as Ahsoka worked her way between them. "Sorry, guys, you're not exactly built for rough terrain. Stay here and watch over the ship. I'll be back when I find Barriss. Oh, and Cici's in charge while I'm gone."

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Courtesy of the escape pod's exceptional cushioning and the crumpling exterior plating, Barriss made it through her impact with only a bump on the head, some queasiness, and the feeling of indignation as she went over how Ahsoka had stuffed her into this pod and shot her out of the ship.

Pressing the release button disconnected the safety belts and popped the pod open, letting in the warm, humid air of Myrkr. There was a bag of survival equipment contained in the pod, which, along with her lightsaber, constituted every resource she now had. In it were some emergency ration, first aid supplies, an emergency beacon, and signal flares. Unfortunately, given the situation with the smugglers, it would probably be best not to use those last two items and wind up 'rescued' by imperial stormtroopers.

The escape pod had left a trail in the dirt. That, combined with the hole of broken branches in the foliage, told Barriss where the Eclipse had been flying when the pod had been shot out. Probably. The pod was ejected out of the starboard side, so she should turn right from the dirt trail to find the freighter. That only narrowed things down to about one tenth of this endless forest, which was the best she could do. All of that assumed that during all the turbulence, the pod wasn't shot out in a random direction.

Next was the tough choice: use those clues to turn left and head back to the smuggler base across what was at least twenty kilometers of alien forest? Or assume the Eclipse had crashed as expected, turn right, and head for the ship, knowing that doing so would take her even further away from the base?

If the imperials at the base sent out their own people to investigate, blindly walking into an encounter with them was a mistake, especially when she wouldn't be able to mind-trick her way out of it with the ysalamiri about.

Knowing Ahsoka's luck, the Eclipse definitely crashed.

Also, knowing Ahsoka's resourcefulness and increasingly inexplicable protectiveness, she'd likely made the same deductions about their relative positions as Barriss and was headed for her. Or better, since the ship might still have working sensors.

Assuming she was uninjured. After crashing into the planet from low orbit.
If she was hurt, the only other people who would be heading to help her were being watched by the imperials.

Barriss turned right and started walking. How long it would take, how far she needed to go, what was waiting in her path, she had no idea. Ordinarily, this issue could be resolved fairly simply by trying to sense Ahsoka with the Force, or Ahsoka could sense Barriss. Instead, Barriss was traversing the forest more or less blind, the only other living things she could see being the ysalamiri. Non-sapient or not, it was uncomfortable walking knowing that each tree she passed contained more of the creatures, each one focusing their four black eyes on her.

There was no getting around it. Those creatures were monsters. Small, furry, stationary, completely docile monsters, but monsters nonetheless. Nothing should be capable of doing what they did. It made no sense.

*Why do they exist?, thought Barriss. *HOW* do they exist?*

Those questions had gone through her head over and over during her time in captivity, ever since she'd realized the role of the ysalamiri in her confinement a few months ago. It completely went against everything she'd been taught, the idea that a living thing can exist disconnected from the Force, but to sever the connections between life around it as well.

The static in the Force they spread throughout the forest, this empty bubble in the flow of energy, at first irritated her. More and more it became abhorrent. Such feelings of contempt, especially towards mindless animals, was not the Jedi way, and Barriss tried to focus on finding a rational explanation.

*Could it be they had evolved naturally? Tens of millions of life-bearing planets exist throughout the galaxy, what are the odds of them developing this ability on their own? Is it really impossible? Are they a fluke of evolution?*

*Or were they bred to keep this world free of the Force?*

Compared to the dim glow of the emergency lights, the sunlight in the forest was blinding to Ahsoka. As well equipped as she could possibly be to try and find Barriss in this alien wilderness, Ahsoka took a look at the map on her pad. The ship's sensor logs were intact enough for it to tell her where the escape pod most likely went down, thought she had no idea if Barriss might wander off or not. The *Eclipse* wasn't smoking or leaving any kind of trail for her to follow.

The map told her to head...she had no idea which way this planet rotated or which direction was which.

*Okay, let's say the front of the ship is facing north, I need to go southeast.*

Myrkr, despite the instinctive wrongness, was actually rather beautiful once Ahsoka got out into it. Warm, green, and that the terrain between her and the pod was mostly flat, giving her a pretty easy walk. Ahsoka had to remind herself of what the dangers were here, and the fact she needed to move fast to ind Barriss and that escaped prisoner. Her sense of echolocation would help her stay aware of any nearby wildlife, and she kept one hand on her saber, ready to either fight off a local predator, or even more dangerous, try to hide the thing if she ran into a stormtrooper.

The log data also told her where the pirate had gone down: five kilometers in the opposite direction,
and probably with no idea where he was. Barriss would be smart enough to figure out which direction the *Eclipse* had been crashed in, and was probably on her way. Even if she only had a general direction to work with, Ahsoka would find her, then together they'd deal with the pirate.

If she could tolerate hiking with Revan for that long.

"Come on, you've got to tell me more than that," said Revan, twenty minutes into 'their' walk, even though Ahsoka was doing all of it. Not that Revan had any choice in the matter. "How was it that none of the Jedi were able to figure out this 'Palpatine' guy was the Sith you were all trying to stop? Part of our basic skill set, really, the *most basic part we all know instinctively*, is being able to detect the corruption of the dark side. And even the Jedi council couldn't figure it out?"

"Palpatine didn't act as anything but the legally-elected Chancellor. He was respected, and considerate of the Jedi's place in the Republic. At least, that's what we all thought," answered Ahsoka.

"Were none of you seriously able to distinguish a politician from a power-hungry, manipulative, greedy, selfish, sadistic, lying...okay, yeah, I'm starting to see the problem now..."

"Maybe you're not the brilliant observer you think you are."

"Don't sass me, kid, I could go waaaaayy deeper into all the problems that still don't make address," snapped Revan, thoroughly enjoying Ahsoka's combativeness regardless of the discussion topic. "SooooooooOooo I think we're getting off-topic now. Weren't you telling me about how you were going about toppling the Empire and saving the galaxy?"

Ahsoka had *not* been telling Revan about that, and hadn't even been thinking about doing so. Right now, all she wanted to do was focus on the task at hand, not worry about getting involved, or potentially starting, another galactic war. The Empire wasn't something she wanted to think about.

Maybe it should be. Despite how frustrating the holocron was, seemingly determined to take every opportunity to tick her off, it was *Revan*, after all. A single Jedi who'd fought in, and been the deciding factor of, two major wars. Even if her involvement in the war kept her history studies brief, Ahsoka knew Anakin practically idolized Revan's accomplishments.

"I'm not sure what to do anymore. I can't fight like I used to, I don't have any equipment, or troops, or ships," Ahsoka said. "Every time we've gone up against the Empire, we've been a minor obstacle, but never really achieve anything."

"To defeat your enemy, you have to understand them," Revan said cryptically.

"I understand the Empire just fine," said Ahsoka angrily, "They're an army of bullies led by a sadistic monster that destroyed the Jedi and is bent on subjugating everyone and everything in the galaxy."

"Uh huh, that's a start," Revan's avatar popped into existence in front of Ahsoka, standing over her. "And how will you fight them? What are their strengths, and how will you protect yourself from them? What are their weaknesses, and how will you exploit them?"

"They're strong thanks to their abundance of expendable soldiers, they're weak in that their organization breeds corruption and homogeneity. I'll fight back by opposing their wherever they are." Ahsoka knew it was a simplistic answer. It was also the best one she had. There was no army for her to lead, no guerrilla fighters to train, no Jedi Knights left to stand against the darkness. Even if she had any of those things, there was no telling if it would help against what the Empire had been throwing at the opposition.
"Ugh, no, see, this is your problem. You're fighting the last war, that's why you're losing this one. The 'Clone War', as I understand it, was a conflict between two sides on roughly equal footing militarily. You can't match the Empire pound for pound. Even if you can accomplish incredible feats on your own, taking out large numbers of troops, or even a few battleships, you can't make up the difference between the two sides."

It made sense. So far, all Ahsoka had done is get chased off of planets after killing some faceless soldiers the Empire would replace in a day. Really, her biggest victory was freeing Barriss, and that was only because the situation was so horrendously bad that, technically, it had doubled the number of anti-imperial Force wielders active in the galaxy. What a rousing success.

That was why Karrde's offer was so interesting. She could actually do something with the resources he was practically handing over to her.

"What would you do in my place?" she asked. "Weren't you the Republic's strategic genius that wiped out the Mandalorians?"

"I'm a holocron. My purpose is to pass on knowledge for future generations and advise them, not to solve all your problems for you."

"What, you're choosing now to keep your thoughts to yourself?"

"Point taken. Hhhmmm...have you considered hijacking the biggest warship you can find and dropping it directly onto Palpatine from high orbit, while simultaneously detonating all of its ordinance to be absolutely certain he fucking dies?" asked Revan energetically, as a very disturbed Ahsoka stopped walking from sheer incredulity.

"The idea has been thrown around, and rejected on the reasoning that it's an atrocity," she said, eyeing the hologram with concern.

"Fine, fine, spoil my fun. Then my advice is this: if you can't tear out the heart, cut open the arteries," Revan said, prompting all kinds of disturbing imagery to pop into Ahsoka's head.

"What?!

"Logistics, kid. Where does the Empire get its resources from? Which ones are vulnerable? Which ones are vital? Which ones can you seize and use for your own purposes? And even more important: what resources can you afford to lose? How many graves are you willing to walk across to reach your goal?" Revan said, making Ahsoka more and more uncertain with each question. "Did you really never learned any of this? No wonder you lost the war."

Angry as that last remark made her, Ahsoka couldn't exactly deny it. Throughout the war, the Republic and Separatists had been kept in a stalemate, achieving nothing, never making any progress, never demonstrating the strategic or tactical skill needed to score a lasting victory. Not that such a thing could have ever been possible with the Sith controlling both sides.

"Okay, how did you succeed against the Sith?" she asked.

"Easy. I had great friends to help me!" said Revan. "Don't you?"

"I have...well, yes, uh..." Ahsoka thought about the question much more than she really wanted to. It was obvious what Revan was getting at. She had Barriss. They were friends, right? They'd definitely been friends, for almost two years of the war. And then they weren't. And now, what were they? Ahsoka's first instinct was to answer 'yes'. The only reason she was thinking this hard about it was from wondering what Barriss's response would be. Did she consider Ahsoka her friend? Could she,
when she was obviously hating herself so much over what happened?

"Friendship is weird, isn't it?" began Revan. "When you forge a strong enough bond, even knowing what you did, those people will stick by you no matter what. Even when they really shouldn't."

"Speaking from experience, I take it?"

"Oh, I had quite a collection of lovable weirdos who fought with me even after they found out I was once a Sith. Let me cite some specific examples..."

The holocron's usual avatar disappeared, instead showing images of several people talking to Revan, sharing thoughts on their relationships, starting with the cheerful beeping of a loyal astromech. Ahsoka listened patiently through a few minutes of the holocron's projected memories. There was an old Jedi saying how he knew what Revan had done and didn't care, an intimidating droid who seemed to prefer Revan be as ruthless as possible but would serve anyway, a young Twi'lek talking about their bond being like family, and so on. More companions, each one voicing how glad they were to have Revan around. Although hardly averse to something cheerful, especially these days when she needed it most, it seemed almost too sweet. Ahsoka kept walking, only half-paying attention to the displays of friendship, increasingly getting the impression it was the holocron's immense ego that had brought them forth, not any concern for her and Barriss.

At the moment Ahsoka was ready to tune out the dialogue entirely, another hologram appeared in front of her, and she stopped instinctively. It was a human male, rugged in appearance, looking despondent as he stared down at her, struggling to find the right words.

"I wanted to hate you," he said, "I wanted to hold you responsible for all the things you've done. But I can't. Despite whatever part of Revan is inside you, the...the darkness that must surely be there, it isn't who you are. That's why I can't hate you. You don't have to be that person. You can be so much more."

Against Ahsoka's expectations, Revan didn't provide any commentary for that. No remarks, no sarcasm. Nothing but the unpleasant silence as that beaten soldier faded away. He'd seemed so full of anger, justified anger, yet he couldn't keep feeling it, despite having been wronged. And why not?

Ahsoka took a few more steps, then a new hologram appeared. This one appeared to be a Jedi. Or rather, a dark one. Also human, dressed in what looked like some antique military uniform. She held a double-bladed lightsaber in one hand, while the other hand clutched her wounded side.

She had been on the losing side of a fight with Revan.

"But how would you be able to trust me?" she asked. "How do you know I wouldn't turn on you? How do you know the dark side wouldn't make me betray you again?"

The hologram stood idle for a moment, and Ahsoka quietly replied in Revan's place, "Because despite what you did, we cared about each other, and I still think that means something."

Revan's response millennia ago must have been similar to her own, because the woman deactivated her saber, stepped aside, and replied back.

"You're brave. And some would say foolish. But you are also right."

And then she was gone.

The trek through the forest continued, and no new holograms appeared while Ahsoka contemplated the situation. Maybe rescuing Barriss wasn't a completely reckless, foolhardy decision. Maybe this
could all end well.

"That was...interesting," said Ahsoka. Perhaps 'interesting' wasn't actually the best word. 'Spooky' might've fit better.

"Yeah..." was the only response Revan gave for a few minutes, evidently as unnerved as she was by the whole exchange. The usual robed masked avatar reappeared, walking alongside Ahsoka. "What is Barriss to you, anyway?"

"She- she's my friend," Ahsoka answered, consciously putting more confidence into the response than was really there.

Revan seemed to ignore her response, the visor of the hologram's mask fixating on Ahsoka. "It hurts, doesn't it? Finding out that someone you believed in wasn't the amazing person you thought they were. Even if they wanted to be that person for you, they failed. Yet despite how complex and difficult it may be, you don't want to give up. Something continues to hold you close, stronger than the Force, you just can't quite figure out what it is, it's so confusing, what could it be...You think she's cute, right?"

Ahsoka snorted and laughed, expecting some kind of unpleasant observation about her connection to Barriss, only to get that. This was certainly an odd tangent to go down, but after the last few minutes with angst-Revan, she was actually relieved for a return to the demented sense of levity the holocron provided.

"With the shyness and the tattoos and the quiet intelligence and the big, deep blue eyes? Of course she's cute."

The holocron didn't say anything for a moment. That response was not at all the expected one. "Well...this suddenly got ten times more interesting. Please, tell me more about how adorable Barriss is."

"That's not what's important," Ahsoka said. And now the discussion was back to being unpleasant and abrasive. "I believed in her, and not only did it turn out that was a lie, she used my trust in her to hurt me. Despite what she did, everything that made me want to be her friend, it's still there."

"Are you really into Barriss? Or are you really that desperate?"

"Desperate?"

"Yeah. Desperate. You rescued her because you were lonely. Because there is no one else in the entire galaxy whom you can connect with, who can share in your fears, your knowledge of the Force, your battle against the Empire. You are alone. You have nothing. Except for her," explained Revan. Ahsoka found the tone of the conversation becoming more unpleasant. Being mocked and argued with was an annoyance. Revan now spoke with thinly-veiled contempt. "And you're trying to build on this connection with her, despite everything she did to you, because you have no choice. You can't stand being alone. If someone else came along, another Jedi, another Force-sensitive who could understand you, would you still want Barriss at your side?"

Ahsoka was speechless. She turned away from Revan, focusing on her search, trying not to think about this. Not right now.

"Here's the core of the issue, Ahsoka: do you like her because she's Barriss...or do you like her because you have no other option?"
After two hours of hiking, Barriss learned Myrkr wasn't as utterly unpleasant as she'd believed. Still unpleasant, but not wholly so. The ysalamiri were less concentrated in this latest section of the forest. Periodically, the Force returned to her, in, well, in force. This planet was intense, brimming with life, and each respite from the deafness those creatures brought drove her on. Each time she encountered one of these gaps, she would pause and meditate for a few minutes, trying to sense where Ahsoka was before moving on, only to find the disruption of the ysalamiri all around her.

She seriously considered pulling out her saber and hacking away at every one of the creatures she found, but she'd already passed thousands of them with no end to their territory in sight. From what she remembered while descending onto Myrkr, this entire continent was mostly forest.

Not to mention many of them were too high for her to reach without the Force to boost her, and she needed to kill the creatures to use the Force to jump to kill the creatures to use the Force to jump to kill the creatures to use the Force to jump to kill the creatures to use the Force to jump-

Barriss shook herself out of bothering with that bit of circular problem-solving, rounded one of the larger trees, and found the first step in answering the mystery of this place.

There were ruins in front of her.

Constructed of the same materials and in a similar style to Karrde's base. Much of it was overgrown with the native flora, enough to be nearly invisible from above, and easy to miss even on foot.

One of the trees had roots breaking apart the stones which formed what was left of the road Barriss walked down, meaning those stones must have been placed before the tree sprouted.

The tree now stood, in Barriss's estimation, over one hundred meters tall and was ten meters thick.

It was fascinating, and exploration was a welcome distraction from the danger of her overall situation of being lost. And also potentially being exposed as a Jedi survivor to imperial forces on the planet. Should she even be taking this detour? What if she missed Ahsoka?

Then again, if Ahsoka really did come by, she would start exploring the ruins, too. Stopping for half an hour wouldn't have much of an impact on their chances of running into each other while wandering through the woods with only a vague knowledge of which direction she was going. It was wise to take breaks regularly, so Barriss would count this as one.

Most of the buildings, or what remained of them after millennia of wear, looked like simple dwellings, nothing about their appearance denoting other purposes. As she walked around, Barriss noticed to curvature of the roads and headed towards the center, finding another tree, the largest she'd seen so far, with more ysalamiri clinging to it, dozens of them turning their heads to watch her.

Barriss was repulsed and about to turn around and abandon this endeavor, when she noticed an opening hidden beneath the sprawling branches of the tree.

It was definitely meant for people to enter, there were stairs, and a hallway extending as far as she could see before becoming pitch dark. Barriss activated her lightsaber, having no other source of light this far into the tunnel, and shined its orange light over the walls, seeing a pair of statues flanking the hall.

The statues were only busts, showing the heads of a species Barriss had never seen before. They looked avian, with four eyes and a pronounced beak, though that was as much as she could tell
of their biology from the statues alone. Likely no more than two meters tall, considering the openings
to their structures were sized that Barriss could comfortably moved through them. Probably flightless
given their size.

Barriss kept walking into the tunnel, and was startled when one step triggered a compartment on the
wall next to her to open. What she deduced was intended to occur was a massive axe would swing
out of the opening and cut her down. Instead, the axe fell off of its rotted hinge, and its rusted blade
shattered onto the ground.

She kept moving cautiously, and more obstacles attacked her with similar effectiveness.

A few hidden compartments were warped shut and couldn't open.

What appeared to be another pressure switch was jammed so thoroughly Barriss could put her full
weight on it without it moving.

The only trap which presented even the smallest difficulty was a stone sphere taller than she was, and
that only happened because it had fallen from the floor above and blocked the hallway. Looking up
through the hole it had fallen through, it appeared the stone was intended to roll into the hallway and
 crush intruders. Barriss doubted that one would've worked even back when it had first been
completed. The drop from the above floor would've either shattered it on impact, or, given the state it
was in now, left it buried half a meter in the floor.

The next stone Barriss stepped on slowly lowered, grinding against its neighbor. A panel to her side
opened...very, very slowly. So slowly, in fact, the Barriss had plenty of time to step out of the way.
That act quickly proved unnecessary, as only a few darts popped out of hole in the wall and fell to
the ground without even getting any distance.

This place was so old, even the traps its builders had left to protect it after their deaths had decayed
away.

This building, whether as a museum, a temple, a sanctuary, whatever else, it must've been important
because once Barriss was past the final trap, the walls were covered with elaborate artwork showing
the development of the native society, and the construction of enormous structures similar in style to
what was left outside. Sprawling cities, far grander than this tiny settlement had ever been, even
before it had been worn away by time. Perhaps so much time had passed that this was all that was
left of the native people...Barriss decided to simply call them the 'Myr' until she found out what they
called themselves.

The hallway began to curve, and began to slant down. The entire structure must've been made in a
corkscrew going deeper into Myrkr, with more material removed as more of the local history was
added.

Each mural became more distinct as she went deeper into the structure, further and further aware
from the humid air, wind, everything that could wear the artwork away.

Another section began, this one darker than the others, showing the city deserted. Descending from
the sky over the city was a symbol that stood out amongst the golden, rectilinear shapes of the local
architecture:
The symbol of the Rakatan Infinite Empire, the first known interstellar power in the galaxy. And one of the most brutal and oppressive in galactic record.

Tyrannical as the Empire was, if a slave disobeyed, Barriss was quite certain imperial leaders didn't respond to defiance by *eating them*.

As the previous works had shown the city being built up, the ones following the arrival of the Rakata showed everything the Myr had built being torn down, the elegant, detailed engravings replaced bit by bit with the harsh, featureless blackness of alien technology on their world.

War machines pursued the Myr from their homes, and with the survivors becoming fewer and fewer with each new image.

The next mural shown the Rakata ravaging the surface, while deep below it the Myr gathered and worked with what technology they had. What exactly they had done, Barriss could only speculate.

All that mattered was the next work, showing tall trees with streaks of tan lining their branches, towering high over the machines of the Rakata, now useless and broken.

Details of the Infinite Empire's technology were lacking, giving its dissolution almost 30,000 years. One consistent feature of it was known, still yet to be replicated by modern technology and was a mystery to the Jedi: their technology could draw power from the Force. Rakatan designs were, in a
way, alive by the definitions of the Jedi.

Until the ysalamiri propagated across the planet and rendered them inert. The Myr were celebrating, beginning to rebuild, tearing down what the Rakata had left behind.

Then, the tunnel came to an end. There was no more artwork, no more history. No more Myr. It didn't take much consideration for Barriss to figure out what had probably happened after that brief triumph.

They'd defied an empire, and had been exterminated for it. Of course they were. What else could they have expected? That the Rakata would've left them alone? That they would've accepted the loss and moved on? Their empire had more soldiers, more resources, more weapons. An entire galaxy's worth. Even if they'd been beaten on the ground, they had orbital bombardment, bioweapons, radiation at their disposal. What the Myr had done was ultimately trivial, but why not slaughter anyone and everyone who resisted on principal?

It was foolishness to fight back, arrogance to believe you could accomplish anything against power like that. All it did was bring more death.

*Find a better way of fighting,* she thought, not entirely consciously.

She knew her history. The so-called "Infinite Empire" fell. It'd taken centuries, but it had happened due to subterfuge and determined opposition, not military might. History could repeat for the Empire, if it was helped along that path. There had to be something she and Ahsoka could do.

They had no soldiers. No navy. No weapons. Against the Dark Lord of the Sith, even the Force may not be their ally. All they had was determination and cunning.

Barriss sank down to her knees. She didn't want to fight, she was sick of it, during the war she would've done anything to make sure she wouldn't see battle.

And she had done 'anything' to escape the war. And she'd failed in every way possible. Failed everyone. Herself, the Republic, the Jedi, Ahsoka...Luminara.

She looked up at the murals again. The Myr were all dead because they'd fought back.

If they hadn't?

They'd all be dead anyway.

*It isn't as if there's anything left for me to lose.*

Chapter End Notes

You ever have those two friends who, for some reason, just can't get along? That's Ahsoka and Revan.

And now we know the origin of the ysalamiri. Or at least my own version of it, because nothing like this is a part of Legends. It turns out they were made by the Chozo. In yet another botched attempt at using bioengineering to battle alien threats. You'd think they'd have learned their lesson after the Metroids.
I also finally worked up the nerve to tag the story Barriss Offee/Ahsoka Tano with this chapter. Before now, there was a 5% chance they wouldn't end up together, because let's face it, that is one hell of an uphill battle, but I'm gonna do this one way or another. It's going to take a while. Plus this chapter marks the point where Ahsoka admits she was crushing on Barriss, so their attraction is explicitly mutual now.
"What happened?" Karrde asked, trying to contain his frustration while surveying the damage to his base and keeping track of the stormtroopers surrounding him and the First Brother. Tano's ship was gone, along with one of his blastboats, and there was smoke rising from small craters near the storage shed.

"Our prisoner from the Ohnaka Gang escaped, sir. Jasn and Kosh are both dead," said Lornan, the base's head mechanic. Karrde shot him a quick look, telling him to choose which details he revealed more carefully while imperials were in earshot.

"Inquisitor, I apologize for the incident, however I assure you, our prisoner has no business with the Empire. If that pirate had succeeded in escaping the planet, he only would've run away from you. After all, if his plan was to contact the Empire, he could've done it with the ship's communication system. Nevertheless, recovering him and my other employees must be priority for the moment, and any help from you and your men would be appreciated."

Karrde knew full well the comms on the blastboats weren't operational yet. The First Brother, however, did not, and bought the excuse.

There was also Karrde's request for assistance: obviously, if he wanted imperial help, then there was no foul play from his end, right? No Jedi here...

And of course, it was beneath the status of an imperial commander to meddle in the affairs of lowly smugglers when it didn't concern the Empire. They won't want to involve themselves, thought Karrde.

"Of course I'll assist you in your search," said the First Brother with a veneer of friendliness. "You have my entourage at your disposal."

Well, kraytspit.

"That is very gracious of you," said Karrde, trying to come up with a way to keep the imperials as far away from this mess. "For the sake of any plan's you've made, be aware the forest covers hundreds of square kilometers, and tracking down the pilots of those ships could take longer than what we need to gather the ysalamiri."

"Perhaps we can speed up the process with a view from above. I'll signal for a squad of TIE fighters to survey the forest, and they'll inform me if they track down your lost smugglers. Tell me, captain," the inquisitor said to the stormtrooper next to him, "when the ships were taking off, did you get a look at the pilots in question?"

"Yes, sir. The escaped prisoner was a male weequay. The two smugglers pursuing him were a Togruta and a near-human. Mirialan, I believe."

"Interesting," said the inquisitor, his forehead wrinkling as he concentrated, then grinning as he recalled some important information. "Karrde, where did you find those two?"

"Ashla and Bogan? They're a couple new hires who were looking for work," Karrde answered. Once again, no lies. Nothing out of place on his end if the inquisitor discovered the whole truth.

"Hm. Once those two have been found, I will be questioning them personally."
"And why is that?" asked Karrde, feigning indignation. "Part of my deal with the Empire was for you to overlook the legality of our activities. My employees are not your concern."

"Unfortunately, I believe the crimes of your associates may exceed what the Empire is willing to tolerate. They will be brought to me immediately upon their recovery," said the First Brother. The stormtroopers stepped forward to flank their commander, making it clear this was not up for discussion.

_He knows._

An inquisitor probably received up-to-date information on which Jedi were still alive. And Karrde didn't have anyone of the same species on-site to stand in for Tano and Offee, no one to convince the First Brother that these were simply another duo of the same species combination.

"Really?" asked Karrde, more diplomatically this time. More conniving. "If they were to be recovered alive, would there be some reward?"

Much as he didn't like that open display of disloyalty, Karrde had to cover all his bases. The inquisitor suspected there were Jedi on the planet, now Karrde had to play the part of a lowly criminal, innocently in over his head with all this Jedi stuff, looking to earn some credits at the expense of his comrades. In the increasingly-possible scenario of Tano and Offee being apprehended, he wasn't about to go down with them. He definitely wasn't going to let any of his other employees die on his account, either. And if the inquisitor didn't think he knew their true identities, it would offer more opportunities to save their hides.

"Indeed. You'll be handsomely rewarded if they are brought to me alive. Assuming this isn't simply a misunderstanding," the First Brother said with a forced, disingenuous chuckle. It wasn't clear if he believed Karrde's latest ploy. Karrde had invested many hours into understanding body language of different species, but it was difficult to read a humanoid face that had patches of skin instead of eyes.

"In that case, I'll put Vrask on it. She knows Myrkr better than anyone else, and has the tracking skills needed to find people in the Jungle," said Karrde, sending a signal to Vrask through his comm. A minute later, the towering Trandoshan was back and informed of the situation. At least, what Karrde wanted the inquisitor to think the situation was. He'd have to count on Vrask being smart enough to piece together the reality on her own.

"Find Ahsla and Bogan. Bring them back. Understood," Vrask's demeanor was more blunt than usual. This situational with the imperial presence had just gotten a lot more complicated, and she knew it as well as Karrde did.

"Taking them alive is a priority. Though personally, I find it unlikely Ashla and Bogan survived," said Karrde. "A crash like that, and in the middle of the forest...even if they survived, they're alone out there with various predators."

"I suppose not," replied Vrask.

_Good_, thought Karrde, _She understands._

"I'll check in when I find whatever's left of our comrades," she finished, then started walking back towards the speeder bike she used for excursions into the forest, the pair of elite stormtroopers the First Brother had selected to accompany her lagging behind.

"Sir, if I may," one of the stormtroopers said to the First Brother, a second one standing with him. "I believe you should send us to investigate alone. This situation feels wrong, and I don't trust this
creature to handle recovery of those smugglers."

Vrask growled at the trooper, who moved for his sidearm in response. Questioning Vrask’s competence was bad enough, doing it while insulting her species indicated the trooper had a death wish.

"You're going together," Karrde sternly, though directing the demand primarily at Vrask, then turning to address the trooper directly. "Your enthusiasm is appreciated, however despite the exceptional training you've been given by the Empire, Myrkr is unknown terrain for you, and these forests contain dangerous predators which Vrask knows how to handle. And she can only help you survive if you allow her too. I'm sure you could both benefit from each other's presence."

Vrask stopped growling at the trooper, instead turning and growling much more quietly at Karrde. He'd known her long enough to get a handle on Trandoshan body language, and knew the look she was giving him meant something along the lines of: 'If you weren't my friend, I would be halfway through eating you'.

"Heh. Sure, we could use its help," said the trooper dismissively, walking off ahead of Vrask. Karrde watched the three zoom away into the forest on their bikes, considering the odds this would end well, and ending up satisfied with the situation.

Even if those troopers were good enough to escort an inquisitor, his hiring standards were much more stringent than the Empire's.

With speeders to carry them through the forest, and knowledge of where both ships had crashed, it took less than twenty minutes for Vrask to cover the kilometers of forest and reach the downed freighter of her new associates, those two useless troopers tagging along behind her.

The ship was impressively intact, considering the impact it had suffered. Part of the boarding ramp had been sheared open when the ship had slid against the ground, providing enough space for Vrask to get inside, albeit with some difficulty given her size. Listening for a moment, all she could hear were the sounds of the troopers following her inside.

None of the three tried yelling for survivors. Even though this was technically a rescue, something about the ship didn't feel right. The troopers were moving around slowly, with weapons raised. Vrask took her own laser cannon out, wary of the cramp space making using it difficult.

Suddenly, the sound of dozens of mechanical legs pierced the air, and the three intruders ducked behind cover to avoid the spray of blaster fire being poured at them from a group of droidekas advancing on them from the cargo hold. Vrask and the stormtroopers were at an intersection of three hallways leading to the cockpit, cargo hold, and turret, offering them cover. For the moment, at least. Peaking around the corner, she saw there were at least a dozen droids, and some of them were fanning out, probably towards other corridors to come around and attack from every angle. Her laser cannon could breach their energy shields with a few shots, but there was no way she'd get more than two droidekas before the others blasted her once she came out from her cover.

They had to get out of here, or they'd be dead inside of two minutes.

An astromech of a model Vrask had never seen rolled into the cargo hold, bleeping frantically and getting the droidekas to cease fire, then cautiously rolled towards the intruders' cover, sizing up the
new arrivals.

<Hey!> it shouted, <Do any of you speak droid?>

"I do," Vrask said back, keeping behind her cover.

"You can understand that thing?" asked one of the troopers.

"Yes," said Vrask, slowly stepping out into the open to address the astromech directly as it rolled up to her. "Who are you?"

<I'm CC-7, the ship's astromech droid. These are my associates,> she said, spinning her dome towards the calmed droidekas, introducing them one by one. <Pin, Glow, Naberrie, Droid #5, Flicker, Lamp, Quaint, Hinge, Indie, Moogan, Oil, Even, Jitter, and Kick. Don't worry, I've told them not to attack. Unless you do something stupid to them or to me, in which case, they'll turn you to ash before you can bare your teeth.>

Vrask was a bit taken aback by that. Though there were no shortage of feisty technician droids in the galaxy, she had never been directly threatened by one, much less a threat that was so plausible. Or such an eager, vicious one. She was also suddenly very aware of the dozens of glowing red photoreceptors all focused on her.

"Nice to meet you."

<Same. I'm gonna throw out a few observations, stop me when I make a mistake: you're not translating for the troopers, meaning you don't care about informing them of the situation. You don't work for the Empire, you work for the local smugglers, and are looking for a way to ditch the escort. You're also trying to do it as inconspicuously as possible, seeing as someone like you could kill them in seconds.>

"True," admitted Vrask, choosing her words carefully for the listening troopers. "Where are your masters?"

The droid twitched slightly at the word 'masters'. <Barriss got launched out of the starboard escape pod, then Ahsoka headed out to find her after the crash.>

Those were not names Vrask had heard before.

"Are you sure you have all the details correct?" asked Vrask.

<Of course I- uh- Jana got launched out of the starboard escape pod, then Ashla headed out to find her after the crash> said the droid. <Yeah, you're not buying that, are you?>

"Go back to your work, droid. We'll send technicians to salvage the ship later. My condolences for your masters," said Vrask, who stood up and walked towards the waiting troopers. The astromech got the idea, rolling away without objection. "The ships was overrun with some predators, probably voraks. The crew did not survive."

"How did wild animals get past the droidekas?" asked one, apparently not as stupid as Vrask had hoped.

"The crew must've survived the initial crash, then exited the ship, perhaps to avoid noxious fumes or to inspect damage. Then, they were taken," explained Vrask. You didn't survive long in the galactic underworld without being able to come up with plausible excuses on the fly. Being an alien species with difficult to read emotions helped out a great deal, because while Vrask had a quick wit, she was..."
"What about these droids?" asked the second, maintaining a grip on her rifle. "We have standing orders to eliminate any battle droids that survived the Clone Wars."

"They are cargo of the pilots we're looking for, and not your concern. This is a condition of Karrde's arrangement with the Empire," snapped Vrask, ab-libbing the excuses. "A few battle droids sent out to the edges of the galaxy are inconsequential. These things aren't even in good shape," she gestured vaguely at the droids, whose head twitched slightly in reaction to that comment. They appeared to have undergone some cosmetic modifications, painted with simple markings on their armor. Vrask assumed it was to make them distinguishable. It didn't matter really, but it helped give them a 'used' look.

"Besides," she continued, waving at the war machines that were all around them, blasters out, "do you want to try and get rid of them yourself?"

It wasn't likely Vrask could convince the stormtroopers the freighter's owners hadn't survived and run off into the forest for much longer. One of the escape pods had been launched, and her claim they were some predator's meal would fall apart if they realized there were no signs of a struggle. No blood, no animal tracks, no signs of a humanoid corpse being dragged off into the brush for a meal.

"Hey! Hey, over here!" came a voice from beyond the line of trees. Definitely not either of the girls, which meant it was the escaped weequay. Perfect.

Vrask followed behind the two troopers as they rushed out to find the source of the cry.

A second later, the target came through the brush, limping as he tried to run towards the wreck. It surprised Vrask that he would approach what was left of the ship that had shot him down. Then she realized it wasn't the ship that attracted him, but the imperial speeder bikes parked next to it. He didn't want to escape the system, he wanted to be found by the Empire.

"Stop right there!" shouted the first trooper. "Identify yourself."

"Name's Jiro. I'm a prisoner, unjustly held, who escaped from the smuggler compound, and I have information vital to the Empire."

"What information?" asked the second trooper. Her voice sounded doubtful the alien criminal would be of any real use.

"Oh, no, we need to talk about what you'll be paying me," said Jiro. The stormtroopers both pointed their blasters at him in response. "Hey, HEY, c'mon, I need some compensation! Look at me! All I can tell you tight now is this: it concerns two Jedi."

"Jedi?" said the first trooper, turning to the second while pulling out his comm. "The inquisitor will want to hear about this. I'll call it in."

Those were the last words out of his mouth before Vrask had a clawed hand around each of their necks, crushing their throats with the pressure. No blood, however. No cutting them apart with her claws. Walking back with human bloodstains in her clothes would result in the imperials shooting her like a rabid animal. Once the life had been choked out of the two, she threw their bodies, still
with one in each hand, back towards the ship. Those might be of use later on.

"Wha- Why did you do that?!!" shouted Jiro, cowering in terror of the enormous Trandoshan.

"Do what?" asked Vrask.

"You just killed two troopers! You think the Empire's gonna let you get away with that?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said calmly. "They were careless, and some of Myrkr's predators killed them. I tried to prevent it, however, as I tried to explain to their superior, they were unprepared for the dangers of this planet. If they'd stayed back at the base, they would've lived. It was unfortunate. And not my doing." Then, she stepped closer to the petrified weequay, towering over him and bearing her teeth. "Do you understand? If you are asked later, will you know what you should say?"

"Ye- y- yeah!"

"Good," she said, putting a massive, clawed hand on his shoulder and turning him around and pushing him forward. "We're going to go find those two Jedi you told me about, and then we're going back to base. Try to run, and your death will be much more painful than those imperials'," she said, ending the discussion with a low growl into his ear.

It was an effective display of intimidation that cowed the escaped prisoner. It also belied Vrask's confusion.

Jedi. Karrde hadn't mentioned those girls were Jedi.

Did he know?

What was she thinking, of course he knew, he's Talon Karrde. That boy was obsessed with information, and always seemed like he knew everything.

And he hadn't told her. She supposed there hadn't been many opportunities to talk to her in private since the Jedi had arrived. If he'd only been suspicious of them, then gotten confirmation at their meeting, it made sense he wouldn't tell her. Well, it would've made sense to Karrde, he rarely acted without certainty. Regardless, he'd be explaining everything to her once she got back to the base.

No, scratch that. She'd hear everything directly from 'Ahsoka' and 'Barriss'.

Vrask's large nostrils flared as she took a deep breath, taking in all the scents of the forest, all the blood, sweat, pheromones, pollen, decay, waste, all of it, trying to pick out the scent of the two offworlders. The Togruta left a distinct trail away from the ship, and would probably lead to her companion as well.

She'd find them eventually. And she'd do it long before the Empire did.
Ahsoka trudged through the forest, as she'd been doing for the past twenty minutes, every step coming with the annoying sensation of the holocron's weight jiggling around in her pocket. Even with it out of sight, even with it keeping silent, hell, even without the Force to sense any kind of energy from anything around her, she could still feel the damn thing judging and mocking her.

"You can't avoid what she did to you forever," said Revan. "Does her betrayal really not bother you anymore? What about the people she killed? The people who couldn't leave, like you did."

"Oh, shut up!" Ahsoka snapped, pulling out the holocron and tightly clutching it in front of her. "The Jedi are gone. What she did, other ways things could've gone, I don't care. It doesn't matter anymore."

"Of course it matters. All your doubts, your rationalizations, your judgments affecting every single interaction between you and her matters, Ahsoka. How do you feel about Barriss, really? You never did answer my question."

"I don't want to blame her anymore," said Ahsoka, still deflecting Revan's probing. "It's not even her fault. It was just all the trauma and pain she'd built up."

All the background noise seemed to fade out for a fraction of a second, and she swore the holocron flashed dark red instead of its usual violet. It didn't last, and everything seemed normal a second later.

"So, that's what you really think?" asked Revan.

"Yes. What of it?"

Revan sighed, "...Just keep walking."

A few minutes later, Ahsoka walked into a ring of immense trees, and found the small gap in the forest was far enough from ysamir to feel the Force again. It was disorienting for a moment, like walked out into the sunlight after being kept in the dark. Even though she knew she couldn't stay in this small pocket of normalcy, Ahsoka took a moment to relax, even though she could sense the void those creatures produced encircling her.

"Savor the moment," Ahsoka said quietly to herself, setting her bag and the holocron down on a flat boulder.

"You feel that, right?" asked Revan. "The Force is back 'on'."

"For now, until we move deeper into the forest again. I'd like to meditate for a few moments."

"Well, I suppose I should take advantage of this opportunity before we move on," said Revan. There was a pulse, a sinking feeling that was sent out through the Force, and all around Ahsoka, the environment took notice. All the birds perched on the branches around her flew out and away, even insects and smaller creatures skittered away.

"Um...what are you talking about?" she asked.
"I'm talking about the very good odds you'll be dead within the next five minutes."

Ahsoka stared at the holocron, unsure how to respond to this bizarre, incredibly creepy tangent, trying to reassure herself that this little two-kilo device didn't actually pose a threat.

"And how are you going to do that?" she asked, keeping her tone steady, not daring to mock the other. "You can't exactly fight me."

"Can't I?" asked the holocron, as the holographic avatar appeared outside it in its regular, violet light. Then it became darker, redder, more opaque. As it stepped towards her, Ahsoka saw the dirt and grass shift beneath its weight.

A purple lightsaber ignited in Revan's hand, now within striking distance of Ahsoka.

*It's just a hologram, how can it-*

Her thought was interrupted as Revan lunged at her. Ahsoka instinctively drew her saber, the green and purple blades colliding and sparking off each other, locked at first, until Revan began pushing her back with raw strength.

*How is this possible!?*

After a few seconds of forcing their blades against each other, Ahsoka took one hand off her hilt, extending it to Force-push Revan back to a safe distance, the two duelists regarding each other with caution.

"Sure you want to do this?" said Ahsoka, fronting confidence despite being thrown into an unexpected fight. "I've fought Sith Lords before."

"Not like me, you haven't," said Revan, launching forward and clashing blades with Ahsoka again. After a few seconds of deadlock, Revan pushed forward, using the Force to send Ahsoka reeling and knocking her to the ground.

Revan was a legend amongst the Jedi. One of the strongest knights ever. Ahsoka wracked her brain going over what she'd learned about ancient Jedi forms, battles, techniques, and everything she'd learned about Revan kept adding up to the same conclusion: she was screwed.

When she stood up again, she was facing not only Revan, but dozens of Dark Jedi and Sith, all of them with their sabers raised, the red glow outweighing the light of the sun. Ahsoka was stunned, with no idea what to do against those numbers, and about ready to run when Revan through up a hand. A storm of Force lightning arced out, spreading through all of the other apparitions. Ahsoka watched in horror as the lightning brought them all to their knees, crying out in agony as the destructive energy burned their flesh away and turned their bones to ash.

"You think you're tough because you held your own against a few Sith?" shouted Revan. "Guess what, Snips: I slaughtered an army of them."

Ahsoka raised her blade, ready to defend herself, watching as Revan slowly walked towards her, sunlight glinting off that red and grey mask. She focused on the vacant black slit of the visor, feeling the power and contempt that was all being focused on her. The entire feel of the environment felt different now, as if the Force itself was turning against Ahsoka.

Reassuring herself that she'd survived more dangerous situations than this, Ahsoka rushed forwards and began striking at Revan, who either dodged or deflected every single one, barely even looking at
her while doing so. The effortless defense was only broken up by a faux-yawn to mock Ahsoka.

That overconfidence only made Ahsoka more determined to smack her opponent down.

Seeing how futile it was to attack using her lightsaber alone, Ahsoka pushed and pulled Revan with the Force, trying to knock her opponent off balance. It was enough to make Revan stop taking her lightly, not enough to actually turn the fight. After half a minute of accomplishing nothing, Revan began to go on the offensive.

If striking at Revan directly wouldn't work, Ahsoka would try another approach, attempting to disarm her opponent. After one of Revan's swings missed her, Ahsoka reached out, and the purple saber flew out of Revan's hand towards her to be sliced in half. Revan's face remained concealed behind that mask, but Ahsoka hoped her enemy was as shocked as she'd been a few minutes ago.

"You're beaten. Surrend-

Revan dashed around Ahsoka's blade, grabbed her by her wrist and elbow, and threw her overhead. Ahsoka's acrobatic skill allowed her to land on her feet, if a bit unsteadily, and she turned around to attack only for Revan to be a step ahead, hitting her in the face with a right hook.

"C'mon, kid, don't tell me that's all you've got! Because that's nowhere NEAR enough!" shouted Revan, deftly dodging Ahsoka's swings, giving ground to her while also taking a few more strikes at her. At least now she knew to dodge.

When an opening became available to her free hand, Ahsoka instinctively punched at Revan's face, with a predictably painful result as her fist collided with the heavy metal mask.

Unfazed and wanting to hammer the point about their respectively levels of armor, Revan returned the favor, grabbing Ahsoka's left horn and slamming their heads together.

"Mandalorian design," said Revan, fondly tapping the edge of the mask while Ahsoka clutched her bruised forehead. "Not something your bare hands will do much good against."

Ahsoka swung her blade again, only for the pommel of her saber, held in a reverse-grip as usual, to be caught by Revan's palm. Followed by a kick to Ahsoka's stomach.

"You should know that the shien form may be good for deflecting blaster fire, it's terrible for extreme close-quarters," said Revan, giving Ahsoka a moment to step back and catch her breath. "Who was the idiot that trained you, again?"

Switching to a normal grip, Ahsoka assumed an aggressive makashi stance, ready to go on the offensive again. Historically, Jedi had used this form against the Sith, and Ahsoka still felt she could beat Revan if she was smart about it. Bare hands could only last so long against a saber.

That confidence disappeared once again when two more lightsabers lit up in Revan's hands, bronze in the right, light blue in the left, flourished and wordlessly daring Ahsoka to strike first.

After years of facing down armies and criminals and servants of the dark side, and always being ready to fight as hard as it took to win, Ahsoka got the feeling she was in way over her head.

She hadn't felt power like this since Mortis.

When fighting against Ventress's two sabers, Ahsoka had held her own by relying on her agility to avoid one of her opponent's sabers while blocking the other, and to switch sides during the duel. While locking blades with Revan's right saber once again, she was ready to use the same tactics, and
nearly got impaled for the effort.

While she was blocking the first saber, Revan had released the second and was manipulating it with the Force, ignoring the limitations of reach and the speed of one's arm to attack Ahsoka flank. The saber shot through the air at Ahsoka's head, coming at her from her blind spot.

It was only the instinctive reaction to leap back that saved her, if only for a few seconds. While Ahsoka was still in mid-air, she felt a pull on her left foot.

Anakin had taught her early on how to resist the telekinetic powers of the Force, but the usual methods were to prevent opponents from controlling the center of the body. When at risk of facing Force-using opponents like Ventress, being able to resist basic attacks had become ubiquitous skills among the Jedi.

Revan had instead taken control of her extremities, flipping her around like a rag doll and then sending her into a painful roll across the ground. Getting to her feet, Ahsoka dashed away without even glancing at her opponent or worrying about her various cuts and bruises.

The fraction of a second she saved kept her from being sliced in half as Revan's sabers cut through the ground she'd been lying on.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked, finally reaching her limit.

"Because contrary to what Barriss believes, you are pulling her closer to the dark side. And I'm not going to let you corrupt her any further."

Ahsoka couldn't believe what she was hearing. The holocron of one of the most dangerous Sith Lords in history was accusing her of being a bad influence. She wondered to herself whether or not this was even happening, then realized there was a good chance it technically wasn't, but she had to deal with it anyway.

"What are you talking about?" she yelled. "How am I corrupting Barriss?"

"Through your inability to forgive her."

"I have forgiven Barriss!"

"No you haven't. You aren't getting over what she did to you and her other victims. You've convinced yourself she didn't do anything wrong in the first place. That it's all the result of her being sick, that she didn't choose to do any of it," said Revan, slamming the sabers against Ahsoka's again and again. "You ignore the reality of her crimes, and undermine the progress she's made in overcoming her pain by making it seem like it wasn't her decision to commit those crimes in the first place."

The two lightsabers kept striking at Ahsoka from both sides, swing left, lunge right, swing right, lunge left, over and over, forcing to to block and dodge exhaustively.

*Even Grievous was never this fast!* 

The duel was exhausting her much faster than it should've. Ahsoka knew her physical limits, but even with a fight this intense she ought to have more stamina left.

It didn't take her long to realize what was happening. Conventional Jedi technique was to use the Force to push opponents back. Revan was applying a downward force on Ahsoka, working with gravity to give her more weight, each second making her a little heavier.
"You don't see people's real motivations, or their conflicts," said Revan. "You need everyone to be good or evil. And when faced with someone like Barriss, you're taking the easy option. You want to like her, you want to be her friend, so you label her a good person, and will make whatever leaps you need to do it. You're wrong."

"She's not that person anymore. She never wanted to be!"

"That does not absolve her of the responsibility for everything she did. You seem a bit confused, so here's an example for you: I killed countless people during my time as a Sith Lord. Then my memories were destroyed, I was altered, remade into someone new," explained Revan. "You know who killed all those people? You know who was to blame for their deaths? IT'S STILL ME."

The ranting was less than interesting to Ahsoka, who was presently trying to figure out a way to defeat, or at the very least, escape her opponent. Skilled as she was, she'd learned in recent weeks when to run. Unless

*The holocron. I've got to destroy the holocron.*

Ahsoka ran over to try and slice apart the device, only for Revan to come between her and it.

"Oh, no, you don't get to shut me up that easily, Ahsoka!" shouted Revan as Ahsoka stopped attacking and pulled back. "If you want to get out of this, you really ought to be listening more closely!"

Ahsoka then tried the opposite tactic, running deeper into the forest to find some ysalamiri. Assuming their effect would work on Revan. Whatever exactly was happening, she was certain Revan hadn't manifested a flesh and blood body.

Running past tree after tree, there were none of the creatures anywhere, and Revan was still behind her. It looked more like Ahsoka was simply being followed rather than actively hunted as Revan kept a healthy distance away, watching Ahsoka as she ran. It was only when Ahsoka quit running and turned around to resume the fight that Revan picked up the pace and struck at her again.

"You want to think she didn't make a choice, that she was so broken it was all decided for her. You're wrong. She chose to kill those people. She chose to betray you. She chose to hurt you. She chose to stomp on what you had, what you could've had. It mustn't have been easy for her, but she could've stopped if she wanted to. She didn't own up to her actions at some poignant, dramatic moment and take responsibility for her actions, it was dragged out of her!"

Ahsoka levitated a nearby boulder, struggling to get the trajectory right as she threw it.

Revan stopped it in midair, playing tug-of-war with Ahsoka until the stress shattered the stone.

"You know what the real irony is? As repulsive as what she did was, she was motivated less by the dark side than any of you!"

Every nearby object Ahsoka could see, logs, stones, what have you, all served as projectile for her as she sent them at Revan from all directions. Revan effortlessly sliced them apart, not even bothering to look away from Ahsoka while doing so.

"This is why the Jedi failed. Why they finally fell. Because they didn't understand war. You all painted yourselves as noble heroes, flying off to fight the good fight. There is no good in war. Only the acts of evil necessary to win, in the hopes that greater evil will be prevented and greater good will arise later. You, your master, the council, you all took the quick and easy path, absolving yourselves of the responsibility for what you did. That is the dark side. Out of all of you, only Barriss discovered
the reality: that every act of violence you committed for the greater good of the galaxy takes a piece of your soul. And it tore hers to pieces. Now she's accepting who she is, and you want to act like those thoughts weren't her own? Not happening."

"I wasn't corrupted during the war!" screamed Ahsoka.

"What, seriously? How many people did you kill for the greater good? How many times have you acted out of rage? Just a few seconds ago, you were about to slice my holocron in half! Admit it, Ahsoka."

"I'm not going to hold back when you're trying to kill me!"

"Isn't that always the problem? 'I had no choice, it was the oooonly waaaay'. I've seen hundreds of controllable pawns like you before. Always so righteous, until they become what they fight. Always so enduring, until they forget what they stand for. Why don't you just skip right to end and join up with the Empire? I'm sure they'll forgive you if you offer Barriss back."

Any retort Ahsoka could've come up with was interrupted by Revan stepping around her blade and grabbing her wrist, pushing the lightsaber away from her body, then grabbing her left montral, yanking her head down and into an armored kneecap. Over and over again, until she dropped the lightsaber.

Revan punched her in the throat, then grabbed Ahsoka by her rear lekku and threw her face-first into a tree.

"You can't accept it, can you?" asked Revan. "That everything you fought for was a lie. The Republic became the Empire. Your own soldiers would kill you now. Everyone you cared about, your master, your friends, they're gone. You are never going to see any of them again. Doesn't it hurt!? All you've got left is the most despicable, treacherous, worthless person you've ever known."

That last attack had left Ahsoka unarmed, and with the damage to her horn, too disoriented to even stand up.

"Barriss isn't evil," she said, uselessly attempting to crawl away from Revan.

"No, she isn't. But she did evil things," said Revan. "That's what you don't get, isn't it? That the most important person in your life, the one you care about most, and who cares about you, is the one who nearly cut you down. Heh. Ain't it grand?"

Ahsoka lay on the ground, barely conscious, as Revan walked over to her, pinning her down with one foot and lowering her own lightsaber to her body. In a reverse grip, of course.

"Anything you'd like to say before you die?"

The blood was rushing to Ahsoka's head. And, as she realized, it was also probably flowing out of it. The pain, the disorientation, was crushing.

"You're right," she said.

The heat radiating from the lightsaber's blade stopped at Ahsoka's throat.

"Go on," said Revan.

"Barriss...chose to hurt me. She could've stopped, but she didn't," said Ahsoka. "But I don't believe she'd make the same choices again."
The saber blade disappeared, the weapon falling to the ground as its wielder vanished.

"Well said. There's hope for you yet," came Revan's voice, now emitted once again from the softly glowing holocron.

Ahsoka lurched upright, looking around and finding herself in the center of the clearing, right where she'd been when Revan had first attacked her. She had no injuries, and felt no pain. The environment was untouched, too.

"How- how did you do that?" she asked.

"I'm Revan," said Revan.

The tone made it clear that was as much of an answer as Ahsoka would get.

"Was that it?" Ahsoka asked, getting up off the ground and dusting herself off.

"If you're wondering whether I'm going to beat you senseless again, the answer is 'no'. For the foreseeable future, at least. Would you mind picking me up?"

"Yes. Yes, I would." Even if she hadn't been in physical danger, Ahsoka wasn't quick to forgive what had just happened.

"I know I haven't been particularly civil recently, but I needed to make certain you wouldn't become a threat to Barriss."

You think I'M the more dangerous one!?

"What, that's why you attacked me? Why wouldn't you just talk to me?" she said angrily.

"Ah, you don't like being tested and toyed with by people trying to prove a point," snarked Revan. "No wonder you left the Jedi."

"Answer the question!"

"Ugh, fine. Your misconceptions about Barriss's sense of morality and psychological state weren't the only issue. I needed to check something."

"What?"

"Back in the day, one thing I was very skilled at was breaking Jedi.Finding those with the right kind of personality to turn into Sith. People who were headstrong, and determined, and tough, and willing to fight when it came down to it. They all professed that they would never fall to the dark side, they would never become as horrible as the Sith," said Revan, voice dripping with sarcasm. "Before long, every single one of them marched beneath the banner of my empire, obsessed with gaining more power through my conquest of the galaxy. And you...you're a perfect candidate."

There were plenty of times Ahsoka had been told her behavior, her headstrong personality, could lead her into darkness. It had never worried her before, she had never felt at all 'wrong' when she made mistakes, or made her feelings known.

To hear that lecture as a child from some old Jedi Master was simply another day at the temple.

To hear it from a Sith Lord sent chills down her spine.

"I won't turn to the dark side," she said uneasily.
"I believe you. You took the difficult path..." mused Revan. "You've felt it before, haven't you? That feeling, as if the things you cherish most about yourself are holding you back. That if you disregard others, focus solely on yourself, you can do anything. All that power, unlimited power, can be yours."

A little calmer now, Ahsoka thought about that description of darkness. Revan wasn't far off from what had transpired.

"It was on this, strange planet, Mortis. In the Chrelythiumn system. Ever heard of it?"

"Chrelythiumn'? I was in the vicinity once, but I'm afraid circumstances denied me the opportunity to check it out."

"The dark side spoke to me there. Literally. I could feel everything it had to offer. I wasn't afraid anymore, all my worries, my fears, they didn't weigh me down. And it wasn't me. I'd never really understood why everyone called the dark side 'corrupting' until that day."

"Count yourself lucky. You got your brush in one sudden change, and could see the contrasts in hindsight. Usually, the change is so gradual, you don't even notice it. And by then, you no longer have what it takes to care."

"Is that what happened to you?" asked Ahsoka. "You couldn't see what you'd become when you became a Sith?"

"Nah. I understood the horrific consequences of every choice I made, and continued anyway until I had the galaxy at my feet. Shall we go?" asked the holocron. The fight still fresh in her memories, Ahsoka stood in place, considering whether she could find her way back to this spot after finding Barriss. "Oh, come on. One time, my apprentice called me soft. You know what I did to teach him a lesson? I sliced off his jaw. Hey, Malak, you know what else is soft? The puréed mush all your meals now consist of! Is your jaw gone, Ahsoka? No? Then stop being such a whiner and carry me."

Reasoning that she probably wasn't in real danger, and this wouldn't happen once she was around the ysalamiri, and the holocron really did seem to have Barriss's best interests in mind, Ahsoka begrudgingly took it in hand once again.

It took a moment for her to get her bearings, and to realize she could sense Barriss again. She was close, and...underground? Glad as she was to have the Force on her side, it was never as explicit as Ahsoka would prefer. Or as anyone would prefer, as she recalled the Jedi frequently acknowledging and making excuses for the vague bits of information they'd glean.

"Thank you for looking after Barriss," said Revan. "I mean that. If you hadn't freed her when you did, things would've gotten a whole lot worse for her. 'The only escape is death' worse."

What fate the holocron was referring to, exactly, Ahsoka wasn't sure of. After that fight, all she wanted was to find Barriss, evade the inquisitor, and leave this awful planet.

"I wouldn't leave her to the Empire. No matter what she's done."

"I know you wouldn't," said Revan. "By the way, you have my approval."

"Your approval to do what?"

The holocron chuckled. "You two are so adorable. Why did you stop, anyway? Pick up the pace, Barriss won't be waiting around forever!"
Revan has very intense feelings about personal responsibility. And is also really fucking strong. Palpatine-level, minimum.

Originally, Revan was going to respond to the question "Your approval to do what?" with "My approval to do Barriss" but I figured if they said that Ahsoka would throw the holocron into the nearest river. But obviously I couldn't leave your brains without that bit of dialogue inside them.
The tunnel was completely dark at the moment, Barriss having deactivated her saber. Light wasn't necessary to meditate, and she wanted to shut her eyes without worrying about whether her laser sword was safely balancing on its hilt. It was actually nice down here, cool and quiet compared to the forest. Below ground and far from the ysalamiri, she could feel the Force around her again, now was the perfect opportunity to meditate. Though this wasn't even meditating, really, only thinking.

Did she really want to go to war again?

Strategy and tactics was something she was good at. A skill she'd carefully honed during the war as intensely as she had every other one of her lessons. She'd successfully attacked the Jedi Temple and killed six Jedi. Most battles of the war hadn't killed that many. She'd beaten Ahsoka in a fight. She could've killed Ahsoka, if that had been her plan, a feat which General Grievous, Ventress, Trandoshan hunters, and countless battle droids had been unable to accomplish. The only reason she'd failed was because she'd held onto some sliver of decency and not killed Ventress after taking her sabers, which wound up exposing her to Skywalker.

Barriss was an exceptional fighter. And that terrified her. Putting those abilities to work also appeared increasingly necessary.

The Empire wasn't going to become less oppressive over time. Everyone who could do something to fight back had to, or there was no hope. Ahsoka, the Separatist holdouts, even Karrde's smugglers were all trying to chip away at the Empire. How could Barriss sit back and do nothing? Because 'violence is bad'? Was believing that going to help anyone?

Maybe fighting back now would save more life in the long run. The Empire couldn't be negotiated with. The people who would be killed arguably deserve to die for the things they've done. If it worked out, Barriss could comfort herself knowing it was the right move after all.

It sounded more and more like everything she'd told herself before. All the rationalizations she'd repeated over and over. Trying to convince herself she had to do these awful things for the greater good.

People were dying while she was sitting around debating the finer points of morality. She would do what must be done.

Then it would turn out she'd accomplished absolutely nothing at best and exacerbated the issue at worst, depending on how you looked at it. What would be different this time?

For starters, she had Ahsoka now. That was always a good sign. Very comforting.

During the Clone Wars, the increasingly apparent corruption of the Republic and the validity of the Separatist cause had made fighting against them difficult to morally justify. The Empire had far fewer virtues. Speciesism, xenophobia, slavery, a massive military buildup, propaganda, normalized corruption. As much as Barriss hoped to find some good, even in her opponents, that reluctance to fight back was absent now.

Maybe her staunch belief in the abhorrence of warfare was another form of absolutism she would have to let go of.
Ahsoka was right. What Karrde was offering was too good to pass up, and it could do real damage against Palpatine's regime. It would take years of work and billions of credits to gather that many ships.

All Barriss could do now was keep taking chances, keep fighting back, and hope that her choices were the right ones this time. At least this time she wasn't making them alone. That would have to be enough.

When Barriss opened her eyes again, instead of the darkness of the underground ruins, she was surrounded by blinding white light. Barriss couldn't tell where it had all come from. She hadn't sensed anything, there were no attackers nearby. Her first instinct was to prepare for the worst regardless, only to find her lightsaber was gone.

After giving her eyes a few seconds to adjust and slowly opening them again, Barriss recognized the designs of the claustrophobia-inducing metal walls that surrounded her. She was in a cell. *Her cell.*

The first one, the one she'd spent between her arrest and the formation of the Empire.

Behind Barriss, on the other side of the force field covering the cell's entrance, stood Luminara, who was staring at her calmly. At least, she was trying to look calm. To most people, Luminara would've appeared positively serene. Barriss knew her master better than that, had spent enough time learning the subtleties of her expressions, and could see how worried she actually was. How sad. How disappointed.

Barriss stepped forward, still shocked at what was happening. Seeing Luminara again was something Barriss had been actively trying not to think about for months, especially after definitively learning she was dead. It wasn't real. It couldn't be real. But if this was some kind of lesson or message from the Force, Barriss was willing to let it play out.

"Hello, m- hello, Luminara." No point in keeping things formal. Luminara wasn't her master anymore. Barriss wasn't a Jedi now, and she hadn't been a Jedi then, either.

"You look well, pada- Barriss," said Luminara, following suit. Maybe it was an attempt to be conciliatory, or an acknowledgement of the reality of the situation. Regardless, it was hollow politeness since although there wasn't a mirror nearby to check with, Barriss could fully remember that no, she had certainly not been looking well at this point in time. When the real Luminara had first come to visit her in prison, the meeting had been nothing but Barriss, very uncomfortable in her new prison uniform, trying to shut herself down to avoid bursting into tears. "Barriss, why have you done this?"

"Why do *you* believe I did it?" Barriss asked meekly. It wasn't an attempt to be evasive, rather, to see if her 'message' had been understood by the person closest to her. By now, Luminara had heard her confession to the bombing and her tirade in the courtroom. Been told how Ahsoka had left the order as a result. In all likelihood, Luminara would've been kept under quarantine out of fear there were nanodroids in her body. Barriss wouldn't have denied that was a reasonable concern.

"The war and the duties of the order became too much," said Luminara, "and I failed to see it."

This scenario had played out in her head so many times. Being honest and direct with Luminara wouldn't yield anything new, wouldn't tell Barriss anything about the state of the Jedi she didn't already know. It all came back to duty and following along with the other Jedi and never went anywhere. Just as Barriss expected.

Luminara continued, "Barriss, I understand how we came to this point, and I'm sorry it happened this way."
That wasn't something Barriss had expected, and she finally looked over at Luminara, waiting to hear what else she had to say.

"You brushed with the dark side, but I believe that with time, after the war is over, you could still return to the order."

Of course. No one ever learns anything. It's never anything but 'dark side dark side dark side' whenever anyone steps out of line.

"Is that your entire answer?" asked Barriss, walking away from the door to sit down on her bunk. What was defying her master going to accomplish? Nothing she could say would change any of this. "You look at me and see a fallen Jedi?"

"The dark side can make what you're doing feel so right."

"Then you will be immensely pleased to know I haven't approved of any of my actions over the past two years," said Barriss, waiting to see if Luminara noticed, or cared, about the not-so-subtle condemnation in that statement.

It didn't matter. It'd been such a long time since speaking to Luminara, or it felt like such a long time, Barriss had forgotten how hopeless she'd felt when questioning the philosophy and workings of the Jedi, even subtly.

"Despite what you have done in recent days, I have hope in the fact that your actions during the war saved far more lives in the long run."

Barriss had finally had enough of this nonsense.

She could feel her heart pounding, her muscles tensing, her balance waning. She tried to straighten up. Tried to ignore the rage building inside her. To keep up some semblance of dignity, of composure. Trying and failing. The Jedi Code provided her some comfort at moments like this.

*There is no emotion, there is peace. There is no ignorance, there is knowledge. There is no passion, there is serenity. There is no chaos, there is harmony. There is no death, there is the Force.*

Except it wasn't true. There was death. The Jedi had caused a significant amount of it. Despite the farce that was playing out here, Luminara was dead, too. Stepping out of the safety of the temple and into war had shown Barriss the abundance of ignorance, passion, chaos. No to mention the growing emotions inside her, too much to hold back anymore.

“Your praise doesn’t make me feel better. Not anymore. I didn’t want to fight, or kill. I only did it because I had to follow you. Because it was expected of me. As the war dragged on, it became my whole life. And I…and I...” Barriss tried to fight back the words, she’d kept them suppressed for years now, but she was sick of it, sick of needing to be the perfect Padawan, always calm, always in control.

*There is only peace there is only there is only peace there is only peace there is only peace*

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“AND I HATE YOU FOR PUTTING ME THROUGH THAT!” she screamed, the declaration echoing around in the cramped metal room.
Barriss felt like she was going to pass out, trying to process what she’d just said. Fear of the implications of her words. Hating herself for feeling this way. Doubt whether it was even the truth. Relief at finally letting it out.

Loneliness as she realized Luminara had vanished, and she was back in the dark, barren stone corridor.

“Master! MASTER!” she shouted as she spun around frantically, hoping the vision was still there, somewhere. “Luminara? Luminara, I’m sorry! I’m sorry…” she called out futilely as she lowered herself to the ground. What she really wanted in this moment was some light.

However, her saber had chosen this particular moment to break, uselessly emitting sparks, not nearly enough for Barriss to find her way out. Barriss shook the device for a few seconds, pointed away from her, of course, as if her inelegant motions would somehow fix such a complicated device.

The corridor seemed to go on forever as Barriss felt her way along the wall, slowly working her way out of this pitch blackness, occasionally using the Force to blast some debris out of her way so she could get out of here faster. Who cared about preserving the ruins? It wasn’t as if anyone else was going to look at them.

Eventually, she reached a point where the light from the tunnel entrance became visible again, reflected off of the curving walls, growing brighter and brighter with each step.

The more she saw, the less she felt from the Force as she neared the entrance to the ruin.

*The ysalamiri.*

Those creatures were right where she’d left them, clinging to tree branches above the entrance to the underground. They had been nothing but a source of frustration for her, cutting her off from the Force, suppressing her strength.

But if they could block her off from the Force, wouldn't that mean they also held back the dark side? During her time in the Empire's prison, hating herself for what she'd become, did the dark side have anything to do with it?

No, it couldn't be *that* simple.

With some trepidation, she walked towards them, the creatures turning their heads and regarding her with come curiosity. She sat down in the alien grass beneath the opening, crossed her legs, and meditated. Not trying to step to a larger world, only working to sort through the contents of her head.

The connection between her and the Force was suppressed. No light, or dark, or anything could reach her. And she felt exactly the same. She was still angry. Thinking about Luminara, about all the times she’d fought alongside her master cutting down enemy after enemy when a few years prior she’d been learning about how the Jedi were supposed to work for peace and justice. The Force was for knowledge and defense, never attack.

She felt lied to. Controlled. Used.

Barriss was furious. At the Jedi. At their council. At Luminara.

And she was confused as well. She was angry and didn’t want to think about her right now, but she missed Luminara. Although she didn’t understand how, she was angry at Luminara and loved her. She wanted her old master alive and well. Barriss wanted to tell her how important she was. She also wanted to yell at her.
Her master was like family. And without her, the future was uncertain. If the Empire had killed Luminara and all the other Jedi, what hope did she have?

Barriss was hateful, and terrified, and vindicated.

Because none of it was because of the dark side. Despite everything she'd learned about the dangers of anger, the more she thought about everything that happened, her time with the Jedi, the more certain she was that her anger was rational. Being controlled and forced to do things she found morally reprehensible, being taught hypocrisy, was being upset really so wrong? Was saying she was upset wrong?

It would be wise to leave. To simply keep these feelings under control, and get back to what was pertinent. But she didn't want to control her anger anymore. No, that wasn't accurate, she was in complete control of her emotions, and had an intended focusing point for them.

Barriss braced herself as she descended back into the tunnel, the sun of Myrkr now shining at an angle directly into the entrance and illuminated her path. A short ways in, her connection to the Force returned. Luminara returned along with it, fading in existence in front of her.

"Why would you come back to me?" asked Barriss, not especially concerned with the answer. This time she actually wanted to see Luminara, and get some things off her chest. There would never be a better opportunity. There probably wouldn't be any other opportunity.

"I want to help you return to the light. To find peace."

Barriss shook her head.

"The philosophy of the dark side being responsible for all these conflicting emotions is a bit difficult to cling to when it's the Jedi Order itself grating on my nerves. I'm not a dark sider. I'm just a terrible person with no idea what she's doing!" Even after only a few days, Revan was starting to have an influence on her. Barriss wasn't quite sure how to feel about that. Suddenly, she got a better understanding of the ancient master: humor and mockery aren't simply ways to irritate others, they're excellent ways to alleviate your own nervousness. "It is painful and challenging to remain in control. I did it. For years. For you. And it isn't helping me."

"Perhaps I can help you find your way."

"You can't do that."

"You must not give into anger, Barriss."

"Fine. Let's talk," she said bluntly. Balling her fists, avoiding so much as looking at Luminara, it took a moment for Barriss to muster up what she wanted to say. "I wish I was by your side again. I wish I was your padawan. Even if it meant repeating the battles of the Clone wars, I'd do it, if it meant seeing you again," finished Barriss, her fists shaking. "I'm also angry at you. And I don't think you'd understand why."

Luminara smiled calmly at Barriss. "Please, enlighten me."

"I realized the way I feel isn't wrong. I’m not corrupted. This is what I’m like, and I am not a bad person for feeling angry," she said, bitter laughter mixed with the words. "I'm a bad person for a hundred other reasons!"

"I don't believe that," said Luminara, "but you’re so out of balance and-"
“Shut up.”

Realizing what she’d just been told, Luminara stood there, wide-eyed. The uncertainty and vulnerability was easy to see now, and Barriss wished she’d seen it years ago.

Barriss felt shocked, too.

Shocked, and absolutely thrilled.

“Excuse me?”

“I said shut up. I’m sick of listening to you explain all the reasons I’m never going to be good enough while standing there all, all,” Barriss stammered as she waved up and down Luminara's body, "perfect!"

“Barriss, I’m only trying to do what’s best for—”

“Shut up, shut up, SHUT UP! If you cared about me so much, how was it that you never, not once, felt what the war was doing to me after every battle? Why didn’t you feel I was so traumatized I wanted to die in my hospital bed after having a parasite writhing around inside my brain? Shouldn’t you have felt that through our bond as master and apprentice? Of course you wouldn’t. You were always so detached. Even from me. I devoted my entire life to you, I endured because I thought it would get a scrap of approval from you, and for what? So you could pat me on the head, then send me off to do it all again? You want to act like you had my best interests at heart? Like I was your first concern? Go to hell. I’ve found a Sith holocron who cares more about me than you ever did. You're right about how strong my connection to you was. It's the only reason I'm seeing you now. And I'm finally realizing that no matter how much I loved you, you never felt anything for me!”

A feeling of satisfaction welled up in Barriss as she watched that ordinarily stoic face become full of surprise, and pain, and confusion. And, perhaps, a glimmer of realization.

It's not fun, is it, master? Cracking under other people's expectations?

“I have always cared for you,” said Luminara, her voice filled with hurt. "More than you could possibly know."

Barriss had explained herself to Luminara, and hadn't been listened to. Hadn't been understood. Hadn't been acknowledged. One way or another, right now, she was dead set on being heard.

“Right,” said Barriss. "That’s why when I was slowly suffocating under a pile of rubble, surrounded by the corpses of thousands of sentients you’d ordered me to murder, your main concern was letting me go!”

“Death is a part of life. I would not have mourned your passage into the Force.”

“Then I suppose I’ll do the same for you. You’re dead anyway. I won’t hold onto you anymore. Congratulations are in order, right? You did exceptional work in training me!” she shouted, turning away. Everything she'd wanted to say had been said. It had brought Barriss some relief, if not any happiness. "Now...you’re gone."

"Wait, Barriss, please. My role as your mentor was to guide you attachment would've made that more difficult. I tried to hide it. I thought it couldn't be more obvious."

That expression of concern, one Barriss had been waiting for years to hear, was enough to make her stop.
For a moment.

"You hid your feelings better than you realized. That's one skill you succeeded in passing on to me."

"Barriss, I'm--"

But the former apprentice was already walking back into the light, flinching as her connection to the Force was torn away, not even bothering to look back at the now-empty catacombs. Observing the path out of the ruins, Barriss began following the clusters of the sessile creatures, relishing the silence of the Force.

Chapter End Notes

It will never be revealed what Luminara was about to say.

Shoutout to SlyStrike's comment from Chapter 28: "So, what new ancient wonders shall Barriss encounter this time? Also, how quickly will they drive her nuts?"

YOU. ASKED. FOR THIS.

I've been working on this chapter for a while, trying to figure out the relationship between Barriss and Luminara, and have found it can be summed up pretty succinctly: they love each other very, very much and it is very, very unhealthy. Luminara's strict adherence to the Jedi code meant she wouldn't actually show Barriss how much she cared regardless of how much Luminara wanted to or how much Barriss needed to hear it. So, Barriss desperately tried to figure out her stoic master's real feelings, and wound up trying to live up to standards she didn't actually need to, and interpreting other events as some kind of restrained criticism.

Someone like Luminara, holding the title of master and rank of general, cannot be excluded from Barriss's criticisms of the Jedi. Barriss knows this, whether she wants to admit it or not. Because Luminara embodies everything Barriss wanted to be and everything she found wrong with the Jedi. You can practically hear her brain tearing itself in half trying to sort that out.

And yeah, learning your mentor was trying to get over your passing as fast as she could immediately after you narrowly avoided death via suffocation doesn't exactly leave many charitable interpretations. Even if those were the correct ones.

Luminara, tell your daughter you love her.

Writing this chapter was incredibly difficult as I'm trying to keep the transition of Barriss feeling inferior to Luminara to angry to defiant while also keeping in mind that she's dealing with complicated emotions that don't necessarily lend themselves to consistent behavior and keeping everything in the context of the differences in approach to morality and war during the Clone Wars and the Rebellion and also drawing up distinctions between feeling the pull of the dark side and being justifiably upset not to mention including vaguely contradicting moments to keep it ambiguous whether that's really Luminara acting through the Force or if Barriss is projecting like crazy or some combination of both and also I almost forgot to mention AAAAAUUUGGHHHHHH
Long Con, Short Fuse

There was a familiar noise screaming through the air, the same one Ahsoka had heard during the battle on Umbara, gradually intensifying as she ducked for cover. The imperial fighter flew over the canopy of the forest, shaking the branches with its slipstream. Unable to find its target, it continued on its path, searching for her.

Even though the fighter wasn’t coming around for another pass, it was a bad sign. Stopping to listen more closely, Ahsoka could hear the faint sounds of others sweeping the forest in the distance. The Empire was looking for her, though she still had no idea how much they knew yet. Did they still think she was a lost smuggler? Did they know her name? Had Karrde given her up to the Empire?

There were some stone structures in front of her, old but clearly artificial. There wasn’t much left of them and out through the ruins a lone figure walked. Walking awkwardly and muttering to herself, too far in the distance for even Ahsoka’s hearing to know what she was saying other than that she sounded furious.

“Barriss!” Ahsoka shouted, drawing her friend’s attention and immediately improving her mood as the two ran towards each other. Barriss stopped within a comfortable distance. Ahsoka kept on going and hugged her.

Suddenly being held like that certainly surprised Barriss, but it didn’t take more than a couple seconds for her to be hugging Ahsoka back, as both of them were relieved to find the other safe.

In fact, Ahsoka noticed Barriss was hugging her tightly. Very tightly. Astonishingly so for someone with such scrawny arms.

Wasn’t particularly interested in letting go, either.

It was getting difficult to breathe. Reluctant to break the hug up, since Barriss obviously needed it, Ahsoka gently patted her back as her diaphragm did what it could. Maybe she finally realized how awkward this was, or she heard Ahsoka’s faint wheezing, but Barriss eventually let go. Eventually.

“I’m glad you all right, Ahsoka- You have the holocron with you?” said Barriss, noticing the purple glow coming from her bag.

“Barriss! NO! Why would you say that!” shouted Revan. “I am not important right now! Go back to what you were doing, pretend I’m not here!”

Ahsoka yanked the device out and eagerly handed it over to Barriss. “Please take it.”

Complying with the blunt request, Barriss took the holocron in her hand, noting the relief Ahsoka showed when it was finally out of her hands. “Revan, what did you do?”

“Who? Me? I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“The ship is back this way,” said Ahsoka, beckoning for Barriss to follow her back through the forest. “It won’t fly, but maybe we can-” Ahsoka paused, looking away from Barriss, listening, then dashing between her and the pack of large, black-furred animals that had just emerged from the brush.

The creatures were predators, cat-like, each one around Ahsoka's size, bearing their teeth and growling at the pair.
“Get your saber out!” Ahsoka shouted while igniting her own blade, though the light did little to frighten off the animal.

“I can’t, it’s broken!” Barriss shouted, frantically trying to get her saber to activate.

“Do you know how to use this?” Ahsoka asked, pulling out her blaster.

“Barely!”

“Good enough!” Ahsoka said back, tossing Barriss the weapon.

The pack was moving around, ready to attack from multiple directions. With only one saber, one blaster, and no Force abilities between them, Ahsoka was terrified, her mind running through all the ways this would end with them both eaten and very few ways they’d both survive. The leader of the pack growled and came at Ahsoka. As it leapt across the ground at her, fangs bared, Ahsoka’s montrals could sense something else approaching. Something much, much bigger.

“Get down!” roared a voice from behind them. Ahsoka and Barriss instinctively obeyed the order, and a bright red energy bolt shot over them and burned away half of the lead predator’s body, blasting what was left of it back several meters. All the other animals stopped and stared, no longer daring to move any closer as Vrask stomped towards Ahsoka and Barriss, her bare, clawed feet leaving deep footprints in the mud from the combined weight of both herself and the enormous anti-personnel laser cannon she was using as a rifle.

A few of the predators were still ready to fight for a meal, undeterred by the loss of their leader. Until Vrask stepped forward, opened her jaw as wide as it would go, her fangs glistening, and let out a roar so loud Ahsoka’s montrals were still ringing after it had ended. The pack stopped dead with terror, then gave up on their hunt and retreated, hungry and whimpering.

Even Ahsoka and Barriss were tempted to run after seeing all that. Reflecting back on her time being prey for Trandoshan hunters, Ahsoka got an unsettling feeling that if Vrask had been among those coming after her, she’d have been eaten in less than a day.

The enormous Trandoshan turned around and walked towards the duo, returning her weapon to her back.

“Vornskrs. Nasty creatures to deal with unarmed...Are you two all right?” she asked worriedly while putting one hand on Barriss’s shoulder, the other on Ahsoka’s.

“Yes, we’re fine,” Barriss said, leaning awkwardly away from the unwanted contact with that heavy, clawed hand, still trying to be appreciative and polite despite how uncomfortable she was. “Thank you for the rescue.”

“Good, good. Now, let’s see if I’ve got this correct: Barriss,” said Vrask, stepping back and pointing at the correct girl, then pointing at the other, “and Ahsoka. Is that right? Or is it the other way around?”

“How did you know that?” asked Ahsoka, holding onto some hope that maybe not every single person she and Barriss met could figure out their real identities. “Did Karrde tell you?”

“No, he didn’t,” said Vrask, sounding more than a little annoyed at being kept out of the loop. “I had another source of information. JIRO!” she shouted. After a moment’s pause, she began intently smelling the air, trying to pick up a scent. “Jiro, don’t tell me you’ve already forgotten what will happen if you try to run from me!”
A few seconds later, the Weequay that Ahsoka had seen make his escape from the smuggler base came out from behind a tree, scared out of his mind by Vrask.

“You found him,” Ahsoka said, relieved to have one less problem to solve. She’d found Barriss, avoided the imperials (so far) and now the pirate was accounted for. All things considered, this was going pretty well.

“Keep an eye on him, would you?” asked Vrask, pulling out her communicator. “I need to make a call so we can finish dealing with this fiasco.”

“Who are you going to contact? Karrde?” asked Barriss.

“No. Karrde is, I assume, presently being watched by that inquisitor and what pass for soldiers under the Empire. He’s trusting me to handle the situation, and that is what I’m about to do,” and with that declaration of purpose, Vrask walked off behind a few trees to get a clear signal.

“Where are you going?” asked Ahsoka.

“To call for the help we need to get out of this mess. It won’t take long.”

Leaving Ahsoka and Barriss with the pirate who’d tried to kill and/or expose them a few hours ago.

Now that what he considered the main threat was out of sight, Jiro’s abject terror disappeared along with Vrask, leaving him much more confident than Ahsoka liked, wandering around the area, watching the two girls.

“Stop moving around,” demanded Ahsoka. Instead of backing down, the pirate stepped closer to her.

“Or you’ll do what? I heard you talking with your friend back at the base. Your tricks don’t work around here,” he said, grinning at their supposed powerlessness and waving at an ysalamiri on a nearby tree. “It’s those things right? They’re on every damn branch of this forest. How does it work?”

“We- we don’t know,” Ahsoka admitted.

“That’s not entirely true anymore,” noted Barriss. Something Ahsoka figured she’d have to ask about later.

“Point is, you don’t scare me. You can’t do anyth-” his taunt was cut off when Ahsoka ignited her lightsaber and pointed it at him. She might not have the Force, but she did have a meter of plasma that could cut through almost anything.

Seeing the sudden fear in his eyes, Ahsoka took a long look at herself, holding her weapon on an unarmed man, who was now frozen stiff with fear. Even if he had nearly killed her and Barriss, put them up against the dangers of the planet and possibly the Empire, she couldn't help but find him pitiable.

“How many people did you kill for the greater good? How many times have you acted out of rage?”

He was still a threat. He knew who they were. The man a killer. One of the pirates who'd tried to sell her into slavery, then hunted her and a group of children. Yet she was expected to show him mercy and kindness.

‘Always so righteous, until they become what they fight. Always so enduring, until they forget what they stand for.’
Ahsoka turned off her saber. This wasn’t worth it. They had Jiro now, and they would keep him prisoner until they figured out what to do with him.

Exhausted from, well, everything today, Ahsoka sat down on the most comfortable rock she could see, keeping one eye on the prisoner. Barriss kept standing, her attention glancing between the Wookiee and Ahsoka. A few times, Ahsoka got some feeling of reassurance when Barriss looked at her with approval. Like she actually knew what she was doing and had the right idea.

A couple minutes later, Vrask came back, switching off her comm. Tilting her head, she stopped and listened, then suddenly huddled against one of the trees, the others following her example as another imperial fighter flew over.

Unfazed, she took the lead, Jiro right behind her with Ahsoka and Barriss to watch him. “We need to hurry.”

The trek back through the forest was uneventful, seeming considerably easier as Vrask knew the lay of the land and had picked a much easier route than Ahsoka had. They found the Eclipse was still grounded, and the damage would probably keep Ahsoka and Barriss on the planet for another few days, at least.

Surveying the damage and the environment, Ahsoka saw a pair of imperial speeders nearby, and another, older model she didn’t recognize. The ones Vrask and the troopers she’d mentioned during the hike had come on. There was also a small landspeeder, hidden from the fighters beneath an overhang. No driver in sight.

“Doctor? Where are you?” yelled Vrask. “UR-10F!”

“I’m coming!” came a haughty metallic voice from inside the ship, and a moment later out came a cylindrical, many-limbed medical droid, moving around on four short, makeshift legs affixed to its base. A modification the smugglers must have made to let him get around the terrain, as the FX series didn’t have legs like that. The droid approached the group, tilting its entire body towards Vrask in a kind of nod, then turning to size up Barriss and Ahsoka. “These the two dead pilots you mentioned?” he asked.

“What do you mean, we’re ‘dead’?” Barriss asked curiously.

“You will be by the time I’m done. C’mon, let me show you,” he said, waving a thin mechanical hand and leading them into their ship. “My name’s UR-10F, by the way. You can call me Dr. Arten, if you like. The resident medical professional of Myrkr base.”

“You go by the title of ‘doctor’?” asked Barriss.

“Oh, yeah. I’ve earned it. Though I’d rather be spending time patching up wounds, the situations these smugglers find themselves in means I sometimes have to devote my skills to, well, ‘special projects’. You’ll see,” said Arten.

The medical droid led the group into the cargo hold. Jiro was keeping quiet with Vrask standing right behind him, ready to tear him in half with her bare hands if he tried anything. Barriss was in from of him, following after Ahsoka, who was wondering where-
The bright red photoreceptors of fourteen droidekas sprung to life as Ahsoka entered the darkened cargo hold.

Ah. There they are.

“Hey, guys!” said Ahsoka, waving to her squad, who replied with various electronic beeps of acknowledgment. She still wasn’t entirely sure how to address the destroyer droids. Their programming was sophisticated, but none of them were old enough to have accumulated memories and developed nuanced personalities. It didn’t seem right to talk down to them, either. That little greeting felt like she was coming home to her pets, not her personal force of exceedingly dangerous combat droids, any one of which would pose a serious threat to a seasoned Jedi Knight.

Fumbling around in the darkness, Ahsoka hit the switch to turn on the light, resulting in a disgusted cringe from both her and Barriss.

On a collapsible table in the cargo hold were a pair of cadavers, both human, with two sets of stormtroopers armor shoved into a corner.

Barriss gagged at the sight. “What are you doing with them?”

“Making them look convincing,” replied Arten. “What I’ve got here is one female human- that’ll be our Mirialan- and one male human that I’m really gonna have to rough up to pass as a female Togruta.”

“One of the bodies will be said to have come from the escape pod that crashed into the forest,” said Vrask. “We can say the vornskrs tore it apart to explain excess damage.”

“Hey, there you go, that'll make this much easier!” said Arten, as an arm with a saw blade emerged from his side. “I wasn’t sure I’d have enough time to whip up a realistic set of lekku, but if we’re blaming this on wild animals, I’m taking off his head!”

The second the saw reached the skin of the neck, Barriss closed her eyes, turned away, and headed for whatever was left of the crew quarters to get away from this horrific spectacle. Ahsoka didn’t try to stop her. Even by the standards of someone who’d seen as much death and had as much nerve as her, Ahsoka had to admit this was pretty disgusting.

“You’re altering the troopers’ corpses to pass as us?” asked Ahsoka, trying to keep her eyes on the droid doctor’s head and away from the ‘surgery’.

“Not exactly,” said Vrask. “We don’t want them to be you two specifically, only look like you in the vaguest of terms so the imperials will think you died crashing into the forest, or better yet, don’t believe you, a pair of Jedi, were actually working for us. I’m preparing for the worst case: the inquisitor knows you’re Jedi, and will continue hunting you both until either you’re dead or he has proof you aren’t the ones he’s looking for. And we’re going to give it to him.”

“Whatever modifications you’re making to their bodies can’t fool a complete autopsy,” said Ahsoka.

“They don’t have to,” said Arten, turning his disk-like head to address Ahsoka. “All we need is to make them look close enough to the appropriate species to fool a visual inspection and maybe a basic bioscan. Some skin coloration, swap out the clothes, damage the bodies in a manner consistent with a crash, and we’re good to go. I’m even prepared to put in the extra effort and add appropriate tattoos to the ‘Mirialan’ face. At least, that’s the hope. If the imperials are too thorough, then you’re right, this won’t work. Speaking of which, to make this effective, I’m going to need some of your blood. These two ‘pilots’ died violently, lots of gashes. I’ve also, um, drained them.”
“Yeah, you drained them all right!” shouted Cici, finally rolling in and slamming her massive wheel into Arten. “Right onto my floor! You know how much meatbag juice I’ve had to clean up in the last hour? Ahsoka, this idiot’s lucky I didn’t have our friends blast him when he clanked in here.”

The two droidekas flanking Arten both readied their blasters, tracking Arten’s suddenly nervous movements. “I am keeping things as sanitary as my supplies and the environment allow, astromech!”

“Cici, calm down. Flicker, Droideka #5, stop pointing your guns at Arten,” ordered Ahsoka. The droidekas obeyed immediately, though Cici was more petulant as she went off to see what else she could repair. “Um, how much of our blood do you need?” Ahsoka asked nervously.

“How much are you willing to part with?” asked Arten, brandishing a pair of syringes. “I’ve got to make this look good.”

With nothing else to do except poke at her sore forearm, Ahsoka paced around in the crew quarters, staring at the fractured glass of its tiny window, considering the worst things that could happen now. The inquisitor could recognize the deception, kill everyone in the base, and come for the ship. The droidekas would offer quite a surprise to any attackers. They would easily overpower the thirty or so stormtroopers on the planet.

The starfighters presented more of a problem. The Eclipse’s turret was disabled, and she had nothing else capable of shooting one down.

Then there were the two imperial bikes outside. During the fight, she and Barriss could take them, outrun their attackers, get to the base, and steal the inquisitor’s shuttle. They’d have to abandon the droids, though. She didn’t want to think about leaving them behind, no matter how often she’d heard people say they were just machines, but she couldn’t save everyone.

A model like that shuttle probably had a hyperdrive. If it didn’t, she and Barriss would have to use it to get onto whatever imperial warship was in orbit. A warship she didn’t know the size or compliment of. Okay, if they got onto the warship, they’d steal a hyperdrive-capable vessel...in the thirty seconds it would take to lock down the hangar and trap them. In which case they’d have to fight all who-knows-how-many stormtroopers and crewers to take control of the ship. At least by that point they’d be off-planet, and would be able to use the Force to fight back. That would at least raise their chances of success from ‘zero’ to ‘low’.

“How are you feeling?” asked Barriss. Ahsoka had been so focused pacing back and forth, lost in her thoughts, she’d forgotten about the other sitting on the bunk next to her.

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“About our recent blood loss, the possibility of death?”

“Either.”

"As for my contribution to our decoys, I’ve been through much worse than a little lightheadedness. As for evading the Empire, I’m considering our prospects."

“Vrask and the droid seem to have the situation in hand,” said Barriss. "And their solution to our predicament is better than any I've considered."

“Hm. What about you?” asked Ahsoka. Barriss’s surprising calm was reassuring, but not entirely
convincing given how well Ahsoka knew her. Or, sometimes, how she never seemed to know enough. “When I saw you coming out of those ruins, you looked angry and you were muttering to yourself.”

“Of course you saw that...” grumbled Barriss.

She was about to explain more, when the sounds from Arten’s work disrupted the conversation. “Vrask, could you come over here for a moment? I need a larger set of hands to make sure OH MY-” there was the sound of something wet and squishy landing on the floor. “Too late. Come over here anyway, please. Yes, you get the idea, just stuff it right back in.”

Barriss groaned in disgust. “I’ll explain after this situation is dealt with, I promise...We should probably go help them,” she said, getting off of her bed and investigating the state of the macabre decoys.

“I thought you said they had things in hand?” asked Ahsoka.

“Evidently, something could still slip away from them,” said Barriss, stepping out into the cargo hold, keeping one hand in from of her face to obscure her view of the cadavers. “Do you need, um, assistance?” she asked, hoping the answer was ‘no’ even though she knew how dire the situation was.

“I’m nearly finished,” said Arten, who was doing something to the faux-Togruta which Barriss could not see and never wanted to see. “There! This is as effective a replication of non-human physiology applied to human remains with injuries to simulate blunt force and an animal mauling as I can produce.”

“Only one thread left to take care of, then,” said Vrask, nodding to Arten and walking over to speak to her prisoner face-to-face. “Now, Jiro, we’re about to head back to base, and when we reach it, this is what is going to happen: you will not speak unless spoken to. When asked about what has transpired, you will tell them that there were no Jedi, that the crew of this vessel died, that the troopers were killed by wild animals, and that you have no useful information for the Empire. If you do not do this, you will die,” she said, leaning towards Jiro and baring her teeth. No other threat was necessary. Vrask was too thorough to stop there, as one of Arten’s arms sprang forth to inject Jiro.

“What was that?” Jiro yelled, so focused on Vrask he hadn’t even noticed the clanking of the medical droid coming closer.

“That was insurance,” said Vrask. “If you’re taken somewhere you think I can’t reach you, be aware that I can end your life remotely.”

The complete alibi was formed. Vrask took the bodies and the restrained prisoner, loaded them onto her speeder, and off she went. Ahsoka and Barriss would have to wait at the ship with the doctor, and hope for the best. They weren’t going anywhere.

Back at the smuggler compound, Karrde was observing his people loading the last of the ysalamiri onto the imperial shuttle. The First Brother had taken a break from standing around and looking intimidating to inspect the cargo, a sight Karrde was taking great interest in.

One of the ysalamiri, stuck in the frame provided to give the animals something to cling to, was out...
in the open with the inquisitor standing over it. Extending a hand, but not trying to touch it. Karrde had seen the pose before, a Force-user attempting to visualize a desired motion. The eyeless man was scowling at the creature, as if he was fighting against it. Maybe that’s exactly what he was doing. For its part, the ysalamiri was squirming, a sign of discomfort Karrde had never seen from them.

Well, this was exactly what he needed. Perhaps the creatures’ suppression of the Force wasn’t as absolute as he’d been led to believe. Maybe the inquisitor could read his mind and knew everything.

*Relax, thought Karrde, Don’t give in to that kind of paranoia. Vrask has everything under control. You know she does, that’s why she’s in charge when you’re not around. Remain calm, take things as they come, and we’ll all make it through the day.*

The inquisitor had been looming over him for the past few hours as they both waited for news of the search. News that could decide whether or not Karrde, and everyone in his employ, would be killed.

What was the lesson in all this? Nothing about his plan was flawed, despite the sudden danger. He had a fleet of warships he wasn’t going to use, so he would sell them to people who would fight the Empire with them. Ahsoka, or another willing Jedi if he could find one, would act as a middleman because she of all people had the reputation, political connections, and military experience needed to get the dreadnoughts to willing buyers who could use them effectively.

Despite the threat today had brought, nothing that had happened necessarily made the plan a bad idea. How could he have known the Empire would show up today?

*I could very well get myself and everyone I know killed because of inconvenient timing,* he thought.

In the distance, the whining sound of a speeder bike was growing louder. A *single* speeder bike. It seems Vrask had taken of the escort sent along with her.

The Trandoshan swooped through the edge of the forest and into the base, carrying a restrained and gagged Weequay, and a pair of body bags, strapped to the rear of her bike. She stopped a few meters away from Karrde, the troopers gathered around her.

“Bring me the prisoner,” said the inquisitor, homing in on the most immediate source of information. The troopers didn’t wait for any word from Karrde or Vrask before seizing the pirate and forcing him in from of their commander. He didn’t even bother to ask where his missing troopers were. Why would he? They were nothing to him. “Remove the gag.”

The troopers did so, and the first thing out of the Weequay’s mouth was a stream of Huttese, incomprehensible for the First Brother. Karrde noticed that Vrask was a bit surprised by this as well, so this was Jiro’s own initiative. Speaking to people in a language they weren’t fluent in made it that much more frustrating for the inquisitor, and would make detecting a lie significantly harder. And in the case of the Empire, speaking languages other than Basic made it easy to get yourself dismissed as inferior out of xenophobia.

The inquisitor groaned impatiently, eager for answers, and signaled for a translator. Not a protocol droid, only a datapad with a speaker.

“Now,” the inquisitor, leaning in and smiling eerily at the captive, “I want you to tell me everything about those two young Jedi who were pursuing you.”

Jiro replied, convincingly, that he didn’t know any Jedi. That he hadn’t encountered the people who’d shot him down. Not until after they’d been killed.

The inquisitor became much more tense.
“Why were you running?” he asked, furious at this unexpected answer.

The reply wasn’t what he wanted to hear. That the pirate was a prisoner, trying to escape from Karrde’s group. He had no business with the Empire.

“Inspect the bodies,” commanded the inquisitor.

The coverings were opened to reveal a pair of mutilated corpses. A life of crime had left Karrde with a lot of unpleasant memories, and this was definitely going to be be in the bottom ten. He forced himself to focus on the bodies, and saw that they were not Tano and Offee, or even particularly close lookalikes. The Mirialan was a lighter shade of yellow, and from what he could tell, at least, the dark red ‘Togruta’ was missing its entire head.

Disgusting. Whatever Vrask had planned, she’d gone a bit overboard. No, there was no way she’d pulled that off on her own, she must have called for help on one of their secure channels. Karrde’s eyes instinctively darted to the base as he wondered whether their resident doctor had managed to sneak off.

“The remains check out, sir,” said the trooper holding a medical scanner. “One Togruta and one Mirialan.”

Karrde watched closely as the inquisitor’s brow scrunched up, trying to piece everything together. There was something missing here, some trick, he knew it, but everything around him was saying that the people he’d been hoping to capture weren’t the ones he wanted and had already died in a relatively mundane manner unrelated to his presence.

_Idiot_, thought Karrde, _If you’d given a damn about your troopers’ lives, you could’ve figured it out._

The bodies, the pirate, his own troop’s reading, it all added up. With a pair of corpses and the sole surviving witness right in front of him telling the inquisitor the same thing, he had no leads left to pursue.

Of course he could spend more time investigating, take the bodies to be examined, take the prisoner for a thorough imperial interrogation. Waste more time. For nothing. Really, what would that tell him? What real reason did he have to think this wasn’t really some dispute amongst lowlife criminals?

Karrde braced himself to conceal his relief when the First Brother relented.

“Very well,” said the inquisitor. “We have no more business here. For now.”

“I apologize for the commotion,” said Karrde. “If there’s anyth-”

He stopped talking when the inquisitor whipped out his lightsaber, igniting its red blade and holding it to Karrde’s throat, the surrounding troopers all holding their guns on Vrask and the pirate.

“Do not believe for a second that you have made a fool of me, smuggler,” said the inquisitor. “For the moment, I don’t know the full truth of what has transpired here. But I know you’re behind it.”

As he spoke, the inquisitor slowly moved his blade closer to Karrde’s neck, until the stream of plasma was so close the heat burned the skin. Karrde wanted to move, he was trying to move, but he couldn’t, some power was keeping him still, forcing him to stare into the patches of skin where the inquisitor’s eyes should’ve been.

“Whatever you have done, the Empire will learn of it. And you _will_ pay for it. Later.” With that final
threat, the inquisitor deactivated his saber and released his hold on Karrde, walking back into the shuttle with his stormtroopers following.

Delicately rubbing the burned flesh of his neck, Karrde watched the shuttle ascend past the clouds, considering his options.

Suddenly, he was feeling a lot more willing to lower the price of those warships.

Ahsoka and Barriss watched the imperial shuttle rise up through Myrkr’s clouds, barely more than a speck in the light of the setting sun, finally leaving them in peace. Glad as she was to have gotten through this, it was hardly a victory. The inquisitor still had his ysalamiri, and who knew how many surviving Jedi would be killed or captured with them.

A short while later, Arten had driven them back to the base in his speeder, the journey broken up momentarily by a salvage ship flying over them in the opposite direction, off to retrieve the *Eclipse*.

When they finally got back to the base, they found the most of the base’s staff having retired for the evening. Vrask and Karrde were still out in the courtyard, though seemingly not waiting for them. Karrde was speaking to a still-restrained Jiro, with Ahsoka and Barriss coming into the picture near the end of the discussion as he approached them.

“Glad to see you’re back safe,” said Karrde. “Thanks to Vrask and some surprisingly good acting from our pirate friend, the inquisitor bought the story. You certainly bring excitement wherever you go, don’t you, Tano?”

Regardless of Karrde’s self-interest frustrating Ahsoka, he hadn’t sold them out, and his sending Vrask to rescue her and Barriss probably saved their lives. Ahsoka didn’t object to the banter now that they were in the clear.

“Hey, I didn’t bring anybody. You’re the one who invited the inquisitor.”

“True, but you certainly captured his interest so much that I couldn’t get him to leave.”

”Keep your prisoners contained next time, then I'll accept responsibility,” she said. Instead of another deflection of blame, something about what she’d said made Karrde lose the enjoyment of the moment.

“*Kidding aside,*” said Barriss, “tell us more about that inquisitor. We encountered another once before, and he seemed to be looking for me personally. What do you know about them? Did he say he was hunting the two of us specifically?”

“He didn’t say,” Karrde answered, as interested in finding the answers as Barriss. “I think he did know who you were based on his reaction to your descriptions, though. If you already met one inquisitor, they probably know you’re traveling together. Assuming they’re being smart and sharing intelligence. What did your inquisitor call himself?”

“All he said was he was ‘the inquisitor’. Does that make a difference?” asked Barriss.

“Maybe. Our guest refers to himself as the ‘First Brother’, so he’s probably high up the chain of command, if not the top. If the other one you encountered didn’t mention a title like that, either he
didn’t care to do so, or he’s the top man and really is ‘The Inquisitor’.”

Barriss considered the distinction for a moment.

“I’d be willing to place you second to no one but myself” the Inquisitor had said.

“It’s the latter,” Barriss realized. “He’s leading the inquisitors.”

“What did he look like?” asked Karrde, trying to get as much information as possible.

“A Pau’an. Nearly two meters tall, thin, dressed similar to the First Brother, though they don’t seem to have a uniform.”

“I haven’t encountered anyone like that, but I’ll tell my people to keep an eye out. Maybe I can gather more information about him,” said Karrde, who then tilted his head up in response to the roaring sound of the salvage ship drifting over the trees at the base’s perimeter and gently lowering the Eclipse to the ground as several technicians surrounded it, inspecting the damage. “We don’t have any spare ships for you to take, unfortunately, so you’ll be spending the night here while we get yours repaired.”

“And what do I owe you for the repairs?” asked Ahsoka. “We don’t have much to pay you with.”

Barriss had raised a hand for Ahsoka not to bother bartering, running towards their ship. When she returned, Barriss handed several of the kyber crystals she’d recovered from Dantooine over the Karrde. More than enough to pay for the labor and parts for the repairs. Realizing what he’d just been given after a moment’s inspection, Karrde handled the crystals for a moment.

“There’s no way you’d hand over all your kyber crystals over this,” he said, staring at the invaluable stones. “You’ve got more, don’t you? A lot more.”

Barriss didn’t know how to respond to that as she suddenly realized she’d handed incredible valuable items over to a career criminal and expected him not to ask questions. To here even greater surprise, Karrde tossed two of them back at Barriss, who awkwardly managed to catch one, while Ahsoka deftly caught the one Barriss would’ve missed.

“This’ll cover it. I do my best to deal fairly with my associates. Which just leaves one last piece of business for today,” said Karrde, walking back to speak directly to Jiro. “Did you tell anyone anything else you know? Did you get a transmission out somehow, or meet an imperial scout?”

“No, I promise, I didn’t tell anyone anything. Your friend over there caught me before I could,” he said, nodding over to Vrask. "I did what you wanted, I helped you get rid of the Empire. Now will you let me go?"

Karrde sighed, seemingly not at all satisfied by the news, his expression unchanged from the stern contemplation it had been since Ahsoka had spotted him.

“I see. Thank you for being honest.” And with that, Karrde drew his blaster and put several holes in Jiro’s chest, watching dispassionately as the pirate’s corpse slumped to the ground.

“Why did you do that?!” shouted Ahsoka. As much as she disliked the Ohnaka Gang, killing an unarmed prisoner like that, a cooperative one, was appalling.

“He didn’t leave me many options,” Karrde said calmly as he holstered his weapon.

“His testimony saved your life!” yelled Barriss as she knelt down examine to the body, hoping for
some signs of life. There weren’t any.

“Yes, and I’m sure he said those lies because he wanted to spare all of us the Empire’s wrath, right? Not because he thought it could save his own life?” Karrde shot back. “None of this would’ve happened if it weren’t for him. Two of my technicians, Jasn and Kosh, are dead because of him. You and Ahsoka almost died. He nearly got all of us killed, and if I’d let him go, he would’ve run back to the Empire to sell us out.”

“You could’ve kept him as a prisoner,” said Barriss, quickly realizing the unpleasant reality of the situation, while Karrde wasn't pulling any punches.

“That’s exactly what I was thinking a couple days ago, trying to come up with a use for him, or a way I could let him go without him becoming a threat to my operations. That was before he knew any of the really important stuff. If I hadn’t been a merciful idiot and killed him sooner, it would’ve saved all of us a great deal of trouble and saved four other people their lives,” Karrde said pointedly, looking away from Barriss to cast a furious glare at the smoking corpse, then saying to Vrask, “Dispose of it.”

Vrask stepped between them and the exiting Karrde, sensing how uncomfortable the situation was, and acting with the awkwardness of someone without any solution to it: getting Ahsoka and Barriss out of the area and away from the dead body.

“Um...Allow me to show you your quarters.”
The guest quarters Ahsoka and Barriss were provided were surprisingly hospitable. Actually, they were the exact same layout as the crew quarters on the *Eclipse*, a pair of beds on opposite sides of the room.

Choosing the bed to the left of the door, the same one she slept in on the ship, Barriss quickly got her boots, socks, and jacket off, and collapsed face-down into the bed while Ahsoka was still checking out the room.

“Um, are you sure you don’t want to wash up a bit?” asked Ahsoka, conscious of how filthy they both were after a long day of physical exertion in the wild, only to hear that Barriss was already snoring.

Considering all the events of the day, the dogfight, the trek through the forest, the stress of waiting to find out if the Empire had been led away...Barriss had the right idea, hygiene be damned, and Ahsoka got to sleep easily as well.

The metal corridor Barriss was walking through slowly came into focus, and she soon recognized it was leading her to the bridge of a star destroyer. A moment of concentration showed her that she wasn’t in control of her body, even though she could hear her own footsteps as she moved through the ship. Where normally there would be droids scurrying about or personnel moving to and from their shifts, there was no one else on the deserted vessel.

The door to the bridge opened, revealing there were no crewers operating any of the controls, either. Out the window she could see the skyline of Coruscant, gleaming orange against the sunset.

She wasn’t alone.

In front of the window, looking out, was a towering black figure, features indistinct due to the light of the city leaving it barely more than an imposing silhouette. She stepped closer and closer to it, even though her mind was fighting against her movements, terrified instinctively and wanting to run as far away from it as possible. Eventually she reached its side and knelt down, still unable to get a good look as she lowered her head in fealty, only able to see the edge of a cape.

Raising her right hand, her gaze tilted up slightly, and she could see her hand and arm were covered in a black uniform, imperial in design. She was holding up a lightsaber, its unique casing and layout identifying it as Ahsoka’s.

The saber was pulled from her hand with the Force, eerily drifting towards the darkness until it was close enough for an enormous, black-gloved hand to reach out from behind its cape and grip the weapon.

Studying the saber, turning it over in-hand, feeling its heft, the figure suddenly paused, and Barriss felt even more terrified as she saw the grip tightening. Tightening until the casing began to yield and
crack. Other cracks began forming in the bridge’s window, and she could hear the metal panels of the floor warping and grinding against each other, intense rage erupting out through the Force.

Barriss felt a force pressing down on her neck, her vision becoming indistinct until she collapsed onto the floor. The last thing she could feel was the pain of her throat being crushed.

Barriss woke from a dead sleep gasping for air, followed by many quick breaths as she sat up and recalled she was safe. She was in a base on a remote planet, far from Coruscant. Far from... whatever that was.

Feeling her neck, she found it was still sore to touch.

Very slowly, careful not to disturbed Ahsoka, Barriss got out of bed, manually opening the mechanized sliding door. She made it out unnoticed, only daring to disrupt the silence and put on her boots and jacket when she was halfway down the hall.

Wandering around, she soon found a makeshift washroom. The original builders of this structure obviously hadn’t meant it to be such, but the smugglers had rigged up some plumbing and installed a toilet, sink, and mirror.

Splashing some water on her face to wake herself up, Barriss felt her neck again. Though she couldn’t see any visible bruising, it still hurt. A simple dream couldn’t do that. It had to be the Force.

Remembering exactly where she was, Barriss extended a hand in front of herself, trying to shake the mirror as a test. Nothing happened. She couldn’t reach the Force, but the Force was certainly reaching her. The ysalamiri were insignificant compared to that kind of power.

What are you trying to tell me? she wondered, focusing on what she could still remember of the dream. Herself, the saber, the darkness.

With no answers coming to her fatigued mind and a splitting headache emerging in their place, Barriss dried off her hands and left. Exhausted as she was, unsatisfying as those two hours of sleep had been, she didn’t want to go back to her bed and instead chose to walk around the grounds.

Sitting around on the balcony overlooking the courtyard, Talon Karrde mulled over the events of the day, coming back again and again to Offee shouting at him over killing the pirate.

Wracking his brain, Karrde couldn’t come up with any better resolution. He wasn’t running a prison here, and there was nowhere he could’ve left the guy where he wouldn’t be able to leak secrets to the Empire. He wasn’t even entirely sure he would’ve left Jiro alive, considering how close he’d come to killing all of Karrde’s people. How he’d already killed two. Bastard. Not that it mattered now, but he still kept thinking of Jiro’s body falling to the ground.

Murderer.
It hadn’t surprised him that the Jedi would object. Arguably, being unwilling to do things like that was part of why there were so few Jedi left.

Karrde looked across the courtyard at his guests’ damaged freighter. Quite a good ship. The Eclipse had a nice ring to it, too, even if it meant he couldn't give them a ship he'd named himself. Though considering the state it was in, and the kind of attention those two would attract, they'd probably need a replacement eventually. After a day like today, Karrde kicked back, relaxed, and spent several minutes thinking about lame puns to use as ship names like the budding diabolical crime lord he was.

‘Good Tano’?

*Definitely not, that sounds like something you say to a pet.*

‘Need Tano Basis’?

*Ooh, that'd work. It sounds clandestine, implies her importance- No, what am I doing, I can't use her real name. Though if I can't come up with something better from their aliases, I'd be half tempted to risk it for that one.*

‘Ashes to Ashla’?

*That's not the name of a smuggling vessel, that's an inappropriate joke I'd say at her funeral.*

‘On a Wing Jana Prayer’?

...*I'll put that one under 'maybe'.*

Those two Jedi were...certainly something. Much of what he’d learned about Tano and Offee wasn’t restricted information. Or at least, it hadn’t been restricted before the rise of the Empire. A lot of news reports on the actions of specific Jedi had been published to keep the public in favor of the war effort, not that it had worked in the last days of the war.

Once the Empire had taken control, all that information had suddenly become much rarer, and much more valuable. Which worked perfectly well for Karrde since he’d been keeping tabs on the Jedi, mainly due to their historically antagonistic treatment of criminals than any resentment on his part.

Tano and Offee had been comrades in arms during the war, serving in operations on Geonosis and Umbara. Then, Offee had turned on the Jedi and her friend. The whole sordid tale had been heavily publicized, and some of the connections he’d uncovered since pointed to the Republic military itself as being partly responsible for the story’s widespread publication.

*How far gone did you have to be to consider framing your best friend for murder you best option?* wondered Karrde, as he tried to judge the former Jedi from his own interactions with them.

Offee had seemed...‘fine’. Quiet. That was as positive a word as he could put on her demeanor. She had barely said anything to him, but what she did say certainly left an impact.

Her presence was a bit of a disruption to his plan for Tano to work as a go-between for him and potential buyers for the warships. Tano was a war hero, someone people with power and a grudge against the Empire would trust over a lowly smuggler like himself. Meanwhile Offee was a known dissident, mass-murderer, and traitor convicted of the crime Tano had been exonerated of. Hopefully her being with Tano would reduce hostility towards her. Karrde certainly didn’t care what she’d done.

Then there was the matter of the ysalamiri, and what the Empire was using them for. Karrde looked
over at a branch with some of his 'pets' clinging to them. For mere animals to pose such a threat to people as powerful as the Jedi was something he'd never imagined possible.

He should be charging the Empire double what he was presently.

Completely cutting off supply to the Empire wasn't an option, he needed something to stay in their good graces, and if he refused they'd bomb his base off the surface of Myrkr and clumsily harvest the animals themselves. His guests wouldn't like it, even he didn't like it, but he needed to keep the Inquisitors supplied with new creatures.

Tano would probably be furious over that. Probably not enough to completely refuse further work with him, but the chance wasn't negligible. He needed a plan to turn the deal with the Empire into something that could benefit them both.

A few minutes of planning later, he had one.

Drifting aimlessly around the base trying to clear her head, Barriss eventually wound up in what appeared to be a lounge for the resident smugglers. The chairs and couches were all quite comfortable, and there was a makeshift bar with various questionably legal beverages stored. One side led out to a second-floor balcony, the perfect spot to view the stars from.

Growing up in the Jedi Temples on Coruscant, Barriss was used to the only light at night being the colorful glow of the countless speeders, starships, advertisements, and skyscrapers that surrounded the temple in the urban sprawl. The dazzling artificial lights offered their own kind of beauty, but she savored the view of thousands upon thousands of stars she could see of the Mid-Rim.

“Beautiful, aren’t they?” said Karrde’s voice. “Smuggling requires bases on remote worlds with few cities or luxuries, but you’d be surprised how much happier you are after a few nights without light pollution.”

"It's rather impolite to sneak up on people that," said Barriss, turning her attention back to the night sky.

"I was here before you were, actually," replied Karrde, sitting comfortably on the edge of the balcony, scrolling through a datapad, as Barriss stood between him and the only access point.

The realization of how dulled her senses were with the ysalamiri around unsettled Barriss. Ordinarily, she should've been aware of anyone near her. Instead, on this planet she was oblivious to her surroundings.

“Are the quarters we provided not comfortable?” Karrde asked. “Or was Tano snoring?”

“Excuse me?”

“Why can’t you sleep, Offee?” he asked, finally looking up from his pad.

“Well, why can’t you?” she replied.

“Because my life was in grave danger today, as were all the lives I’m responsible for. Also, I killed a guy.” Barriss was startled by Karrde’s bluntness on the subject. How easy it was to talk about taking
a life.

“Does it ever get easier?” asked Barriss.

“You know it does,” Karrde said, attention returning to his pad.

Barriss nodded. “That’s what worries me.”

Karrde nodded back. The two of them kept apart for several minutes, focusing on their own thoughts, until Karrde stood up and approached Barriss.

"Here. In a galaxy like this, especially in our profession, you should have a good firearm on you,” said Karrde, unholstering the blaster on his belt and handing over it to Barriss.

"I don't like killing if I can help it, and I don't use blasters," she said, not so much as reaching for the weapon. Karrde stared at her for a moment, as if she'd said something phenomenally stupid, still holding out the blaster.

"If you're against lethal force, you do realize a blaster set to stun would be much more useful to you than an energy sword perfectly sized to cut people apart, right?"

After a tense second of the two staring at each other in silence, Barriss reluctantly reached out and took the blaster pistol, getting a solid grip and taking aim, quickly realizing she barely knew how to hold it correctly.

"I assume you have some kind of shooting range in this base?"

“Clutch the pistol higher along the back of the grip. Stop, no, keep your finger off the trigger until you’re ready to fire. Get a firmer stance, blasters have more kickback than most people think, even if it’s just a pistol. Line up the sight with the target- okay, aim and fire,” said Karrde, observing Offee’s technique as she took aim at a two-square meter sheet of durasteel with several concentric rings painted on it, marred by dozens of scorch marks. The shooting range was a simple setup in the lower level of the main building, various bits of hardware and random supplies strewn about, like any other basement.

Obeying the instructions, Offee lined up the shot- and barely landed it within the outermost ring.

"My, that's rather em-Barriss-ing,” Karrde said, earning an annoyed looked from Barriss.

*Must've heard that one before,* he thought.

Many shots later, Offee had only moved into the fourth ring.

“How do people do this so easily?” she asked. “If your shot’s off by a fraction of a degree, you could completely miss your target.”

"You underestimate non-Force users,” said Karrde, studying her grip until a question struck him.

"Tell me, what exactly do the Jedi think of people who can't 'feel' the Force, or however you put it? The Jedi are what, on in ten billion out of the galactic population? Less? What do they teach you about the lesser people outside the temple?"
"In a way, you're seen as fortunate," said Offee. Karrde detected a touch of envy in her voice. Or perhaps regret? She was difficult to read, even for him. "You're not vulnerable to the dark side's influence. You're more free. Use of the Force demands extreme control and training. It also provides opportunities to make a difference in the galaxy we otherwise wouldn't be able to. It's a responsibility."

"You don't hold yourselves as superior?"

"We don't- we are not supposed to, and are taught so from an early age."

On the other side of the discussion, every single thing out of Offee’s mouth was layered with so many subtle implications about her past and motivations that it was difficult for Karrde to work through it all before she spoke next.

She cut herself off before saying they don't hold themselves superior before clarifying that they aren't supposed to meaning they do hold themselves superior in spite of some aspect of their belief structure. Was that a result of a contradiction in their teachings and making a choice of what route to follow based on the situation, or completely ignoring some aspect of their code? How did it manifest? Is that self-serving attitude part of the reason for her betrayal? She doesn't consider herself superior to anyone, obviously, but what is her self-image made of?

On and on it went. It'd been a while since he'd had this much fun. Sipping on some Corellian brandy, Karrde was having an unexpectedly good night.

"Isn't it rather dangerous to combine alcohol and firearms?" asked Offee.

"Only if those two things are in the same set of hands," Karrde answered. Then he immediately tried handing the bottle over to her. "Want some?"

"No," she said, the refusal punctuated with another shot. Outer ring again.

"You need to take more time to aim. You're not pulling off any fancy tricks your first time shooting a target. Isn’t ‘patience’ a big deal with Jedi?"

"Patience is necessary to connect with to Force, to allow it to guide us. This would be so much easier with it," she said, frustrated by the lack of progress.

"Too bad," said Karrde. "You still rely on that stuff too much."

"Using the Force to assist me was an integral part of my training. It has been ever since I was a child. How well would you manage without sight?"

"Without sight? I don’t know how well I’d manage, but I know other people don’t depend on it," Karrde said, leaning back and recalling a tale. "Five years ago, before the start of the Clone Wars, I was on Jedha. Now, I've actually studied the Jedi quite a bit, mainly to figure out you pull off those impossible feats of yours. One thing I'd learned was how you can sense intent. To know when someone is hostile, when they don't belong. So in addition to studying the layout of the temple there, the routines the people followed, I also practiced keeping myself disciplined. And when I snuck in to steal a bunch of valuable kyber crystals, no one noticed. Because I was 'camouflaged', if you will. I wasn’t afraid, or aggressive, or impatient. Because I understood their security, I could get around it."

"You were able to steal kyber crystals?" asked Offee, incredulous. "From an occupied Jedi temple?"

"No, I couldn't. I oh-so-calmly made my way to the exit, and no one stopped me. Then I was out, walking through the streets...and got smacked in the face with a stick. I thought my attacker was a
Jedi, so I pulled out a blaster, for all the good I knew would do against one of you people, and it got knocked out of my hand before I could get a shot off. At this point, as I was still on the ground, desperately scrambling away and trying to ignore the pain in my hand, and I noticed a curious absence of lightsabers. I looked up at the guard, and saw the color of his eyes—pale blue all over. He was blind.

“What did you do?”

“I threw the bag of crystals at him, which he then caught one-handed, got up, and ran,” he said. ”That guy wasn’t a Jedi. He stopped me without the Force. Without eyes. If he can do that, you can learn to shoot worth a damn without being guided by the universe.”

With some renewed determination. Barriss took several more shots at the target until exhausting her ammunition, then got a lesson in how to reload the pistol before starting again.

“Do you have your lightsaber on you?” asked Karrde, much to Offee’s surprise.

“I do,” answered Offee as she tried to line up her next shot.

“If you don’t mind, may I see it? Since we’re trying out each other’s weapons, and all.”

Offee pondered that for a moment. Lightsabers were unbelievably dangerous in unskilled hands, but decided it wouldn’t be a problem so long as she was observing. Karrde didn’t seem stupid enough to toy around with a weapon like that. Even if he was slightly inebriated.

With the saber in hand, Karrde activated it. What came out was not a clean, elegant pillar of energy, but a crackling, unstable mass of orange plasma trapped inside the containment field. The noise it made, instead of the steady, calm hum lightsabers were known for, sounded more like a growling animal.

“Uhhhhh, is it supposed to be doing that?” asked Karrde, nervously holding the weapon as far away from himself as possible. “It doesn’t seem very—ow ow OW!” he shouted, switching the saber off and dropping it onto a crate, frantically waving his hand to dispel the excess heat that had very nearly burned most of his palm. “Okay, I’m no expert on lightsabers, but what the hell is wrong with that thing?”

“It—uh, I can’t get it to function properly,” said Barriss, disappointedly taking the saber back.

“It felt like it was, I don’t know, angry that I was holding it,” said Karrde. “Do lightsabers...have feelings?” He felt stupid asking the question, but when it came to Jedi business, nothing was off the table.

“Sabers are, to a degree, reflections of their owner’s intentions,” Offee explained.

“Well, okay, allow me to formally apologize for that lame pun on your name and shooting skills. Didn’t think you’d take it so personally,” said Karrde, still clutching his hand.

“It’s not like that, I—,” Offee stammered, cradling her saber. “I’m sure I can get it to work properly—”

“NO, no thank you, I’ve gotten enough lightsaber training for today,” said Karrde, sitting back down and taking another sip of his drink.

Offee continued firing at the target, working her way into the third ring now that she was finally taking more time to aim.
"Do you really think the Empire can be overthrown?" asked Offée. She was obviously looking for reassurance anywhere she could get it. Why she’d want it from him was unclear. Maybe she wanted a perspective from outside her own little bubble. Good policy.

“I do,” said Karrde. “We simply need to use the available information correctly.”

"Information?" said Barriss, in between a pair of blasts. Second ring those times. “You think that’s all it will take?”

“Not all it will take, no, but information matters more than anything. Every incorrect belief your opponent holds is a weakness you can exploit. Every lie you tell them can be more destructive than any warhead. The wrong thought in the right head can cost a battle. Today, because of the lies that were told to the inquisitor, we all survived. Two Jedi made it through. Supplies will eventually be received by enemies of the Empire. So, yeah, information matters, far more than raw power. More than whatever power the Empire can produce,” he finished.

That kind of confidence was hard to argue with. What happened today would have repercussions, if they took advantage of the opportunities. Events could cascade against the Emperor’s plans.

"That reminds me of a legend I’ve heard,” said Offée. “About an ancient scientist that claimed he could turn his world with a place to stand and a sturdy fulcrum. A small effort applied at the right place could have tremendous impact."

“Now you’re getting it,” Karrde said. “Use your non-dominant hand to steady your aim. Exhale while you’re firing. Keep at it, these little skills could wind up saving your life, and really disrupting the Empire’s plans. Every time you live when they want you to die, that’s a victory.”

Offée immediately put the tips to use, taking aim, lining the shot up perfectly.

In the instant she began to pull the trigger, Karrde chose to say "You realize she's in love with you, right?"

The shot landed a meter to the left of the target, taking out the support of a shelf holding dozens of targets and sending the bits of scrap and bottles loudly tumbling to the ground. Neither of them took any notice of the clatter, then Barriss slowly turned towards Karrde.

"At least, that's the way it looks," Karrde continued. It was the reaction he'd expected. "Even after you committed treason and mass murder, betrayed her, and completely dragged her through the mud, she swooped in to rescue you from the bad guys. Then she offered you the chance to come with her to save the galaxy from tyranny, and will only do it with you. If she doesn't love you right now, she definitely did at some point."

Offée took one last look at the target, then handed the blaster pistol back to its owner, ready to leave and get back to bed.

"Thank you for the lesson," she said.

"Any time," he said, holstering the blaster.

"There's one more thing I feel the need to ask," she said. "How much do you charge for a single ysalamiri?"

Chapter End Notes
In which Talon Karrde is me, trying to figure out what makes Barriss Offee tick based on the ten episodes of the entire series she appears in, only six of which she actually has any lines.

This arc is a bit of a look into one of my earlier ideas for the story, where I'd considered including Karrde as the tritagonist. He would've acted as the Han Solo to Ahsoka's Leia and Barriss's Luke, ignoring the trios' respective romantic entanglements, acting as a scoundrel getting drawn into the other characters' rebellion and metaphysical shenanigans. He's confrontational with Ahsoka at first until they get more chances to see each other's behavior, gets along well with Barriss despite misgivings about the Force, and ultimately proves himself a loyal friend despite being a career criminal.

Instead I decided to focus on Barriss's arc, which of course heavily involves Ahsoka and takes up plenty of space on its own. Though looking back I can see where Karrde could've made some good additions in the early chapters by giving Ahsoka someone to work off of when figuring out how to deal with Barriss's imprisonment, the break-out, and generally acting as an observer to the awkwardness of the two Jedi.

Also, all the puns are totally in-character for him. The guy loves puns. His main ship is named the "Wild Karrde". All the names of his smuggling ships are puns on the names of the people working for him.

Punspunspunspunspunspunspunspunspunspunspunspunspunspunspunspunspunspuns.

And yes, droppin' the F-bomb this chapter. I'd originally had ideas about this when I'd initially started writing this story, back before it was revealed there were more Fulcrum agents, but tell me, does this look like Ahsoka to you? Nice hood you've got there, mysterious rebel agent we've definitely never seen before.

On to the more interesting stuff with the saber. I'd already made the fubar saber a representation of Barriss, but after watching Sabine struggle with the darksaber, I decided to really kick it up a notch with this chapter. Barriss embodies all the contradictions of the Jedi Order, the saber is literally cobbled together from antiquated parts. She's feeling broken and scared, it stops functioning. She gets lost in the darkness, it won't provide light. She has issues with physical contact and of being controlled as by the Jedi, don't even think about using it as your own weapon.
On their way back to Karrde’s office, if you could call an open-air room in ancient ruins overgrown with trees an office, Ahsoka and Barriss were ready to finish their business from yesterday without an interruption this time. Figure out what Karrde would sell the dreadnoughts for, how to deliver them to buyers, how to prevent the Empire from tracing the ships back to them when increasingly large fleets of old warships began popping out of nowhere to obliterate imperial bases and convoys. Simple.

They were both quiet as they walked through the stone hallways. Ahsoka had noticed Barriss was even more sluggish than usual, with bags under her eyes and a general lack of attention to what was around her. Probably more bad dreams she’d need to talk to her about. After negotiating with Karrde. And after talking through whatever happened in the other ruins that Barriss promised she’d tell Ahsoka about yesterday. And whatever Barriss had learned about the ysalamiri, because that weird comment back in the forest obviously meant something important.

They’d been on this messed up planet for less than one rotation.

Nearing the door, Ahsoka heard voices and stopped, Barriss following her example, listening to a conversation Karrde and Vrask were having.

“Your little project is going to get out of hand. If Car’das finds out about this, the Empire will be the least of our problems,” said Vrask.

“Don’t worry about Car’das, I have the situation under control. On the imperial front, too. Yesterday’s incident was unexpected, but we got through it. Trust me.”

“And the Empire will no doubt be keeping a closer eye on us as a result. Don’t let your greed distract you from the danger you’re getting into, Karrde.”

Vrask came out the door, noticing Ahsoka and Barriss, only acknowledging them with a nod before walking off while they entered. Karrde was as personable as ever as he waved them to the same table they’d been at yesterday, eager to get down to business.

“Comfortable?” he asked, sitting leisurely in the chair opposite Ahsoka.

“Sure,” she replied, ready to dispense with the pleasantries. “Since we got interrupted last time, if I remember correctly, you have a few hundred dreadnought-class warships you want me to sell to wealthy clients who would oppose the Empire. Clients you want me to find because I know people who could use them effectively, but those people wouldn’t be caught dead making deals with a fringe smuggler like yourself. Is that right?”

“Those are the basics of it, yes. There are still a few things we need to discuss: the security of the operation, for one,” Karrde said. “As far as the connection between you and me goes, don’t tell anyone of my role. Don’t mention me, not even to confirmed buyers. Every bit of information you give out helps to form a trail back to Myrkr, and I’m trusting you to understand how royally screwed we’d all be if the Empire learned of what we’re talking about.”

“That’s an understatement,” Ahsoka said as she imagined a Star Destroyer bombarding this little base into a crater with nothing but a few turbolaser shots. “No one in the Empire would think anything of wiping out a bunch of scoundrels.”

The words had come out a lot more judgmental than Ahsoka had intended, not that they didn’t reflect
her feelings at the moment.

“You really can’t stand me, can you?” said Karrde.

“I’ve dealt with my share of criminals and lowlifes before,” Ahsoka answered. “Your ‘cultured businessman’ shit isn’t exactly painting you as trustworthy.”

That didn’t go over well. Throughout the previous conversations with Karrde, he’d always been fairly genial, trying to get along with her and Barriss in a way that struck Ahsoka as disingenuous. The only time that’d broken down was when he’d asserted his reasons for killing Jiro after Barriss confronted him over it. That same combativeness was on display now, and Ahsoka actually preferred the honesty it implied.

“You’re far too ingrained in the mindset of someone who is operating according to a set structure,” Karrde said, glaring at Ahsoka. “Who expects everyone to be working towards the same goal, as in your order. Or an army. I’m not your subordinate or fellow soldier fighting for the cause. I’m not a noble Jedi Knight standing against the darkness. I’m not your friend. I’ve got my own goals, and right now, they align with yours. To weaken the Empire. To survive. Believe it or not, I’d love for our goals to keep lining up for as long as possible. And we can help each other a great deal. Do you want that, or not? If you find the idea of working with me so unpleasant, by all means, go. I can find other options. If not, cut the moralistic crap.”

Ahsoka glared right back at Karrde, about to snap back that she wasn’t going to wait and see what happened when their goals stopped aligning, until some tapping on the table drew her attention away from the smuggler.

“If you two are quite finished,” said Barriss, “weren’t you planning on negotiating a deal that could lead to the destruction of hundreds of vessels in the imperial fleet, defending worlds, and saving billions of lives while crippling the Empire’s advance across the galaxy? Or would you prefer to continue bickering over personal differences?”

Ahsoka could hardly argue with her sense of priorities. Even though it was really a toss-up between the two choices. She had plenty of bickering left in her.

There wasn’t any army for her to lead. No organization to stand with, or at least not one she could believe in.

Work with the damn smugglers, Ahsoka thought to herself.

“You said you had two-hundred dreadnoughts, right?” asked Ahsoka. “What do you want for them?”

“I won’t sell for anything less than ten million credits each. Considering the market price on a ship of that power is over thirty million, I expect whoever you find will jump at the offer. Especially with the added selling point that these ships require less than three thousand crewers each, rather than the typical sixteen thousand for that class. They’re a bit underpriced on account of them being unmaintained for years, though no one will complain given the kind of bargain they are,” Karrde said, to Ahsoka’s confusion and eventual surprise. Dreadnoughts couldn’t be crewed with so few people, not without sophisticated computer networks monitoring the ships systems. The technology of those ships simply couldn’t remain operational without them. Unless that’s exactly what the case was.

“I can’t believe it,” said Ahsoka, groaning at the simultaneous realization of what the ships were, and the fact that the realization wasn’t even in the top five weirdest things that had happened since her
arrival on this planet. “You found the Katana Fleet, didn’t you? How?”

“Like I said yesterday: pure luck,” Karrde said, pleased to finally reveal the magnitude of the find. “And I’m going to get everything I can out of that bit of luck.”

Two hundred of the most advanced pre-Clone War battleships, lost in the interstellar void due to sabotage via a bioweapon infecting the crew. The culprits, who presumably intended to steal the fleet for themselves, were never identified, but they didn’t get their prize. By some chance, probably a dying, delirious crewer working the controls the fleet was launched into hyperspace, sending all of them, united by their computer systems, into the expanse of interstellar space. That kind of disaster wouldn’t have been possible for a fleet of ordinary ships, but the developments in inter-ship communications the Katana Fleet was meant to showcase allowed it operate as a single entity, more coordinated and effective, and reducing the crew needed in each ship. Another selling point for getting them to small cells fighting the Empire.

They were practically legend these days, less than a generation later. The chances of ever finding them were astronomical, and that was assuming they hadn’t simply wound up inside a star. Every spacer traveling the galaxy would kill to find them, knowing what they were worth both in equipment and material. Just as Karrde had.

And this fleet was currently the largest source of potential anti-imperial war materiel in the entire galaxy.

Ten million credits each, minimum. If those ships were spread throughout the galaxy to varying rebellions, it would put two billion credits in Karrde’s pocket. No wonder he was so dead set on getting them sold, enough so he’d risk the Empire bearing down on him.

“I can’t believe you’re charging that much for equipment you stumbled across at random. If you want me to find buyers and negotiate, why wouldn’t I give them away for the lowest price?” asked Ahsoka. “You must know how much I’d want those ships in the fight, and for the people willing to use them to save their credits.”

“Well, for starters, your first offer must be higher because that’s a basic rule of haggling. You can’t start with the minimum!” said Karrde, though Ahsoka could tell he was building to something. “You’ll also sell them for more in order to earn credit with my organization.”

“Credit to do what?”

“To track down whatever’s left of the Jedi.”

Ahsoka froze, studying Karrde intently. Unlikely as it was that he knew more than her, Karrde didn’t strike her as the kind of person to give empty promises.

“We’re listening,” said Barriss. Ahsoka threw her a surprised look, but the other girl was perfectly willing to hear Karrde out.

“I don’t believe for a second that you two were the only Jedi to escape the purge,” Karrde began.

“First off, you need to get it into your head that we’re not Jedi anymore,” said Ahsoka.

“Semantics. As far as the Empire is concerned, you are. As far as the desperate citizens of the oppressed galaxy who need heroes are concerned, you are,” said Karrde. Frustrated as Ahsoka was by the association, Karrde was right, her resignation and Barriss’s expulsion didn’t really matter to anyone else. At least, no one who was left alive. “As I was saying, the Empire undoubtedly has records of which Jedi are active, captured, missing, or dead. The more credits you bring in from the
dreadnoughts, the more credits will be funneled towards finding that information.”

“How many credits?” asked Ahsoka.

“After subtracting a five million credit base cost, ten percent. The more money you sell them for, the more you’ll get back.”

“Make it twenty percent,” she said confidently, expecting a round of bartering.

“Agreed,” Karrde said quickly, his expression unchanged save for a brief grin that told Ahsoka that was still a pretty good deal for him. “If you’re at all worried about that money going to waste or not producing results, I have a second use for those funds: tracking the ysalamiri.”

“You’re still going to harvest them for the Empire? Even knowing what they’ll be used for?” Ahsoka said.

“I am. One way or another, the inquisitors will be getting their pets. I’m choosing the scenario where my companions and I all remain alive,” Karrde said. “This can benefit you too. I know when the Empire comes for supplies. I have plenty of time to acquire the best tracking equipment possible to tag the ships that come and go, maybe even get undetectable tracers into the ysalamiri themselves. Definitely something that can operate within a solar system, give you some warning of where they are. Tell you where prisons made to hold Jedi have been built.”

“And you’ll only do this in exchange for tens of millions of credits,” Ahsoka said, pointing out the exorbitant price tag of this information.

Karrde would have none of it.

“Yes,” he said flatly. “You want me to put the lives of everyone in this base on the line aiding the top enemies of the Empire. To undermine the most powerful military force in galactic history. Just yesterday your very presence nearly got us all killed. You want to put our skills to work finding more of your comrades? You’re going to have to make it worth our while.”

All things considered, this... was an incredible opportunity. Put capital ships in the hands of people who’d fight the Empire, people selected at Ahsoka’s discretion, for prices far below what would ordinarily be possible. And then there was the chance of finding living Jedi.

Karrde was an untrustworthy criminal as far as Ahsoka was concerned, but he knew how to put together an offer.

“Deal.”
“We were both having trouble sleeping last night, and I came across him while wandering the base. We had a civil discussion about the Jedi, ways to oppose the Empire, that sort of thing.”

“Just chatting away about overthrowing the order of galactic civilization. Typical late-night topics of conversation,” Ahsoka joked.

The two of them walked out to inspect the progress in repairing the Eclipse. The smuggler technicians worked quick, Ahsoka had to give them that. The damaged portions of the hull had almost all been replaced, and with the canopy replaced they could get spaceborn again without leaking air.

Stepping inside, Ahsoka saw the internal components weren’t in nearly as good condition. Replacing hull plates and transparisteel was easy, replacing damaged hydraulics, circuitry, and control panels was going to keep them here until tomorrow. Cici was rolling around barking orders at the techs, and despite them coming from a simple astromech, none of the smugglers contradicted her on account of the droidekas clanking around.

They shouldn’t expect anything less, really. They could’ve bought a new ship for what they’d paid for this service.

One bit of activity in the starboard side of the cargo hold caught Ahsoka’s attention, as a Duro was setting up an odd piece of equipment she didn’t recognize, with a tan-furred animal she did.

“What’s going on here?” asked Ahsoka.

“One ysalamiri, as requested, plus the nutrient frame to keep the little critter alive,” said the Duro, rudely ignoring Ahsoka and handing a data card past her to Barriss. “Here’s the nutrient mix you’ll need to prepare. Usually a liter will last them about a week, though this is a small one you’ve got here.”

“Thank you,” said Barriss, taking a look at the latest addition to the Eclipse’s cargo hold. The furry animal was perched on an upright, porous ‘branch’ with a small, elevated tank supplying nutrient-rich fluid to it. “I would have preferred a living tree for it, however I doubted the ship’s lighting could support a plant for a sustained period.”

“You bought an ysalamiri?” asked Ahsoka, incredulous and wary of the creature. Yesterday, the two of them had both been trying to get out of the forest and away from the things, and now Barriss evidently wanted to bring one with them around the galaxy. “Why?”

“I’ve come to recognize how dependent I can be on the Force. Some time to myself may be beneficial,” explained Barriss. “It also offers some defense against the inquisitors. Camouflage, if you will, to make it more difficult for them to track us.”

“How did you pay for it? There’s no way Karrde gave it to you for free.”

“I exchanged another one of our kyber crystals for it.”

“He took another one off of you?” said Ahsoka, annoyed at how her friend had been overcharged.

“If you must know, he acknowledged the discrepancy in value, and now owes me a 'favor'.”

“And you couldn’t have used that favor during our little negotiating session?”

“One crystal isn’t worth nearly enough to sway- hold on a moment,” said Barriss as she noticed the Duro returning to her with a box.
“Karrde also wanted me to give you this. For your help,” he said, handing the package over to Barriss before leaving again.

Barriss didn’t seem to know what this new item was and took the box to the lounge table to be unpacked, curious as to what it could contain, only to be dismayed at the revelation of a blaster pistol.

Ahsoka wondered why Karrde would give her a weapon like that, or why he’d think she’d even want it.

A data card with a manual came with it, which Ahsoka plugged into her pad to show Barriss the product description:

BLASTECH S26 STUN PISTOL: THE ULTIMATE IN NON-LETHAL PERSONAL PROTECTION!

THE S26 IS A DEDICATED ALTERNATIVE TO CONVENTIONAL FIREARMS MADE SPECIFICALLY TO STUN AN ORGANIC TARGET. THANKS TO OUR PATENTED LOW-ENERGY PLASMA ANTI-DISPERSION TECHNOLOGY, SHOTS ARE GUARANTEED TO BE MORE PRECISE AND HAVE 50% LONGER RANGE THAN THE STUN SETTING OF STANDARD BLASTERS. WHETHER THE BOUNTY POSTING SAYS TO TAKE THEM ALIVE, OR IF YOU’RE JUST TOO SQUEAMISH TO KILL, THE S26 IS THE WEAPON OF CHOICE TO KEEP YOU SAFE AND YOUR ENemies UNCONSCIOUS ON THE GROUND!

In addition to the blaster and manual, a shoulder holster came with it to keep the weapon concealed under Barriss’s jacket. While Barriss was getting a feel for her new equipment, Ahsoka only got more and more confused at her friend’s latest acquisitions.

“Why would you want a blaster?” asked Ahsoka. “Jedi- I mean, people like us don’t normally use blasters.”

“You know I don’t want to kill anyone if it can possibly be avoided, Ahsoka,” said Barriss, clutching her blaster. “I told Karrde as much, so he suggested I utilize stun weapons and learn to fire a blaster. It’s quite a thoughtful gift, actually.”

Barriss spent the next few minutes fitting the holster into place and practicing drawing her new weapon, while Ahsoka spent some much-needed time in the thankfully operational refresher. When she came back, Barriss was waiting for her, having just finished cleaning the blaster.

“Would you care to help me get some practice?”
During the Clone Wars, Ahsoka didn’t see much of the facilities on Kamino where the Republic’s armies were created. Fortunately, Rex and the others in the 501st provided detailed descriptions of the obstacles and drills all the clones went through, enough for Ahsoka to come up with her own test of Barriss’s shooting skills upon deciding that dingy shooting range in the lower level of the base wouldn’t cut it.

Hey, Barriss wanted practice, and she’d asked the right person.

Out in a secluded region of the forest away from the base, being hunted by droidekas, Barriss was certainly getting some real-world experience in ranged combat. The droidekas’ blasters were all set to low power, of course, not that weaker shots diminished the effectiveness of their combat programming. They’d still hurt, though.

The test would require Barriss not only to practice aiming her blaster, but to use timing, her agility, cover, and the terrain to move around the droidekas and hit them when they were unshielded. Each time she took out all of them, the next round would add another enemy. They were at round three now, no droidekas down yet.

“This is not what I’d been hoping for when I’d asked you for help!” Barriss shouted from behind a tree, taking a few shots at a pair of clanking tripods. The wispy blue stun bolts landed dead center on their shields, dissipating uselessly.

“Don’t yell, it gives away your position!” Ahsoka shouted back from her elevated viewpoint, sitting on a thick tree branch and grinning as she oversaw the whole exercise. Sure enough, not only had that outburst alerted the pair in front of her, the third was rolling around to Barriss’s back.

Barriss noticed it coming, and instead of attempting to find another source of cover, she ran towards it. The droideka, dubbed ‘Kick’ by Ahsoka after watching him somehow knock Cici away during a squabble without letting himself fall over, tried to deploy from ball mode only for Barriss to stomp down on the curving bronze armor of his back, rendering him unable to activate the shield as she shot him with her blaster. Stun shots weren’t much use against droids, especially not against ones as armored and resilient as the droidekas, so Ahsoka didn’t have to be concerned about their self-preservation code coming online.

With the rules demanding Kick to now play dead, Barriss took cover behind him, as he was still partially unfolded and offered protection from Glow and Pin, who were still protected by their shields yet a bit unwilling to open fire on their comrade, even with Barriss in their sights.

Ahsoka wasn’t completely sure if that trick would’ve worked had the droids been undergoing the regular memory wipes they were supposed to, preventing them from forming any kind of comradery with each other.

So, the tripodal droids slowly clanked around to try and get a clean shot at Barriss. In response, she struggled and turned Kick’s stiff frame to keep herself protected. Then the pair split up to try and attack Barriss from two sides. Then she started moving Kick towards a trench she could use as cover and an escape route, slowly rolling the heavy droid while the others slowly lumbered after her.
Really, really slowly. So slowly Ahsoka had to contain her laughter at how long it was taking for anyone to make progress as the combatants made the five-meter journey, Barriss fighting against friction to roll the first droid with her wiry muscles while the other two chased after her on their stubby legs.

Barriss successfully reached the trench, crouching down and easily evading the droidekas’ shots. Ahsoka had chosen the area for this particular reason, actually, as the terrain was rough enough to force the droidekas in and out of their shields to give Barriss the opportunity to shoot back.

Acting as a team, the two droidekas remained a dangerous threat, as Glow rolled after Barriss with Pin remaining shielded and providing cover from the high ground. Once Pin was too far away to help, Glow unfolded and activated his shield, Barriss nowhere in sight but no doubt waiting for him.

As the blue sphere formed around him, Barriss rose out from her hiding spot behind a tree stump and pelted the droideka with a handful of dirt, the loose powder and grit sticking to the shield and providing a good blind spot. She moved around to the other side of the stump and repeated the trick, leaving the droideka’s field of vision severely clouded. More than that, having that much solid matter in contact with the shield was draining its energy, leaving the droideka exposed, not to mention covered in dirt, not ten seconds later. Followed by a blaster shot that took Glow out of the fight.

Closely watching Barriss’s progress from above, Ahsoka was impressed by how well she made use of the environment. Anakin’s tactics, while often successful, tended to favor a methodical and very direct approach that paid off thanks to the skills of himself, Ahsoka, and battle-hardened clones. Barriss was fast, evasive, and knew how to exploit cover and positioning to outflank and surprise the droidekas, never using the same tactic twice. Ahsoka was eager to see if she’d wind up succeeding against all fourteen.

Only Pin was left now, and he wasn’t dropping his shield for anything. While he was too low to spot her, Ahsoka could see Barriss taking the long way around, and she was carrying...something.

Barriss ran at Pin from behind, lugging around a long, sturdy stick for some reason, dropping it behind the droideka. Keeping out of the droideka’s line of fire, Barriss waited until Pin had shambled around enough to be standing on top of the stick. Which left it partially within the shield. Barriss grabbed the end of the stick and used it to physically smack and knock the droideka over, taking out the shield and allowing Barriss to land the final shot.

“Round Three goes to Barriss!” Ahsoka cheered, climbing down the tree and helping Pin up, glancing back at the other droidekas clustered on the hill behind her. “Ready for the next match? I think Droideka #5 is itching to take you on.”

“No,” Barriss said, rubbing sweat and dirt from her brow, her head hung low as she breathed heavily and leaned on a tree. “I know you were only being helpful but this is getting too intense. Can we stop?”

“Of course,” Ahsoka said, waiting patiently for a moment before noticing how Barriss’s hands were shaking.

Despite the value she found in training exercises, Ahsoka had to take a moment to remind herself that, regardless of her skill level, Barriss was not a born fighter. While Ahsoka was feeling a rush purely by watching the display, Barriss was struggling to keep herself steady.

“Sorry if this was all a bit much,” said Ahsoka, realizing she’d been expecting Barriss to fight a small army of war droids. That was far from her idea of a good time.
“It was...an interesting idea,” Barriss said after a moment.

“You’ve actually become a good shot pretty quickly,” said Ahsoka, trying to bring the conversation around to a positive note as fast as she could. “The clones would be proud.”

“Thank you,” Barriss said, holstering her weapon and walking off. “Though I can’t say being reminded of the clones to be much of a comfort.”

Ahsoka wasn’t sure what to do or say next, a problem that had come up frequently with Barriss. What else could she have done to help Barriss with her shooting skills? What had Barriss expected from her when asking her to come along?

_You moron, _Ahsoka thought to herself, _she wasn’t expecting you to set up an actual training exercise, she just wanted to hang out with you._

---

Angry at herself for giving up so easily, Barriss rushed herself back to the smuggler compound, trying to focus on the lush environment around her instead of that embarrassing training exercise. She’d been doing well, and had quit. How could she expect to get practice when being in an environment that tested her abilities terrified her?

Walking back to the ship, Barriss heard blaster shots coming from behind the hangar building. None of the workers seemed at all alarmed by it, however, so Barriss decided to investigate herself, eventually finding a tall, yellow, rugged-looking Twi’lek woman practicing with a training remote. The metal ball was darting back and forth in the air, projecting holographic targets that were moving in all directions. Though her aim was lacking, it was an impressive display.

“Um, excuse me?” asked Barriss once the remote completed the sequence, not wanting to cause much of a disruption while interested in the remote.

“Huh? Oh, you’re the Togruta’s copilot, right? she said, extending a hand which Barriss nervously shook. “My name’s Wont.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m, um, Jana,” said Barriss, almost forgetting her alias for a moment. It felt strange relying on it when their cover had repeatedly proven ineffective.

“Same,” said Wont, polite but obviously not especially interested in being social. “How do you like your work so far?”

“It’s certainly been...interesting, since I’ve arrived.”

Wont shrugged. “It’s not usually like this. Not much trouble, not from other criminals, and definitely not from the Empire. Actually, this is the best job I’ve ever had.”

“Really?” asked Barriss, surprised by such a ringing endorsement. “What makes it so special?”

“Kid, I’ve worked for both lawful and criminal enterprises in my time. Karrde’s operation is the latter, but he runs it like it’s the former. You think the Black Sun or any of the Hutts offer workers’ compensation? Signing bonuses? Sick days? Yeah, this place is pretty great,” she said, proudly looking around the compound. “If there’s nothing else, I’ve spent too long shooting and should get back to work.”
“Your remote, it certainly appears to be very high-quality,” said Barriss. Having a quality remote for target practice would certainly come in handy. And be significantly less stressful than live fire exercises with real droidekas shooting at her. She should never have agreed to that. “Do you know where I can get a similar model?”

“It’s a little custom job I’ve been working on,” said Wont. “It began life as a Marksman-X combat remote, then I started adding on the holoprojectors, upgrading its repulsors, and programming in new training patterns. You won’t find something like this in a store.”

“Oh, well, would you be willing to sell it?” asked Barriss.

“Nope,” Wont said bluntly, then thinking for a moment and turning back to Barriss. “If you want the remote bad enough, I suppose you could do some work for it.”

For sale or not, while another kyber crystal would probably have covered the cost then and there, Barriss decided to hear out what the proposed price was. Regardless of Karrde’s odd sense of honor, it would be unwise to advertise her supply of the precious crystals to more people in the compound. It would be best to hear her out.

“What is it you need?” Barriss asked.

“I’m in charge of maintaining the base’s infrastructure, including the power supply to all the equipment we’ve built into the ruins. The job hasn’t been easy with the mynocks flying around, sapping the power.”

“There are mynocks here?” asked Barriss. The second the words were out, a series of high-pitched shrieks pierced the air. Even though she’d only been on the planet for a short time, it felt like she should’ve noticed them by now if they were such a problem. In fact, looking around now, she could see a few creature flying around, as if mentioning them had brought them into existence.

“Yes,” Wont said, irritatedly pointing at the cluster of cables leading from the generator to the hangar. “Some of them must’ve latched onto a smuggling ship and hitched a ride here, now they’re chewing on our cables. Not to mention they’re breeding. I’ve tried clearing the damn things out, but they fly off every time I get close.”

“Why haven’t your fellow smugglers deal with them? Aren’t the majority of the workers here armed well enough to deal with simple pests?”

“Some have their own tasks to deal with, others see mynocks as a waste of ammo, most just can’t hit the damn things from a far enough distance to keep them from running out of sight,” Wont explained. “You find a way to get rid of them, and the remote’s yours.”

Rummaging around her quarters and the tools Cici had stored in the engine room, Barriss tried to devise a way to trap the mynocks. She’d heard that they were somehow ‘allergic’ to helium, but there wasn’t any on the ship, not that she had any knowledge of how to safely handle and utilize a substance stored at near absolute zero.

Maybe she shouldn’t even worry about this. Remotes weren’t rare pieces of technology, she could probably buy a decent one in the next spaceport.
Still, she wanted something to do, something to take her mind off of things. Off of everything.

And that was a very high-quality remote.

*I can always talk to the holocron.*

Those conversations tended to grab her interest, and she couldn’t recall any topic that didn’t ultimately make her feel better, or at least teach her something useful. Despite how much the ancient personality inside could get under her skin. Perhaps that was all deliberate on Revan’s part.

“It feels like its been so long since we’ve talked,” Barriss said as she held the holocron.

“Does it? If you recall, our last discussion was yesterday morning,” Revan said, whose voice then switched to that unnerving impression of Barriss. “Don’t you remember? It was deeply unsettling!”

Perhaps my memory is more selective than I realize, Barriss thought with a shudder.

"Something odd happened in the compound."

"What was it?"

"One of the smugglers gave me the task of clearing out some mynocks that’ve been giving them trouble. It's not unreasonable to ask for assistance, but she'd never met me, had not reason to believe I could accomplish the task, and provided little information on how to do so."

It took Revan a long time to form a response, to the point Barriss was worried the holocron was ‘stuck’ somehow.

"Heh. Oh, wow," said Revan. "It's funny to see it happen to somebody else."

"What’s happening?"

"My curse. It’s spread to you now."

"What are you talking about?" said Barriss dismissively, no longer alarmed by the concern in Revan's voice. “I would’ve expected being in possession of you to be enough of a curse.”

"You will- nice jab by the way, well done- you will land on planets, you will walk around, then random people will approach and give you things to do."

"That can’t be too unusual."

"Oh, we’ve got a doubter. Let me regale you with tales of my journey across the galaxy."

"Please don-"

"On the ocean world of Manaan, two of the native Selkath, standing in the same room no less, approached me to give me jobs investigating the goings-on of their planet. A mysterious Twi'lek gave me instructions to meet a Rodian on that same planet, and I got offered the chance to join a secret society of bounty hunters. A republic officer stationed there demanded I retrieve sensitive data from the Sith in exchange for information on the star map I’d been looking for, because it wasn’t like we were on the same side or anything, which lead to me fighting my way through an entire Sith base, both to find the data, and some missing Selkath youth who’d been kidnapped. Then the Republic sent me down to the bottom of the ocean on a rescue mission, where I had to fight my way through swarms of insane Selkath and giant sharks to reach my goal.”
"I don't see how this is-"

"On Kashyyyk, I journeyed to a Wookiee village, fighting giant bugs along the way, got caught up in a power struggle between them and the Czerka Corp, and was sent down into the shadowlands to hunt a Wookiee fugitive. It was there I met up with Jolee, and the only way he'd help me was if I dealt with some poachers for him, because nobody will ever help me just to be nice. Then I had to go even deeper into the Shadowlands, fought a bunch of Mandalorians, found the Wookiee fugitive, and discovered ancient Rakatan artifacts. Then I had to walk all the way back through the lower shadowlands, upper shadowlands, the giant walkway, and back to the village, all while listening to these screeching apes, dozens of them, every damn second. Oh, remember the Terentatak? I killed one down on the forest floor because it had part of a legendary artifact embedded in its hide, and of course I had to go get it in order to resolve the power struggle. Also, I solved a Wookiee murder investigation completely by accident as a result of looting every corpse I’d come across, then I had to present the evidence at the trial even though I didn’t know what was happening.”

“That seems-"

“On Tatooine, I left Anchorhead to see a woman standing at the gate, who then gave me a message to deliver to her cheating bastard of a husband. She was just standing out there in the desert, waiting for me. This Duros waited outside the Czerka Corp office to rant at me about why I should try to make peace with the Sand People. I never saw him after that. When I finally made peaceful contact with the Sand People, their chieftain's first task for me was to run back to Anchorhead to get him some moisture vaporators, then run all the way back to their enclave to drop them off. To learn the history of his people, I had to kill a Krayt dragon, which I could only do by following instructions from a big game hunter to go lure some banthas over as bait, but I needed some fodder to do that, so I had to go back to the enclave to find some lying around, then run back across the desert, which, by the way, was littered with land mines, to the dragon’s cave. Through all this, the Sand People raiding parties continued trying to murder me even though I was trying to be nice. Disregarding how I’d defiled their dead to obtain some robes as a disguise. Also, I killed a target for the aforementioned bounty hunter secret society while I was there. It was on the way, figured I might as well do it.”

"Why would they-"

"A woman on Dantooine wanted me to bring her droid back to her so she could fuck it."

"...Please stop this," said Barriss, shifting uncomfortably and trying to avoid thinking about how, exactly, a droid would be used for such a purpose.

"I wish I could, but four thousand years later, that one still creeps me out. Droids are not built for that. Anyway, yeah, back and forth, back and forth, planet after planet. People giving me chores and making me run around because no one except me could ever get anything done. It never ended."

“Didn’t you have access to speeders? Any mode of transportation?” Barriss asked.

“No. I was trekking through sandy deserts, labyrinthine ruins, dense forests, and the bottom of the fucking ocean. Your typical speeder can’t handle those environments. And it was never even that far, I could usually get to everything I needed within a few kilometers, right on that thin line between making speeders worth it or not worth it,” said Revan. “So, the smugglers want you to do chores. Why are you even considering it? For easy cash? To gain acceptance and influence with them to accomplish a larger goal? Or is there some shiny item you’re doing this for?”

“Um... ‘shiny item’? She has a remote I want to use for training with my blaster pistol.”

“Wait, you have a gun now? Where did you get a gun?”
“It was a gift from the lead smuggler, Talon Karrde. We were both up late last night, and he gave me some instruction in using conventional weapons.”

“You were both up late last night. Hanging out. Alone. Talking. Nothing else?”

It took a moment for Barriss to realize what Revan was implying, and reacted with appropriate disgust. “Eugh, no. We were having a discussion about how to resist the Empire and training me in the basic use of a blaster, nothing more.”

“Ah, good. That means Ahsoka can have you all to herself.”

Barriss pinched the bridge of her nose and groaned. What had she expected from this conversation besides frustration, exactly?

“She really does like you, y’know. You’ve got nothing to worry about on that front,” said Revan.

“Wha- did she say something to you?” asked Barriss.

“I don’t know. Why would you trust me at my word? Why not ask her to find out for certain?”

Yet again, Revan was completely outmaneuvering Barriss in these discussions, seemingly directing their course without being noticed. Again and again coming back to the same topic. Barriss was getting tired of it.

“What do you expect to happen here, exactly?” she asked, glaring at the holocron. “That my best friend, whom I lied to, manipulated, framed, and assaulted is going to...to... develop romantic feelings for me? How do you expect this to work out the way you hope for?”

The holocron was quiet for a moment before replying in a matter-of-fact way, “I don’t know, but I’m certainly going to give it my all.”

Honestly, why had she started a conversation with Revan?

Mynocks. She had completely forgotten about trying to deal with them.

“The smuggler. The remote,” she implored, too aggravated to form complete sentences any more.

“Huh? Oh, that. Everything you need is already in place. You wanted some target practice, right? You’ve been tasked with hunting down and eradicating dozens of small, fast, flying monsters. This seems like a perfect opportunity, don’t you think?”

“SKRRREEEEEAAAAA!!!!” shrieked several mynocks as they flew at Barriss, their bizarre sucker mouths pulsing grotesquely as they emitted their cries while she crouched down and tried to shoot them. The underground passage she was in connected the power generator and the barracks, and was mynock central.

The mynocks themselves weren’t actually dangerous, lacking any teeth as their energy was drawn primarily from solar rays and leeching off electric circuits. That didn’t make them any less terrifying as their stalked eyes watched Barriss.

As the latest group of creatures flew off to find other energy sources, Barriss reached down into one
of the crevices and began gathering up four creatures she’d managed to stun. Lugging them back outside, she approached the container she’d whipped up to contain them. It wasn’t much, really, just a large crate with a portable generator stuck inside it to hold the creatures’ attention, and a slot on the side to dump them in. That way, she could open the second hole to add the latest catch without them all flying out at her.

It felt a bit cruel when she considered how cramped the space must be getting with so many inside, but most people would simply kill the animals, ugly and irritating as they were. If she could contain them, she had little doubt Ahsoka would help her dump them all out into space somewhere away from frequently traveled lanes.

There were dozens more, and getting four in one go was a record for her.

Barriss stopped for a moment and focused. This whole situation was meant to be a form of practice, now, what was she learning? How could she improve her technique?

Finesse, observation, planning, those were her strengths.

With each encounter with a group of mynocks, Barriss paid close attention to their patterns of movement, how close they remained to each other, how close they would allow her to get before fleeing, observing the environment to judge what escape route they were most likely to take.

With each encounter, she developed more of a rhythm, keeping track of how many remained, which of the spots she’d found the ones that escaped would go to. Each encounter left her with a plan, a method for the next.

Even if it could take the entire day, but she was going to find them all.

Latching onto the power cables leading to the barracks? Into the crate.

Clinging to the engines of one of the blastboats? Into the crate.

Harassing the local astromech droids? Into the crate.

At the top of the damn communications tower, leeching power from it, requiring her to climb up a fifteen-meter ladder and feeling the force of the wind trying to push her off? Ten of them, so after she zapped the first one the others flew around her, screeching and demanding she shoot each one of them out of the air? You’d better believe they were going into the damn crate.

Draining power from the restroom lights, knocked out by the stun blast, and fell from the ceiling directly into the toilet? Crate.

The whole process took hours, and eventually Barriss had turned over every rock, crawled through every vent, and stuck her hand into every piece of machinery in the base to hunt down every last one of these pests, hauling their stunned bodies all over the compound to containment.

“There,” said Barriss, presenting the fruit of her labors to Wont. “Exactly eighty mynocks, all safely contained.”

“Wow. Nice work, kid,” said Wont, staring disbelievingly at the crate, sitting in the middle of the loading area, the mynocks audibly writhing around inside, and extending her hand with the remote to Barriss.

Unbeknownst to them both, the corrosion and fraying wires the mynocks had caused to the nearby crane used to load cargo had left it a time bomb waiting to cause damage. One of its joints had
chosen this particular moment to fail, letting it swing like a pendulum and knock over the crate with enough force for the impact to crumple one of the sides, leaving gaps at the edges.

The mynocks flew out, scattering all over the place. The whole flock spread away in all directions for a moment, then the creatures reoriented themselves and flew back to where they had been at the start of the day.

“Oh, that’s...unfortunate. You can catch them again, right?” asked Wont.

“I did what you asked me to do,” Barriss said quietly, staring at the fleeing mynocks, feeling her mouth pursing and her left eye twitching involuntarily.

“I- I know, and I’m sorry that happened, but this still doesn’t solve my problem, and the crane thing wasn’t my fault. How about if you just get half of them back, we’ll call it even, and, uh, hey, where are you going?”

Covered in sweat, dust, grease, and mynock expulsions, Barriss stormed off away from Wont, through the main building, and barged into Karrde’s office.

“I’m calling in the favor you owe me for that kyber crystal,” she said to the alarmed smuggler. “One of your employees, Wont, has a remote I intend to use for target practice. I want that remote, and will drop the debt if I get it.”

It took a moment for Karrde to respond as he looked Barriss up and down, noting her disheveled and stressed appearance.

“Glad as I am to take care of that favor so quickly, are you sure to want to use it on something so trivial? It’s only a remote, not exactly a...um...” he said, then becoming unnerved and leaning back away from Barriss as she slammed her hands onto his desk and loomed over him.


After a second, and still without looking away from Barriss’s disconcertingly intense stare, nor even daring to blink, Karrde pulled out his communicator and tapped a few buttons. “Hey, Wont? It’s Karrde. You made some kind of deal with our Mirialan guest regarding your practice remote, right? I need you to give it to her...Yes, you’ll be compensated for it...Okay, fine, I’ll organize some people to set aside time to deal with the mynocks...Great, thanks.”

Barriss stepped back and sighed with relief that she’d finally gotten what she wanted, calmly and leisurely walking out to claim her prize without another word.

Pushing through the brush back to the improvised training area, Barriss emerged out of the dense foliage and took in an unexpected sight: the droidekas were all lumped together in a pile, their stubby legs and blaster arms quivering and clawing at the air as they ineffectively tried to get themselves upright. Standing atop the pile of metal, covered in dirt and sweat, breathing heavily and flexing her arms from the workout, and with a huge grin on her face, was Ahsoka.

“Hey, Barriss!” she said, deftly jumping off the mass of twitching droids down to the ground near an awestruck Barriss. “Glad to see you’re feeling better.”
“I’ve obtained a new training tool, and believe it will be a more practical method of improving my blaster skills than employing your droidekas,” Barriss said, holding out the remote and looking over at the pile, stunned by Ahsoka’s feat, trying her best not to gape. “How did you do this?”

“Hey, they didn’t make it easy,” said Ahsoka as she groaned and heaved Pin off the top of the pile and back onto his three feet. “Mind helping me with them?”

The two of them worked together to get all the droidekas upright again, with minimal protesting from the beaten droids. A few of them would need maintenance from the experience, but it wasn’t anything Cici couldn’t handle.

“You’re not the only one who’s been fighting against improbable odds,” said Barriss. “There’s a crate in our ships that’s full of mynocks we’ll be releasing back into space when we leave.”

At this point in their partnership, Ahsoka couldn’t even feel too surprised. Of course something weird had happened, it was only a matter of getting into specifics.

“Why did you get that? You know their pests, right?”

“Yes, I know, but that’s hardly their fault. I caught them all in order to earn the remote. At least, I did at first, but an accident caused them all to escape.”

“So you had to gather them all again?” asked Ahsoka.

“No. I demanded to be paid for my work despite the outcome, and received my remote. Then I captured them all a second time after that because I realized the smugglers would kill them rather than release them back into the wild. We are saving them. Besides, the second effort was in fact considerably easier, thanks to all the practice I’d gotten the first time,” Barriss said, confidently twirling her pistol around on one finger.

Once all the droidekas were mobile again, Ahsoka and Barriss lead them back to the nearly-repaired Eclipse, quietly enjoying the dim light of the sunset, the only noise being the wind and the steady, rhythmic clanking of metal legs behind them. It had been a good day.

Chapter End Notes

Everything Revan described actually happened to me at some point in the game. Yes, including the droid-fucker. That is an actual sidequest. She doesn't explicitly tell you why she wants the droid, but it's pretty obvious what's going on here. It's weird, but the thing I love most about it is that no matter how utterly evil your characters acts, if you bring her droid back, even a dark sider finds the situation unnerving and can only reply with exasperation.
With Friends Like These

After a full night’s sleep, Ahsoka groggily got up, stretching and feeling a bit achy from throwing a bunch of war machines into a giant pile with her bare hands.

Barriss wasn’t in any rush to get up, either, only finally getting out of bed and getting dressed at Ahsoka’s encouragement over an hour after the latter was up and about. They needed to leave soon. Perhaps more important, Ahsoka wanted to leave soon. This whole planet was a disaster and she could practically feel it weakening her life force with each passing minute.

The Eclipse was still out in the courtyard, looking like it was fresh off the assembly line. Getting ready to go was easy, seeing as they didn’t have anything to pack up. The two of them had each claimed a bed and left their spare clothes, killer droids, and the crate full of hungry, screeching mynocks on the ship.

“Ah, nothing like rolling around a ship that someone else cleaned,” said Cici, surveying her domain in the cargo hold. “It was nice of the smugglers to mop up the stormtrooper blood. They even took care of the dried tea from when the droidekas tried brewing! I like those meatbags. They obeyed my commands.”

“We’re ready to take off, then?” asked Ahsoka, walking around, inspecting her ship. Cici wasn’t kidding, the place looked incredible.

“I paid for quality labor,” said Barriss, who was similarly satisfied with the situation. “Those kyber crystals could’ve bought us an entirely new vessel, if there was anywhere on this planet to purchase one.”

“Leaving, I take it?” came Karrde’s voice as he approached the boarding ramp to see them off, adding “I hope you’ve enjoyed your stay.”

Barriss and Ahsoka looked at each other, finding that neither was at all amused by the joke.

“All things considered, our visit could have ended much more unpleasantly,” said Barriss, inspecting her training remote and glancing over at her pet ysalamiri. “Thank you, Talon.”

“You’re welcome, but please, don’t call me that. ‘Karrde’ will do nicely. Nobody ever calls me Talon.”

“What about your family?” asked Barriss.

“They don’t call me that, because that isn’t the name they gave me,” Karrde said. “Believe it or not, I wasn’t born to parents who hated me enough to name me that. Talon is just a criminal alias I came up with that stuck. A dumb teenager’s idea of a cool name, like ‘Decimus’, or ‘Kylo’.”

“Does that mean your last name isn’t actually Karrde? Or did you keep that much?” asked Barriss. The friendly chat stopped dead as Karrde’s grin vanished, replaced with nervousness upon realizing he’d already revealed quite a bit more than his paranoid level of secrecy would usually permit.

“I think that’s a sign for me to let you get on your way,” he said. “Good luck to you both.”

The next moment was a little awkward as Karrde shook Barriss’s hand, though this time he kept a straight face and didn’t react to her flimsy shake. When he extended the same politeness to Ahsoka,
she hesitated. Something about Karrde still made her uneasy, and she was finally putting together what it was. It wasn't that he was a criminal like Hondo, someone who was unpredictable and greedy while still somewhat friendly. It was the ruthlessness and ambition lying beneath all that.

Maybe she could stand to go a little easier on the smuggler. Barriss seemed to like him, that had to be a good sign.

Actually, as she thought about it, she had no idea whether Barriss was a good judge of character or not. Everyone the two of them had interacted with during the war was a Jedi, a clone, or some other ally.

Getting her own grip on Karrde’s hand, Ahsoka decided to end their time on this awful planet in as diplomatic a manner as she possibly could.

By the time Ahsoka had sealed up the hangar door and stopped pondering what the future held, Barriss was already strapped into the copilot’s seat, smiling and nodding to Ahsoka that everything was ready.

The *Eclipse* soared away from Myrkr, the blue sky fading to black, the starlight slowly becoming distinct as the ship ascended.

Karrde watched the two Jedi fly off, his mind full of plans and calculations as he considered the long-term effects of what he was doing, not only from selling off ships of the Katana Fleet but from knowing who the ships were going to. Knowing which group of rebels would have access to that firepower, knowing from proximity which imperial targets were likely to be hit, knowing where to invest credits legitimately and illegitimately to profit the most of the damage, all while taking immense satisfaction in watching the Empire’s war machine get completely blindsided by a fleet of legendary warships no one ever expected to see again.

As he was imagining the growing resources he’d soon possess, Vrask snapped him out of the daydream when she lifted him off the ground high enough for their eyes to be on the same level, a considerable height, and growled at him.

“Uh...I swear I’m not the one who drank all your Corellian brandy,” he lied.

“If you want me to keep pulling your ass out of danger,” she said, “you’d better keep me informed about what you’re planning to get us into.”

“Is this a general rule, or are you talking about something specific?” he asked. Though that reply would seem evasive coming from most people, in Karrde’s case, providing more detail really was warranted. This could be in reference to at least five different schemes.

Vrask didn’t care if it was warranted, and her response began with pulling Karrde even closer. Her mouth widened to reveal that her teeth were longer, sharper, and far more numerous than Karrde had previously believed.

“When the Empire is on our doorstep, I would very much appreciate being informed of the Jedi running around our base, rather than piecing everything together later as I’m trying to form a plan to save all of our lives.”
“I wasn’t completely certain Tano was who I thought she was until she’d arrived, until I’d seen her,” he said. “It was only a suspicion. I’m sorry.”

“Next time, then, inform me of your ‘suspicions’.”

“Duly noted,” Karrde said uneasily, but sincerely, feeling his feet dangling in the air. “Do I even weigh anything to you?”

“No. It’s like lifting a plate of fruit,” Vrask said, dropping him to the ground and accepting the apology, much to Karrde's relief. It took him a moment for the shock to his knees to wear off, not to mention the jittering from all the adrenaline in his system.

“Why did you wait until right this second to talk about this?” asked Karrde.

“I don’t worry myself with the extent of your plans until they get past ‘Step 1’. So I’m certain they won’t instantly collapse. Like they sometimes do,” Vrask said, much to Karrde’s chagrin. She was never going to let him live down his attempt to carry a freighter full of precious metals atop the backs of some turbo tanks. They’d both known it wouldn’t work, but neither expected it to fail the way it did. “And while Tano seems like a nice girl, I wanted to be certain she wasn’t around to eavesdrop on us. Togrutan hearing is quite excellent, from what I’ve learned.”

After stretching for a second, Karrde followed Vrask over to the two-person landspeeder, getting into the passenger side while she drove out into the wilderness with the supplies they’d packed.

Passing tree after tree, Karrde tried to mentally count the ysalamiri on the branches, giving up as quickly as he’d begun as he realized the creatures were everywhere. Thousands upon thousands of them on this route alone, while billions, maybe even trillions more lined the branches of the immense forest that covered half the planet.

The Jedi’s beliefs said that the Force encompassed the entire universe, as ubiquitous as gravity, connecting all life. As much as he’d love to write off the Jedi’s powers as a magic show the way other, less mindful criminals would, Karrde knew better. Even if he didn’t trust the Jedi, he trusted data. Jedi commanders in the Clone Wars would routinely fight in close-quarters with hundreds of battle droids and survive while their clones bought it by the thousands. Whether by magic or martial art, those pesky pseudo-pacifists certainly had some kind of power on their side.

A power that could evidently be nullified by the wildlife of a random tenth-rate planet. Nullified so utterly that said wildlife was the go-to method for the Empire to accelerate the Jedi’s extermination. In fact, he only now realized he hadn’t actually seen Tano, or Offee, demonstrate any supernatural feats, ostensibly because of the ysalamiri.

The great Jedi Order, guardians of peace and justice since the days of the Old Republic, brought down by some lizards. Lizards with fur. That drew nutrients from trees. And never moved. Come to think of it, Karrde didn’t quite know how to apply taxonomy to them.

None of that mattered, really. His current enterprise with Tano hinged on her reputation, intelligence, and discretion, none of which demanded her to move objects with her mind.

The speeder arrived in a small clearing, nothing particularly distinct about it save for the remains of a single animal so badly charred by the energy of a blaster that not only could he not identify it, it seems none of the local scavengers had any desire to eat it.

“This is the place?” he asked, putting together that the animal was Vrask’s handiwork. A vornskr, probably, he could recall her mentioning something about them when she’d explained how she’d
found Tano and Offee.

“‘Yes,’” said Vrask, waving to get his attention and leading him over to some worn down structures, same materials and style as their base. The two of them walked deeper into the ruins, finding the overgrown remains of some small temple in the middle of the forest.

“Something they neglected to tell us they’d found,” Karrde said.

“Like you’re one to talk about being selective with information,” said Vrask. “It’s possible they simply didn’t notice anything important about them. It’s the same architecture of our base, after all.”

“Hm,” Karrde said, accepting the explanation as possible even though he didn’t really believe it.

Exploring the worn-down structures, he soon came to a large tree situation at the center, covered in ysalamiri, more densely than any other he’d seen. And with one pair of recent footprints leading into the entrance situated beneath it.

The First Brother had told him, if not in so many words, that there was something valuable on this planet, more important than the ysalamiri. Whatever it was, Karrde had put together it was worth enough for the inquisitor to keep his forces to a minimum, during his visits, only scouting for now, wanting to avoid drawing attention from rival imperials. Or more narrowly, from the other inquisitors, whom Karrde would now be investigating. Maybe he could arrange for one of them to kill the First Brother. They seemed like the type.

There was something ancient in there. Something rare. Something priceless.

Something he could make a ton of money off of.

Karrde’s grin widened as he shined a light down into the entrance, small probe droids floating around him to scan and investigate whatever was buried inside.

“Let’s see what we can find.”
Finishing up the entire story, Barriss looked at the hologram of Revan, expectantly waiting for some kind of reassurance in the wake of her vision of Luminara. She wanted to talk to Ahsoka about it, she would talk to Ahsoka about it. First, she needed a ‘test’. Something to help her make some sense of it.

“I’m sorry all that happened,” said Revan. “Meeting your master like that...are you feeling okay?”

“I feel...different. Though I wouldn’t say ‘bad,’” said Barriss. “It’s confusing. I’m so angry at her for involving me in the war, even though I would do anything to see her alive again.”

“You loved her, but she hurt you, you know she didn’t intend to, you also know that doesn’t stop you from feeling pain, you want her back anyway, you know that can’t happen. Of course it’s confusing,” said Revan. “Tell me about this ‘Inquisitor’ you mentioned. What does he have to do with your master?”

“The Empire is making use of a group of dark siders whose purpose is to hunt down any remaining Jedi,” explained Barriss. “Their leader appears to have an interest in me personally.”

“Ugh, dark side stalkers are the worst. I know, I’ve killed at least six. Why is he after you? Orders? Or is he making it personal?”

“I may have been the reason he came to draw on the dark side,” Barriss said, guilty as she recalled the moment she’d made her speech, thinking hard in the hope that she could remember the guards around her, to remember some detail about her attacker.

“...Okay, and how are you responsible?” Revan asked skeptically.

“He was once a temple guard, one of the group who helped apprehend me. He listened to my tirade against the Jedi, and maybe if I hadn’t bombed the temple he wouldn’t be hunting innocent Jedi now.”

Revan let out a groan at this newest example of Barriss’s self-loathing, leaning back in frustration, then snapping forward again to confront Barriss on it.

“Barriss, listen to me: that guy is a grown man who can make his own choices, and listening to one angry speech isn’t enough to make a decent person turn to the dark side. Him being an evil bastard now is not your responsibility.”

“But if I hadn’t-”

“BARRISS. Who is responsible for the Inquisitor being a pathetic moron who’s now a slave of the Empire?” Revan said adamantly. Barriss could tell the subject wouldn’t be dropped until she answered correctly.

“Not...me...?” she answered.

“Correct. Perfect answer!”
“It isn’t merely his own defection that worries me,” she said, stifling back tears. “He...he killed Luminara.”

“...Oh for...” Revan whined, not specifically to Barriss or anyone in particular, only venting some secondhand angst as more and more of Barriss’s issues were laid out. “She died in the Jedi purge, I take it?”

“No,” said Barriss. “If the Inquisitor stated the truth, and I don’t believe he was lying, she was captured and killed later.”

That made Revan visibly pause, save for holographic fingers now gently drumming the left elbow of the holographic avatar, lost in thought.

“What is it?” asked Barriss.

“You’re not going to like this,” said Revan. “And I’m not saying that in my usual ‘lovable jerk’ way. This is going to get very unpleasant.”

Revan’s seriousness was disconcerting, however it also made Barriss all the more worried about what it could mean.

“What are you getting at?” she asked.

“You were a prisoner of the Empire for some time, right? What were your living conditions like? Unbearable? Miserable?”

“’Miserable’ would be an understatement. I was isolated in a cramped cell. Nothing to do except lie on my bunk and contemplate all the ways my predicament was my own fault, and consider how many people I’d brought down with me.”

“You were stressed. Lost. Confused,” said Revan. “Slowly growing more receptive to any chance to put an end to your misery.”

*Paths to the dark side*, thought Barriss.

“If you’re referring to the possibility of my becoming an inquisitor,” she said, “I already received an offer and rejected it.”

“While in prison?”

“On Serenno, shortly after Ahsoka freed me,” said Barriss, uncomfortable at the realization that refusing the Inquisitor’s offer could have been far more challenging if it had happened sooner.

“How well do you think you’d have fared if Ahsoka hadn’t freed you? If you’d remained in confinement for another month? Another year?”

The months Barriss had spent in imperial custody had been among the worst of her life. Her time in the care of the Republic had been time spent reflecting on her mistakes, and despite her guilt, Barriss had felt some small relief at being away from the war for the first time in two years. It had at least offered time for meditation, palatable food, and occasional time out of her cell if she behaved. And she’d always behaved.

The Empire’s facility kept her in solitary confinement for the entire time, cut off from the Force and with just enough tasteless grey nutrients to keep her alive. Still, it was endurable. She’d held it together until Ahsoka had rescued her. Mostly.
“I hope my spirit is harder to break than that,” said Barriss.

“You don’t ‘break’ the spirit of a Jedi,” said Revan, saying so as if it was a vital lesson. “You erode it. Subject them to stress after stress, choice after choice with no good solution. Situations the Jedi Code can’t and won’t prepare them for until they’re forced to abandon the code in order to survive.”

“I...I admit choosing to join the Empire wouldn’t have been an impossibility,” Barriss grudgingly admitted. It was hard for her to think about the past, not only because of the regrets she had but how all the stresses she’d experienced made it painful to think about.

“Now for the really big question,” said Revan. “Did the Inquisitor kill your master before, or after, you escaped?”

That question was rather unexpected, and it took a moment for Barriss to recall the Inquisitor’s words to her and get a conclusive answer.

‘There will be no more rescues, not for you, not for anyone else. After your execution, your remains will be used to draw in the surviving Jedi to their deaths. Just like your master’s.’

If the Inquisitor had intended to make her a servant of the Empire, it made sense to keep her alive and in isolation. Why do the same for Luminara? Regardless of Barriss’s recent doubts and misgivings surrounding her master, she could never be corrupted in the same way, could she?

Unless that wasn’t the plan. Unless Luminara had died the moment she’d stopped serving a purpose. The moment Barriss had escaped.

“After. She died after Ahsoka freed me,” Barriss said, forcing the words out through the lump forming in her throat.

“Corrupting Jedi doesn’t end with torture. They must be presented with a test. Something to do that will convince them there’s no turning back. That they can never stop serving the dark side,” said Revan. “You know what yours was.”

“They were...saving her for me,” said Barriss, voice filled with disgust. “They were going to make me kill her.”

“No,” said Revan. “They were going to let you choose to kill her.”

Barriss hugged her knees to her chest, trying to control her trembling body.

If Ahsoka hadn’t rescued me, I would be an inquisitor.

I would have killed my master.

The hologram of Revan approached Barriss, hands placed on her shoulders. Barriss rarely liked physical contact, yet she found it extremely comforting, enough to stop her shaking, at least. Perhaps it helped that the hologram had no mass to it and didn’t feel intrusive.

“Barriss, I’m sorry about this, but you need to understand the kind of thinking you’re up against if you’re going to overcome these inquisitors.”

“HOW? What am I going to do against the Empire?” asked Barriss, desperate for a way out of the nightmare the galaxy was becoming, fully aware she had no means of fixing it. “My saber is inoperable, I’m such a mess psychologically I can hardly connect to the Force, I’m a detriment to my only friend, who rescued me in the first place out of pity, I’ve failed to uphold my master’s teachings-
a master whom I thankfully cannot disappoint any longer considering she died because of me! What can I do on my own?"

“You believe you need a master to guide you that badly?” asked Revan.

“Yes.”

“Even though you can see all of Luminara’s faults now?”

“Yes,” Barriss said, running her fingers back through her hair, blinking tears out of her eyes as her vision became cloudier.

“You want a new one?” asked Revan.

The anguish Barriss felt stalled out when she couldn’t provide a simple answer like she had for the other questions. Several seconds passed as Barriss lifted her head from her hands, realizing what Revan was suggesting.

“Holocrons can’t be used as a substitute for a real master,” Barriss said. “It’s not the Jedi way.”

“Yeah, the Jedi say a lot of stuff, Barriss,” said Revan. “And as you said when we met, you’re not a Jedi anymore. Don’t continue to restrict yourself with the code you’ve abandoned. The code that abandoned you.”

Barriss considered the proposition for a moment. Eccentricities aside, Revan was, without exaggeration, a legend. Literally ancient, a hero of the Jedi and the Republic.

And what was she? A traitor. A murderer. A coward.

“After everything I’ve done,” she said, “you believe I would make a worthy apprentice?”

“Are you kidding? You’re perfect,” Revan said emphatically, waving up and down Barriss while speaking. “I couldn’t hope for a better student. Why would I think otherwise?”

“Because I’m a failure,” she said with a shrug.

The hologram paused for a second, then began to remove its mask. Barriss was about ready to cringe at whatever eerie face Revan had decided to wear, and was surprised to see nothing except empty blackness holding up the hood.

The holographic mask left Revan’s hand and drifted through the air towards her, turning so that it lined up with her own face.

“You can be as strong as I ever was, Barriss. If you’re willing to claim your power,” said Revan.

Barriss couldn’t help but scoff. “What could make you think I could be as strong as you?”

“What do you think made me so powerful to begin with?” asked Revan.

“History texts describe you as being a prodigy,” Barriss answered, continuing on as Revan’s head shook with dismissal. “That you were naturally gifted, and the Jedi cultivated your strength in the Force.”

“I’m gonna have to set a lot of historians straight, aren’t I?” said Revan, irritated by the prospect of needing to write an autobiography. “From the moment I entered the temple, I studied a little harder than the others, trained a little longer than them, and over years and years every skill, every feat,
every power, every little bit of knowledge I’d accumulated added up and allowed me to survive one battle after another where the people who hadn’t pushed themselves hard enough all died. The Jedi died and died, and eventually, I came out the strongest of them because I kept enduring everything they couldn’t. I’m not special, Barriss. I’m not the child of prophecy. Not talent, not destiny. Relentlessness, and a stubborn refusal to die that persists to this day.”

“You became the most powerful Jedi of your era because of...statistics?” asked Barriss. The logic behind it wasn’t completely unsound. Someone had to be the best, it only happened to be Revan via small advantages cascading into better odds of success over and over.

“Now, Barriss, I’ll ask again: do you want to be trained by the greatest badass in galactic history, or not?” Revan said, the offer now seeming like it would not be extended again if Barriss refused now.

“...I accept your offer.”

Within the empty darkness under Revan’s hood, an enormous, bright smile appeared, and Barriss couldn’t decide whether to be excited or terrified by it.

“Are you afraid?” asked Revan, sensing Barriss’s apprehension.

“I am,” Barriss answered.

The smile grew even wider, enough that it seemed unlikely a real human face could contain it, and Barriss waited, bracing herself for whatever insane response Revan had in mind to throw her out of balance yet again.

“Don’t be. You’re gonna be amazing.” Then, the avatar disappeared and the holocron went dormant.

...This is going to be a very strange period in my life.

Once the crate was safely in place, Ahsoka hit button on the airlock and dumped the mynocks safely into space, the Eclipse’s speed carrying them away safely from the pests as the crate drifted through the vacuum towards the rings of a gas giant neighboring Mykr, opening up to let the creatures escape.

“The Myrkr natives created the ysalamiri artificially?” Ahsoka asked as she turned away from the small viewport she was watching the crate through to see Barriss’s project, positioning the nutrient frame stuck against the back wall of the cargo hold. “You’re sure?”

“The underground murals were works of art, though I couldn’t see any other interpretation of the images,” said Barriss. “The ysalamiri aren’t natural organisms.”

“That answers some questions,” said Ahsoka. “At least there’s nothing left for the Empire to get their hands on.”

Ahsoka could do without the Force-suppressing lizard-thing in the middle of her ship. Barriss, on the other hand, was petting the ysalamiri affectionately, stroking its fur as it craned its neck to push its head further back into her fingers, enjoying the scratching provided by the big, weird, greenish-yellow not-predator.
“I’m going to call it ‘Snoots’,” said Barriss.

“Snoots?” asked Ahsoka, amused by Barriss’s rare moment of humor.

“Yes. Snoots.”

“Why Snoots?”

“It looks like a Snoots,” she replied, clearly not interested in overthinking the name, while laying out a mat beneath the apparatus, then sitting and beginning to meditate.

At the risk of interrupting some important thoughts, Ahsoka was curious about the abnormal setup. She knew of cultures who practiced meditation without any intent to connect to the Force as a form of introspection, though such methods didn’t fit the goals of the Jedi.

Nothing like this had ever been done by the Jedi as far as Ahsoka knew, and it probably wouldn’t have been interesting to any of them. The novel approach was interesting and staring at Barriss sitting peacefully wasn’t at all unpleasant, but it wasn’t telling Ahsoka anything new.

“Okay. I’ll leave you to it,” she said. ”If you need me, I’ll be in the cockpit.”

“Wait,” said Barriss. “If there’s nothing more important you need to do, would you mind, um, telling me about Skywalker?”

“About Anakin?” said Ahsoka as she walked over to Barriss, close enough for a conversation while still keeping her distance from Snoots. She was never going to get used to that name. “Sure. What do you want to know?”

“You always spoke so highly of him, I’d like to hear more, if you don’t mind.”

That sounds really nice, actually.

Ahsoka sat down opposite Barriss, trying to think where to begin.

“He was, well, incredible. Always projecting strength, and power. Sometimes, it could be intimidating, being his apprentice, wondering if I could live up to his example. Then again, he always tried to let me know he trusted me, and believed I could succeed. Even if I stumbled a bit, I felt like I was getting better. He admitted he didn’t know everything about being a good teacher, and learned things along with me. He cared about me. You know how masters can be.”

“No, I don’t,” said Barriss, still smiling in a dissonant manner that, frankly, worried Ahsoka for a moment. “Please, keep going. I’m enjoying this.”

Ahsoka spent the next couple hours telling story after story of her and Anakin, fighting aboard the Malevolence, pursuing Cad Bane, how she was captured by Trandoshan hunters, fighting on Onderon, and bringing down a budding slaver empire together. She may not be a skilled storyteller, but Ahsoka watched for every time Barriss’ interest was piqued, enjoying every smile and laugh and surprise she brought out of her friend. It took a while for her to finally run out of stories.

“Barriss, that was great, but I’d like to know, why did you want to hear all that?” asked Ahsoka. “You can tell me.”

This time, Barriss was completely forthcoming.

“Back on Myrkr, I had a vision of Luminara. I felt furious at her, because of everything that had
happened. I wanted to learn about someone else’s master. To compare.”

“You saw Luminara?” said Ahsoka, realizing, especially given how upset Barriss had been back in the forest, there was no way that interaction had gone well. “This is what you’ve been waiting to tell me about, isn’t it? What happened?”

“I told her I hated her for getting me involved in the war.”

It couldn't possibly be true. Regardless of all the things that had been eating Barriss up inside, her master was the one thing Ahsoka had been sure could ease Barriss’s mind. Reading her emotions was challenging for Ahsoka, especially right now, with the ysalamiri perched over Barriss’s head, stifling the connection between them. Ahsoka had relied on the Force for so long, reading people through body language felt unfamiliar.

“You don’t really hate her, do you?”

“No. No, I don’t believe so,” she said, much to Ahsoka’s relief. “Though I am angry at her. I think, maybe, in my mind, she represented everything I wanted to be as a Jedi. And I could never live up to that vision. As the war dragged on, with her leading battle after battle after I’d spent so long listening to her profess the value of peace, she came to embody how much hypocrisy I saw in the Jedi. Seeing her again, as a hallucination or vision or whatever you want to call it, was frustrating. And liberating. I could finally accept how painful being her apprentice was.”

“Was it really that horrible? Luminara always seemed so kind. How could she have hurt you?”

“It wasn’t her fault exactly, and of course it wasn’t intentional. But that wasn’t the problem. I- I hated being her apprentice, but I want her back, and I...I'm not making any sense,” said Barriss. “She was the perfect Jedi. And I wasn’t. I never could be. We both know how that worked out.”

"Luminara was proud of you, Barriss."

A mix of disbelief and hope appeared in Barriss's eyes. "Really? Did she...say something?"

The question wasn't one Ahsoka had been prepared for, though she realized she probably should’ve been. Thinking back to her mission with Master Luminara, escorting Gunray, fighting Ventress, she couldn't remember Barriss being mentioned. Luminara had been all business.

"Uuuumm-" she stalled, watching Barriss's face become highly unimpressed by the response as the seconds ticked by, and Ahsoka had to give up. Even if she could come up with a plausible lie, Barriss wouldn't believe it now, and she shouldn't try that anyway.

"That's what I thought," said Barriss bitterly.

"It doesn't mean anything. So what, she didn't talk about you that one time I was alone with her. When I saw you together on Geonosis, it was obvious how proud of you she was!"

“Obvious to everyone except for me,” said Barriss. "Yes, I'm sure she was very pleased with how I demolished the droid factory with thousands of Geonosians inside."

"You're angry. I don't think I've ever seen you this angry."

Barriss didn’t say anything, her annoyed stare saying more than any words could.

"That can’t be good for you,” said Ahsoka.
"Of course it isn't 'good'. But it's an improvement. Anger isn't new for me, Ahsoka. I've been angry for years. Now I'm not fighting it back anymore. And I feel so much better."

"Hate to sound pessimistic, but anger is a path to the dark side. The Jedi weren't wrong about that."

"I know. It doesn't matter where the path goes, I feel angry, and trying to make myself not feel angry only made things worse," Barriss said. “Maybe some rage is exactly what I need."

"You don't need that. Luminara, I'm sure she thought you were amazing!"

"I don't care."

"But she-"

"I don't care!" snapped Barriss. No sudden realization of what she'd said or any attempt to regain her composure followed. She only kept glaring, kept clenching her fists. "I don't care what she thinks of me anymore. I don't care about being the perfect apprentice for Luminara. It never did anything but make me miserable, and I can't even remember why I cared to begin with!"

“What do you care about now?” asked Ahsoka.

"I don't know. I don't know how to proceed, and I have no useful explanation for anything that's happened," said Barriss with a shrug. "I'm just doing the best I can. It's all I have. I don't think I'm ever going to be the same."

After a tense pause, Ahsoka replied, "Good."

"Excuse me?"

"You betrayed me in a plot against the Jedi, Barriss. I know this sounds harsh, but, I'm kind of glad you don't think you could ever be that person again."

That did seem harsh, especially coming from Ahsoka, but her expressions made it painfully clear to Barriss she wasn't the least bit pleased with this reasoning.

"I didn't mean- of course I wouldn't make the same mistakes," Barriss said, not with any amount of certainty in her voice.

"I believe you,” said Ahsoka. "The fact is you were both the trusted padawan of a Jedi master, my friend, a model padawan, and a traitor all at the same time. I should never have acted like those traits were separate.”

Ahsoka watched Barriss’s face, seeing how much that stung. It wasn’t supposed to hurt Barriss, it was a stupid thing to bring up, and Ahsoka knew it.

“Barriss...I’m glad you’re here. Even thinking about what you did, I’m happy with who you are now,” said Ahsoka. “Even with all the terrible things that are going on in the galaxy, I’m happy I can face them with someone I can trust.”

There were still some half-formed tears in Barriss’s eyes, no longer getting any bigger, and Ahsoka was relieved to see her smile. A genuine smile, not simply curving her mouth in the technically-correct way while her eyes made it clear how strung out she was.

"Thank you for listening to me, Ahsoka,” said Barriss. "Thank you for everything you've done."

"It's not a big deal," Ahsoka said modestly.
"Yes, it is. You saved my life and went out of your way time and again to help me recover. Even though, and let's be perfectly honest, you logically shouldn't have bothered," said Barriss. "You've done more to help me than anyone ever has, when you have every reason to despise me."

"I could never feel that way about you, Barriss."

"A hypothesis I've certainly put to the test," said Barriss, perhaps jokingly, perhaps not, Ahsoka couldn't quite tell. "I want you to know...this can go both ways. It's not fair for you to have to listen to all of my problems. If there's anything you need to talk about, tell me. If you need to go on some mad quest to get closure on something, do it. I'll be there to help you."

"Thanks, but I don’t need to talk."

Barriss stared concerned but disbelieving at Ahsoka for a second, then reached over to reassuringly put a hand on her shoulder. Or at least, that had been her intent, however Barriss quickly realized the two of them were sitting just far enough apart for that gesture to be awkward and require Barriss to lean uncomfortably. Ahsoka silently watched, holding a straight face, too amused to even consider interfering as Barriss ran the gambit of noticing how weird she looked, considering adding another few seconds to this already long pause by moving closer, then getting annoyed at her own misstep, then giving up and powering through, maximum awkwardness and back pain away.

"You seemed afraid when you were talking about Skywalker," said Barriss. "Ahsoka, don’t try to suppress whatever you’re feeling. If you don’t let it out on your terms, it will find a way to escape on its own and will be a very unpleasant spectacle."

It took a moment for Ahsoka to accept that Barriss definitely knew what she was talking about in this case, even if she didn’t know the specifics.

"There is something I'd like to talk about. Master Skywalker cast a difficult shadow to get out of," Ahsoka admitted. "And I don’t say that because he was probably the most powerful knight in the order. That’s only part of it. You probably heard the rumors about him, right? That he was the 'Chosen One'?"

"Hm. I know even alluding to it could make Master Windu scowl."

"It wasn't just a rumor," she said, thinking back to the fight on Mortis, the Daughter and the Son both restrained by the strength of her master. "He had that kind of power, and I've seen it in action."

"That’s rather surprising. And raises many questions about his destiny," said Barriss. "It must've been difficult to live with. To try and live up to."

"It was. I always felt like I could never be good enough. Even after everything I’d learned while being his apprentice, Anakin kept growing stronger, too. Faster than I was."

"It seemed as though you would never become as wise as your master, never able to stand out on your own," said Barriss.

Ahsoka nodded. "The whole prophecy also gives me some hope. The galaxy is out of balance, and he's supposed to restore that balance. I hope he's still out there, somewhere."

The cargo hold became quiet for several minutes, neither of them saying anything or even looking at each other as they tried to process everything they’d both said.

"I think I’ve felt enough stuff for today," said Ahsoka.
“Agreed,” Barriss said, closing her eyes and getting back to meditating.

Pacing back and forth, Barriss kept looking at and away from her lightsaber, which was sitting on her bed, mulling over whether or not she wanted to test it again.

For several minutes, she paced back and forth through the room’s small patch of floor, looking at it, trying not to look at it, thinking about if dismantling and reassembling the thing for the tenth time today would do any good. It hadn’t before.

It shouldn’t be this difficult. All she had to do was pick up the saber and press the button.

...All she had to do was pick up the saber and press the button.

Pick up the saber, Barriss.

Barriss waffled between reaching out to the saber and pulling her hand back to fidget some more. Working on it for so long, what if it still didn’t work? What if it would never work? What if she was always going to be stuck with this unreliable, mangled piece of Jedi technology?

When the frustration finally got too aggravating, Barriss rushed forward, grabbed the saber, and hit the ignition switch.

Be afraid, do it anyway.

She was startled when the blade ignited, orange glow outshining the normal ship’s lighting, and Barriss let out a sigh of relief as she waved the blade carefully. It was perfect.

Well, maybe not perfect. While the blade wasn’t crackling any more, it still periodically gave off an odd pulse, a thinner section of plasma that ran up and down the blade. And there was still that weird, low humming coming from it that Barriss couldn’t find the source of.

‘Functional’ was a good descriptor. It was functional. At least it wasn’t smoking anymore.

Barriss went out into the empty cargo hold and activated her new training remote, including its own light blasters, turning it to the low setting. Saber in her right hand, stun blaster in her left, she got a solid stance and got to work.
Please welcome Admiral Snoots to the cast.

Barriss: I want you to know, this can go both ways.
Ahsoka: Yes, of course I go both ways.
Barriss: What?!
Ahsoka: Wut.

This is apparently now the second-longest Barrissoka fic on AO3, and is easily the longest if you only include ones with the pairing as the focus. I have written a novel. How did I do this.

I don't have a definitive plan in place, but this is probably the halfway point of the story. I'm going to be taking a bit of a break to think more about how things are going to play out on Pantora. Could take a couple of months, or I could get a surge of inspiration and finish one of my half-done drafts at literally any given moment. I have no idea.

In the meantime, if you're enjoying this fic, please tell anyone you know who might be interested about it. Especially if they can draw.

EDIT: Speaking of which, the artwork at the end was made by lanadarthrey, and it's the first work of fanart I've received.
Fugitives Ahsoka Tano and Barriss Offee have traveled across the galaxy seeking ways to undermine the expanding power of the Galactic Empire. Encountering revolutionaries and smugglers, opportunities to strike back present themselves and plans of alliance begin to form.

On Serenno, the former Separatist capital-turned-holdout, the duo contacted the planet’s countess, and received an encrypted data file which could cripple the Empire. Later, the smuggler leader on the fringe world of Myrkr offered a fleet of warships and information on survivors of Order 66- for a price.

Now free of danger after narrowly avoiding an encounter with an Imperial Inquisitor, the two travel to the icy moon of Pantora to contact Riyo Chuchi, friend of Ahsoka and member of the Imperial Senate, and deliver the mysterious data file.

“Well, this is worrying,” said Barriss as she handed her pair of macrobinoculars over to Ahsoka. Through them, Ahsoka could see Riyo Chuchi, Pantora’s representative in the Imperial Senate, their potential ally, her friend, walking out of the newly-constructed imperial headquarters with considerable grace despite being walking past rows of stormtroopers and various sinister-looking droids guarding the building. The command center was an ugly thing, far larger than necessary, breaking up the Pantoran skyline with stark grey utilitarian architecture, looming over the rest of the city.

Ahsoka realized now that this was the first time in over six months she’d seen Riyo. All things considered, she was looking well, senators faring much better these days than any of Ahsoka’s other associates. Head held high, wardrobe as stylish as ever, looking concerned but confident as she walked past the Empire’s security. It reminded Ahsoka of Padmé, always ready to fight back without being ignorant of what she was up against.

The senator wasn’t alone, with a half dozen Pantoran security personnel forming a tight circle around her. Also accompanying her within the circle was a human woman, brown hair, in her mid-twenties, sticking close to Riyo with her jittery hands barely holding onto a cluster of datapads. Probably just an attendant or secretary by Ahsoka’s estimation, clearly in over her head, nervously looking around at everything that could kill her.

Without any kind of intelligence apparatus to get information from, all Ahsoka and Barriss could tell about the situation was whatever rumors were circulating in the general population. The imperial sector moff was on-planet, and as Pantora’s main representative in the Empire’s government, Riyo had probably met him for...Ahsoka had no idea what the exact reason was.

There were any number of reasons Riyo would be confronting the moff. Maybe ‘confronting’ was a bit much to hope for, considering the position Pantora was in.
The Imperials on Pantora weren’t an occupation force, not officially. After Pantora had reportedly considered joining the Separatists during the hostage situation with the Trade Federation, it gave Palpatine probable cause to ‘secure’ the moon. It also sent a message to other worlds considering opposition to the Empire.

Ahsoka had been keeping track of the imperial forces ever since she and Barriss arrived in the system: the imperial cruiser in orbit contained a complement of sixty TIE fighters, at least twenty-four of which were on patrol in groups of four at any given time. Minimum of two hundred stormtroopers in the garrison, no walkers, but plenty of speeder bikes and a few personnel carriers for rapid movement. It wasn’t much in the grand scheme of things, even for a moon as sparsely populated as Pantora, just enough to remind the moon of its place. And for such a small, concentrated population center, and the Trade Federation blockade fresh in memory, it did the job well. Ahsoka could feel the fear and anxiety throughout the capital.

Ahsoka took another look through the macrobinoculars, watching Riyo enter her speeder, its direction leading back to the local senate building and out of sight.

Riyo was safe, had a security force and staff loyal to her, and was free to move as she pleased.

They’d gotten their reconnaissance. Riyo was okay, everything else was terrible. That was actually a lot better than Ahsoka had feared. Now it was time to put the intel to use.

Ahsoka and Barriss were sitting around the Eclipse, considering their options, disturbed only by the sound of repulsorlift traffic outside their landing pad. And the occasional roar of TIE fighters.

“Any idea how we should reach the senator?” asked Barriss.

“The opposite, actually. We need to trust Riyo to be resourceful enough to set things up for us,” said Ahsoka. “The Empire has been here for months, and this city is Riyo’s home. By now, she’s probably found ways of moving around under the Empire’s nose. Letting her pick the time and place will also make it easier for her to trust us.”

“Why wouldn’t she trust you?” asked Barriss. “She wouldn’t be convinced by Palpatine’s anti-Jedi rhetoric, would she?”

“Of course not. The problem is that I can’t approach her directly. A random patrol isn’t likely to spot us unless they’ve been told to search for us, but getting past her security to her directly isn’t going to be easy with both the Imperials and Pantorans on their guard for each other, not to mention if we’re caught, her association with me would put Riyo in danger. We have to get some kind of message to her, and let her to come to us.”

“Does Senator Chuchi possess any secure frequencies we could contact her with?” asked Barriss.

“None that I know of.”

“If we can’t get to her directly, perhaps a subordinate of hers could be used to deliver the message to her,” Barriss suggested.

“Right. We need someone close enough to Riyo to talk to her directly. A live drop who can get a message to her,” Ahsoka said, pacing around the room.
“Who can we trust? The Empire could have agents anywhere, even unwilling ones.”

“Nobody. We don’t need to tell them everything, or enough to identify us, we only need to tell them enough to convince Riyo to come. We can’t do it in person, and so we need to get her a secure frequency to reach us some protocol to make sure the Empire doesn’t realize who we are, but some way of letting Riyo know it’s me.”

“I can’t help but feel we’re overcomplicating the issue,” said Barriss. “We’ve both infiltrated installations with more security than whatever the Pantoran government has provided to protect the senator, and we can use mind tricks on anyone who stops us.”

“True, but let’s face it, no matter how good we are, something unexpected always happens, and now we don’t have an army or our masters to back us up. And if there’s solid evidence that Riyo’s in contact with a pair of surviving Jedi, she’ll be killed on the spot, and the ‘treasonous’ actions will be played up by imperial propaganda as an excuse to crack down harder on Pantora. We have to play it safe this time,” Ahsoka said, pausing and trying to think. In the background, mixed in with the humming of the ship’s power generators, she picked up the faint sound of a large wheel rolling around the ship. “And I think I’ve figured out step one.”

The opportunity to take part in real clandestine operations was so exciting. Even if this was a glorified mail delivery, Ahsoka had been clear that this was the first step towards something much bigger, something that could really be a thorn in the Empire’s side.

Cici cheerfully rolled down the street, having to remind herself it wasn’t normal for astromechs to whistle a tune and stopping before she began. She had to be inconspicuous, eyeing her target. The civilians took no notice of her as she sped along, just a common droid, nothing to see here, move along, move along...

Pantora wasn’t particularly isolationist, but amongst the locals, the human woman Cici was following stood out easily as she moved about, not in much of a hurry. It wasn’t clear exactly where she was going, but it was taking her towards the industrial areas of the city, with fewer people around. Perfect.

Rolling in front of the woman, Cici bleeped a friendly greeting at her to get her attention. She was much nicer than the average meatbag, smiling at the astromech and crouching down slightly.

“I’m sorry little one, I don’t speak droid,” she said, then muttering to herself, “Though I suppose after all these years I should’ve learned by now.”

Cici bleeped at her again to keep her attention and scanned the environment, tracking the movements of a few Pantorans who were walking away, leaving the two of them in a lull in the pedestrian traffic. She also did a scan for any electronic surveillance that turned up nothing. Even the Empire couldn’t monitor everything at once.

“No no, I need to be going,” the woman said firmly. “You’ll have to talk to someone else.”

The last bystander moved out of earshot.

“Oh, I don’t think that will be necessary,” said Cici, ominously turned her dome towards her mark. “You’re exactly the person I want to talk to.”
The human’s reaction, or relative lack of one, surprised Cici. Even the battle-hardened Ahsoka had been alarmed by her speaking Basic. This one wasn’t fazed in the slightest, slowly, calmly moving out of her crouch and standing tall, arms crossed, looming over Cici.

“I’m listening,” she said.

“My employer wants to talk to your senator friend, without the Empire watching. We’re a bit new to this planet, but we figure rebellious types such as yourselves must know some place to hide and have a private chat.” A compartment on Cici’s side opened up, presenting a small data card for the woman to take. “Take it. It’s not much, just a frequency to contact us with and some instructions to throw off any eavesdroppers. Not enough to catch us if it turns out you’re working for the Empire.”

The woman’s face scrunched up at the implication she was an imperial agent. “Who is this master of yours?”

“Hey, I said ‘employer’, not ‘master’. And I can’t trust you with that information. I was only told give you that data, and a little message for Chuchi to prove we’re all friends. Ahem,” said Cici, her voice becoming more serious to deliver her line. “‘You will let us both pass’. Say it exactly like that, emphasis and everything. The emphasis is important, apparently. Your boss will know what it means. They’re waiting. Toodles!”

Then the droid revved up her wheel and zipped away, leaving a cloud of dust in her wake.

Ahsoka and Barriss waited patiently at the comm for hours. Each time they began to lose their concentration, there was some crackling of static to make them alert again, expecting contact.

The wait eventually dragged on so long they started occupying themselves, Barriss reading a psychology textbook she’d downloaded off the holonet while Ahsoka added some fresh designs to the droideka’s bronze armor. She’d customized the paint jobs to make them all distinguishable, like she’d seen the clones do, but she also wanted them to feel like a cohesive unit.

On each of the flat plates protecting their small heads, Ahsoka painted on the jagged lines and diamonds that marked her forehead. Ahsoka remembered her last battle at Mandalore, the clone army she was leading with their orange-and-white painted helmets made to match her colors. Thinking about the nightmare that battle had been almost made her stop, then she felt new drive when her ‘troops’ expressed approval of their new decals as much as their rigged metal bodies could.

It was therapeutic, calming Ahsoka’s nerves considerably. Riyo’s attendant was, logically, the most likely traitor, an outsider on Pantora working for the notoriously pro-human Empire. Still, when Ahsoka saw her, when she started putting together this plan, she didn’t feel any treachery around her, no warning from the Force. Not that the Force was an especially reliable or clear source of intel, but it was something in favor of this plan.

Communicating via a channel like this, even a secure one, was risky. And all of this was operating on the assumption that Riyo’s attendant would deliver the message to her and not the Empire, not that it would tell the enemy much.

Their comm had been rigged so that any transmission sent out would distort their voices to be unrecognizable. Riyo would know to do the same. None of them would refer to each other by their real names, obviously.
All this effort and evasiveness and paranoia, just to get an in-person conversation. Ahsoka wondered how much of it was even necessary. What were the odds that this one frequency would be listened to?

With the Empire so close, they couldn’t afford any half-measures.

After a while, Barriss set down her pad, rubbing her dried-out eyes.

“What were you reading about?” asked Ahsoka.

“Coping mechanisms and responses to trauma.”

“Um, is it helpful?”

“A great many things are suddenly making a great deal of sense, yes,” said Barriss, tilting her head back to stare at the ceiling and focus on something that wasn’t in arms reach, blinking rapidly to help rehydrate her bloodshot eyes. “Can I talk to you about something?”

“Sure. What is it?”

“I had a nightmare on Myrkr. Nothing unusual for me, however I’ve kept thinking about what it might mean.”

“What was the nightmare about?” asked Ahsoka.

“I was—” Barriss stopped short, staring worriedly at Ahsoka for a moment, then she became more resolute, glancing away from her while powering through the next few sentences. “I was inside a Star Destroyer. Dressed as an inquisitor. Presenting your lightsaber as a trophy.”

It didn’t take much thought for Ahsoka to put together what that implied, or why Barriss was reticent to talk about it: Barriss had killed her.

In the dream.

Eh. Big deal, I’ve forgiven you for things you’ve done in the real world, I’m not about to get angry over your subconscious.

“But Barriss, I know how guilty you feel about...stuff...but really, don’t beat yourself up over this,” Ahsoka said, trying to be firm but not dismissive. This actually had Barriss worried, when it really shouldn’t. “It was only a dream.”

“I don’t believe it was ‘only’ a dream. There was someone else there, whom I presented your saber to. I couldn’t get a good look, only enough to feel his presence in the Force. It was more darkness, more hatred, than I’ve ever felt before. I handed your saber over to him...and he killed me,” Barriss finished, her hand moving to feel her throat. “When I awoke, my throat hurt from being strangled to death.”

“What did he look like? Could it be anyone we’ve encountered?” Ahsoka asked, taking the nightmare much more seriously now. She’d learned about, and experienced, visions in the Force having a physical effect, but inflicting pain with nothing but a dream was unheard of.

“The dream didn’t provide any opportunity to get a direct look. Tall, bulky, a black cape, some kind of helmet, perhaps...that’s all.”

Ahsoka thought for a moment about who that could possibly have been, assuming this dream was
actually a vision Barriss had seen through the Force and that whoever had killed Barriss in it was a real person. It had to be someone who could command inquisitors, but it wasn’t the Pau’an they’d seen on Serenno. Maul was at large, but when Ahsoka had last seen him, he was in no shape to be commanding anyone. He’d mentioned his brother was dead as well, so that wasn’t an option. Ventress was presumed dead, and even if she was still alive, Ahsoka couldn’t see her working for the Empire. It could be someone new, someone they hadn’t met yet. Dooku was dead, it having been all over the news that Anakin had killed him and brought the war closer to its end.

And if Dooku was the Sith apprentice, and Palpatine was his master-

“I think you got a look at the Emperor’s new apprentice,” said Ahsoka. “There’s always two Sith. Palpatine’s still the master, so whoever’s giving orders to the inquisitors must be the apprentice who replaced Dooku. I’m surprised a new apprentice was found so quickly.”

“Palpatine is absolute evil, and one of the most intelligent people in the galaxy,” Barriss grudgingly stated. “He likely had a candidate to replace Dooku on hand already. The count was powerful, however I doubt he was ever anything more than a tool to start the Clone Wars.”

“Hm,” Ahsoka murmured. “We still don’t know who he is, though. And I get why my lightsaber might be a part of your dream, but what does it matter to him?”

Both girls jumped as the transmitter crackled, and the Eclipse received a signal.

“Is anyone there?” came a voice, deep and distorted beyond recognition.

Exchanging a few mixed looks of nervousness and excitement with Barriss, Ahsoka answered.

“I can hear you,” she said.

Ahsoka thought she heard a brief sigh of relief from the other end. The distortion made it tough to tell. “I’m glad. And I assume you have good reason for contacting me, given the current situation.”

It was her. It didn’t sound like Riyo, though that was exactly the point. Even so, Ahsoka could pick up on little things, inflection from her accent, the way the words were emphasized.

“Now that we’ve made contact, is there a way we can meet in person? My reason for contacting you can’t be resolved over a comm.”

There was a pause. Riyo’s initial reaction worried Ahsoka, made it seem like her presence was unwelcome. It could certainly pose a problem with the target on her back, but Riyo should understand that Ahsoka wouldn’t be here without reason.

“We’ve figured out a procedure for these kinds of things. Follow these instructions exactly.”

The rendezvous point wasn’t anywhere in the city. Instead Ahsoka was flying the Eclipse to the southern continent, to an abandoned mine shaft. There were other active mines in the area, so this area struck the delicate balance of being just deserted enough that they weren’t likely to be seen, but occupied enough that it wouldn’t matter if they were. It was also one of the few places the Empire wasn’t currently trying to assert its authority, as it no longer held any valuable resources for them to exploit.
Setting the freighter down inside the mouth of one of the larger natural caves, Ahsoka and Barriss headed out, spotting the entrance to the mine shaft, and little else.

There wasn’t any other ship in sight, so either Riyo hadn’t arrived yet, or she’d chosen a better hiding spot for whatever craft she’d come in than Ahsoka had.

Upon arriving and surveying the area, Ahsoka realized Riyo’s instructions had been...vague, in retrospect. There had been a clear explanation of how to find an entrance to this mine, but not much about the underground facility that had been dug out, or where, exactly, Riyo was expecting them to go. The center, presumably. Wherever that was.

“Please tell me we’re not splitting up...” Barriss said warily, her experiences on Geonosis and Dantooine leaving her with very little love for underground tunnels. All Ahsoka could do was stare blankly at her and shrug. “...In that case, I suppose I’ll take the left route.”

“You have your saber on you?”

“Of course. Are you armed?”

“Yep. Give me a call if you find anyone,” said Ahsoka, turning right to try and find her old friend. “You’re certain about this?” asked Barriss.

“I...think it’ll work out. Also, the droidekas have been ordered to storm the mine searching for us if we don’t check in within the hour. I’m confident we’ll be fine.”

Walking around impatiently, shining her light in hopes of finding some signs or a map, Barriss considered whether or not she wanted to head back to the surface, at least until Ahsoka signaled her to say she’d found the senator on her own.

It didn’t take long before she found an open cavern, sides dotted with entrances to other caves. In the middle of the room was a lamp, too new to have been left behind when the mine was shut down. This had to be the place. Barriss press a button to illuminate the cavern.

Regular indentations along the ground and walls indicated the presence of mining equipment, probably making this room where ore was initially transported to and crushed. One of the largest caverns in the place, and a good spot to meet.

Lost for a moment in her study of the abandoned facility, Barriss heard the sound of approaching footsteps, then turned around and saw Senator Chuchi in front of her. The senator stared at Barriss for a moment in confusion, then her eyes widened with recognition and she drew her blaster.

That human woman from the imperial command center was standing next to the senator- and that nervous, demure attendant was presently aiming her own blaster at Barriss. A blaster considerably larger than Riyo’s, the kind powerful enough to punch holes in body armor, held with far greater calm than the senator was exuding. And it was aimed between Barriss’s eyes so precisely she could see directly down the barrel. Barriss didn’t have time to question this woman’s identity before Riyo spoke, demanding answers.

“Barriss Offee,” Riyo said nervously. “Keep your hands where I can see them, but do not raise them.
Where is Ahsoka? What have you done with her?"

The imprecise demand confused Barriss as she tried to figure out how exactly to position her arms without alarming Riyo further, eventually settling on keeping them straight and at her sides, hovering a half-meter off her hips. The senator must’ve been aware of Jedi mind-tricks and the hand-motions that accompanied them, while also trying to keep Barriss’s hands away from her lightsaber.

Barriss could see Riyo was terrified of her, and could hardly fault her for that. From the instant the latter had pulled out a weapon, Barriss had come up with four, no, now it was five different ways she could’ve disarmed her. One of which involved literally cutting off her arms, and it upset Barriss beyond words that those thoughts came so instinctively even it’d been so long since she’d fought in the Clone Wars. Even now, she wanted nothing more than to Force-pull the weapons from their hands so she could stop feeling so anxious, only stopping because she knew it would only escalate things. Riyo’s escort was also a factor Barriss wasn’t sure how to account for.

This was another reason Barriss had been so worried when she and Ahsoka were separated. Ahsoka was supposed to be here to explain things. Riyo had come expecting an old friend, and had instead found a traitor with an antagonistic history surrounding said friend, whom she knew possessed an array of telekinetic and mind control powers, and also probably an energy sword that can cut through anything. All after going to great lengths to ensure secrecy on both ends. It didn’t exactly paint the situation in a good light.

“I haven’t done anything to Ahsoka. We came here together, but were separated. Please, if you’ll be patient and wait a few minutes, she’ll be here, I’m sure of it,” Barriss said, not sounding very sure of anything. “Please, I can contact her with my comm, if you’ll allow it.”

“Communicators won’t work here,” said Riyo. “Signals can’t penetrate the trace amounts of cortosis in the rock, even with the larger veins or ore removed. Makes this place ideal for face-to-face meetings like this. No remote eavesdroppers.”

“What? How can I prove that I’m with Ahsoka if I can’t reach her? Why would you pick this location?”

“There was only supposed to be one contact meeting me here! I wasn’t expecting you to be mixed up in this!” Riyo said angrily, suppressing the words enough that they weren’t quite a yell. “Why would Ahsoka be working with you after what you did to her?”

That was a fair question. After all the time spent traveling with Ahsoka, Barriss couldn’t think of any answer which Riyo would be satisfied with. Even Barriss didn’t feel like she understood Ahsoka’s motivation for helping her most of the time. Of course, she wouldn’t have to if Ahsoka would get here. Hopefully, enough light from the lamp would reflect through all the tunnels to guide her here. Or she’d sense Barriss’s stress.

“Ahsoka...will do whatever she thinks is right, regardless of how sensible it may appear to others,” Barriss said.

To her surprise, the senator paused, thought that over, and gave a slight nod of acceptance.

“That does sound like Ahsoka,” said Riyo, her mood brightening momentarily before snapping back to her previous state of justified paranoia. “Say I believe you for a moment. Why did Ahsoka contact me? She should be keeping out of the Empire’s sights, not throwing herself at them...” the senator paused and glanced off the side. “Who am I kidding, it’s a miracle a building didn’t explode the moment she set foot on the moon.”
“We have a data file,” Barriss interjected. “Encrypted, we don’t know what’s on it. Countess Midla of Serenno instructed us to deliver it to you.”

Studying Riyo’s reaction, Barriss could tell that she’s directly familiar with the countess, though she couldn’t tell if she knew what the data could contain.

“Does anyone else know about this meeting?” asked Riyo.

“No. Only Ahsoka and myself were meant to come.”

Riyo paused for what felt like a long time, weighing her options. Her bodyguard stayed vigilant, ready to burn a hole through Barriss’s head if she tried anything. It already felt like her cold stare was cutting through Barriss.

“I’m sorry,” Riyo sighed, “if you’re telling the truth, you’ll forgive me for this.”

Then she lowered her weapon slightly, and shot Barriss in the torso with a stun blast.

Chapter End Notes

We're back, just in time for the one-year anniversary of publishing the first chapter.
Barriss’s whole body was numb, save for the throbbing in her head. All she could tell from her sense of balance and the dim awareness of her body’s position was that she was sitting. She couldn’t move a muscle, or even open her eyes, only able to hear the conversation going on around her.

"I still can’t believe you shot her."

"What would you have had me do? Let her mind-trick me? Or cut me in half with her sword?"

“First of all, you’re strong-willed enough that wouldn’t affect you. Second, her saber is a bit...unreliable.”

“Don’t be coy with me. Either one of you is a match for a small army, and the last time I saw her, she was being lead out of the courtroom after confessing to mass murder. What were you thinking breaking her out of prison?”

“I wasn’t going to leave her in the hands of the Empire, no matter what she’d done. Who knows what Palpatine would’ve done with her eventually.”

“She certainly seemed to be quite creative in the area of sabotage. Perhaps he could've put her to work there.”

That remark stung. Not that Barriss could exactly deny it, but still, it stung.

“Riyo, you don’t need to... She’s conscious,” Ahsoka said abruptly.

“What? How can you tell?” asked Riyo.

“What? How can you tell?” asked Ahsoka, ignoring Riyo to walk over to Barriss. She could feel a hand on her shoulder, nudging her gently.

Barriss groaned weakly, eventually working out a low “Yes” and experimentally twitching her fingers. She’d recovered enough to open her eyes now, squinting as she adjusted to the light.

“First time getting hit with a stun shot? Don’t worry, you’ll be back on your feet in a minute,” came a third voice. Barriss turned her rather stiff neck, the indistinct blob to her left slowly focusing into an elderly woman sitting in a chair in a corner of the room, smiling at Barriss after comfortably watching the argument between Ahsoka and Riyo.

“...Countess Midla?” said Barriss. She hoped she’d remembered her name right, still being somewhat light-headed.

“Glad to see Chuchi didn’t hit you too hard. And it’s just ‘Midla’ now, my property on Serenno being under the control of the Empire,” said Midla. “I’ve never been one to fuss over titles.”

Riyo’s bodyguard then entered the room, still fully armed and suited up, and carrying a tray full of tea which she quietly brought around to everyone. Barriss was getting control of her extremities again, enough to take one of the cups.

“Thank you,” Barriss said, a bit uneasy in the presence of the stoic guard. The tea was quite good
though, and the warmth helped her relax.

“Yes, thank you, this is excellent,” Midla said happily, as she casually poured something out of a flask into her cup.

“You’re welcome,” said the bodyguard, her voice polite if not especially warm. She looked oddly comfortable in full combat gear, a far cry from the scared, helpless attendant act she’d been putting up around the imperials.

Barriss worked up enough energy to sit up straighter and noticed her lightsaber and stun pistol were both missing.

“I’m sorry, who are you, exactly?” asked Barriss. “You’re certainly no secretary.”

“Barriss, this is Sabé,” answered Ahsoka. “She was one of Padmé’s handmaidens when she was queen of Naboo.”

“And currently, the unofficial liaison between Queen Apailana and Senator Chuchi,” said Sabé, setting the tray down on the small table at the room’s center, then taking her place next to Riyo. With the refreshments served, she remained quiet, stoically standing around with her back to the wall, keeping everyone else in her line of sight.

“You’re in communication with the Naboo government? To what end?” asked Barriss.

“To start fighting back against the Empire, obviously,” said Midla. “What else?”

“I will not take part in violent action against the Empire,” Riyo said adamantly, getting an eyeroll from Midla in response.

“It’s a little late for peaceful negotiation...” grumbled Ahsoka.

“Where are we?” asked Barriss, studying her surroundings. They were all in a spacious office in what looked like an upper-class house. There were some windows behind the desk Riyo was sitting at, but Barriss couldn’t see anything out of them but sky from this angle, and there were no sounds of any traffic.

“We’re in one of my safehouses, at the outskirts of the capital city, away from imperial eyes, and with plenty of amenities,” said Midla, enjoying her ‘tea’. “Purchased before the Clone War under a false name, but it’s listed as the property of an imperial citizen now. A wealthy, human citizen, the kind of person imperial authorities won’t dare or care to harass. You, Ahsoka, and I will be safe here.”

“Why didn’t we meet here instead of that abandoned mine shaft?” asked Barriss, annoyed and wishing that little encounter had been avoided as she tried to sit up straighter and work out the stiffness in her neck.

“I’ve only just arrived on the moon,” said Midla, then wryly adding, “Nicely done, you two. I’m quite proud of myself for handing sensitive data over to such dependable young women as yourselves, who beat me to its intended recipient by a whole half-hour. Speaking of which, you still have the data, I hope?”

“Hey, we’ve been pretty busy for a while, alright?” Ahsoka said defensively as she pulled the data card originally given to her back on Serenno out of her pocket, and plugged it into the office’s monitor while Riyo took a seat at the desk and began entering passwords to unlock it. “So, what is it, anyway? Schematics of a Separatist weapon we can fight the Empire with? Details of Palpatine’s
long-term plans for establishing imperial control over the Outer Rim? Evidence of some atrocity the Empire’s committed?”

“Good guesses. All good guesses,” said Midla, smiling to herself as she got up and walked over to them, looking over Ryoi’s shoulder at the opened files. “It’s a database with evidence of various acts of embezzlement, disloyalty, infidelity, bribery, and outright treason committed by dozens of the highest officers in the imperial military and government. HA!”

While Midla smiled at the treasure trove of blackmail material, Ahsoka and Riyo stared dumbly at the screen, their wide eyes darting around as they read through all the documents.

“So...we can expose the corruption to new outlets?” asked Barriss, unable to see what the others were looking at. She was still on the couch, testing out the movements of her limbs before she would risk taking a few steps.

“The media? Please, they’re all too gutless to risk fighting the Empire. Hell, the way they report current events it seems like half of them still think they’re in the Republic. No, we threaten to expose this information to his rivals,” said Midla, her grin looking all the more devious basked in the light of the computer monitor. “Everyone knows how corrupt the Empire’s power structure is. A bunch of greedy, xenophobic monsters who are in their present positions through sucking up to Palpatine, and will maintain their positions at the expense of everyone else in the galaxy. But they’re all ambitious, and desperate for weapons to use against one another and curry favor with the Emperor. Provide the right pieces of information to the right moff, governor, senator, or admiral, and we can watch them cannibalize each other.”

“How much of this stuff do you have?” asked Ahsoka, incredulously scrolling through dossier after dossier.

“Oh, plenty. This right here is only scratching the surface, information I decided would be useful to the good senator and her allies in the imperial senate. Most of it was gathered before the Empire’s formation, actually. Plenty of these people were involved in the Republic’s government and navy, back before imperial culture ramped up their collective paranoia and made them harder to expose,” said Midla. “Like Tarkin. Did you know he’s having an affair with one of his students at the Imperial Academy?”

“That’s a grotesque abuse of one’s position,” said Riyo, while Ahsoka was silent and similarly disgusted.

“True, though I don’t feel too bad seeing as the young woman in question appears to be just as much of an evil sadist as he is. His poor wife, though...anyway, the moff currently residing in Imperial HQ a few kilometers away, Disra, is guilty of plenty of stuff. Subtracting funds from his budget for personal investments, for starters. Tell the Economics Ministry, and they’ll tout the removal of Disra as a demonstration of efficacy before the Emperor. Even better, he hired assassins to kill this predecessor. We could threaten to inform Grand Moff Tarkin, let him know he could be next, and Disra wouldn’t survive the hour. Not to mention there are a dozen planetary governors who’d love his position and would help take him down if we showed them how he’d overinflated his numbers when it came to mining quotas.”

Ignoring the discussion for a moment and stepping away from the others, Ahsoka approached Barriss. “Do you think you can stand?”

“Yes,” Barriss answered, awkwardly getting onto her feet. Ahsoka got a grip on Barriss’s right hand and upper arm, helping her through the first few steps over to the others. Barriss could swear she saw Sabé looking at the two of them, her eyebrow raised. It was only for a second before she went back
to being stoic, and Barriss had no idea what to make of it.

“How did you get all this?” asked Ahsoka.

“The leadership killed at on Mustafar was not the last of the Separatist movement, and neither are the losses in the remaining holdouts,” Midla explained. “We had spies, informants, and listening devices all over the Republic government as part of counterintelligence operations. The people that weren’t found remained involved in day-to-day affairs, and ingratiated themselves into the new power structure.”

“How many people did you have in the Republic?” asked Barriss, alarmed by the reveal of how many leaks must have been in the Republic military and government for Midla to have incriminating information on so many figures.

“To be fair, they’re not all ‘my’ people. Some of them were employed by various Separatist leaders and generals as part of the war,” said Midla. “I’m simply the last woman standing. Or at least, the highest one.”

“That didn’t answer the question,” Ahsoka noted.

“First rule of counterintelligence is to never tell people more truth than strictly necessary,” said Midla. “Sorry, but no matter how improbable it may be for anyone here to inform the Empire, I’m not going to say anything more about my agents other than the fact that they exist. Perhaps.”

“And what if it turns out because you kept things secret we weren’t able to coordinate effectively?” asked Ahsoka.

“Then it will have been ‘necessary’ to tell you more, then, wouldn’t it?” said Midla, stretching and yawning. “Really, it’s not complex. We’ll discuss how exactly to use this intel to take care of Disra tomorrow. Right now, I think we could all use some rest, your friend especially.”

“What? Don’t you think this is a _little_ more important?” asked Ahsoka.

“You’re free to stay up all night planning if you want, but Disra isn’t going to be in his office until tomorrow, and it isn’t as if we’re on a time limit. The Empire will be there when we wake up,” Midla explained. “Also, I’m old, I’ve had a long trip, and this is my house you’re in. Good night.”

With that, Midla walked out of the room, leaving everyone else somewhat unsure of what to do now until Riyo broke the silence. “Sabé, please show Offee to her room. I’d like to talk to Ahsoka alone.”

Sabé nodded and turned towards Barriss, only to remain in place when Ahsoka stepped between.

“Will you be all right?” asked Ahsoka.

“Of course,” Barriss, nervously looking between the other three women. “Though I would like to get some rest. Please, this is why we’re here.”

Once Barriss and Sabé had exited and had walked down the hall and out of earshot, Riyo snapped around to face Ahsoka.

“How are you so calm with her around?” Riyo asked, more riled up than Ahsoka had ever seen her.
“Riyo, I have everything under control,” Ahsoka said, hoping her calm tone would get Riyo to ease up a little. “I know what you’re thinking, but please trust me on this.”

Rubbing her temples for a moment, Riyo wasn’t convinced. “Even so, you can’t be in denial of how odd this looks. After putting in all that effort to contact me, you bring along a known traitor to back you up? You place this much confidence in Offee? You didn’t think there’s a chance she’d pose a threat?”

Ahsoka sighed. No, she was not oblivious to the fact she’d been far more sympathetic towards Barriss than most people would consider rational, and all variants of Riyo’s questions and many more had weighed heavily on her mind well before she’d even considered freeing Barriss.

“Barriss was my friend for years before the bombing. Years before the war had time to wear her down. I know it might seem insane, but I know Barriss. I understand why she did what she did. I have ever since that day in the courtroom. It’s the reason I left the order. Not just because of how the council didn’t help to defend me, but because Barriss was right about the Jedi.”

“And that gives her license to commit those murders?”

“Of course not. You don’t understand, Riyo, she isn’t happy she was right, and isn’t proud of anything she’s done.”

Riyo pursed her lips for a moment. “It sounds like you’re making excuses for what she did to you and her other victims.”

“We’ve been through a lot since I freed her. Saved each other a few times, fought together against the Empire, and I think together we can make a difference.”


“Riyo, I know your worried about me, but could you please stop trying to find reasons to hate Barriss?”

“I don’t hate her, I’m concerned for your safety,” said Riyo.

“It’s a bit late for that,” said Ahsoka. “If she wanted to hurt me, she’s had plenty of opportunities, especially seeing as I’ve been sleeping next to her ever since the rescue.”

“You’ve been WHAT!”?

“Not like that. We share a room on the Eclipse,” Ahsoka clarified calmly, albeit with a bit of omission. No way in hell was she going to bring up that weird first night.

“That is...marginally less worrying,” said Riyo.

Ahsoka took a deep breath. It wasn’t like she’d expected this conversation to be easy or hadn’t seen it coming. Still, she’d hoped Riyo would be more willing to trust her judgement. “Riyo, Barriss is my partner. She’s a skilled fighter and tactician, has medical expertise, and the two of us might be the only Force-users left who are fighting against Palpatine. She’s staying,” Ahsoka said, making it clear this wasn’t open to discussion anymore.

There was no need to use the Force to sense how strung out Riyo was. Even when they were dealing with the Trade Federation, she’d been more at ease than she was now. Back then, at least, victory had seemed possible.
“I...I’m sorry our reunion hasn’t been on the best of terms,” said Riyo, taking a deep breath, trying to get past the stressful events of the past few hours. Then she stepped forward and hugged Ahsoka. “It’s good to see you, Ahsoka. It’s been so long, and with the Empire’s ongoing hunt for the Jedi- I’d feared the worst.”

“It’s good to see you too, Riyo,” said Ahsoka. “Um, how have you been?”

Riyo paused for a moment, taking long enough that it told Ahsoka that she didn’t know where to begin, and that none of it was good.

“There is a Star Destroyer in orbit over our largest city. The moff is abusing his power at every opportunity simply to show the Empire can do whatever it wants to us, primarily in the exploitation of resources and disregard of any legal means of protest. Pantora is being used as a symbol of what can happen to worlds who resist the Emperor, the propaganda machine is trying to paint the increasing stranglehold as the fault of myself and others in our government for trying to unreasonably stand up for people’s rights, I’m fighting back by focusing more on engaging with Pantoran citizens and am maintaining my popularity as a result, and trying to reform the senators from the Loyalist Committee to act against the Empire, and with Padmé gone-” Riyo stopped herself short, recalling who she was talking to. “Senator Amidala has left a large gap in the Senate’s power structure. Mon Mothma, Organa, and I are holding things together, for now.”

“You seem to be doing pretty well, all things considered,” Ahsoka said reassuringly. Being reminded of Padmé brought a twinge of sadness, but she wasn’t going to burst into tears, especially not now. “I’ve been around the galaxy since the Republic was dissolved. Compared to some places, Pantora’s actually in good shape.”

It was true, even if it was a low bar to set. Coruscant was becoming more and more socially and economically stratified as Palpatine’s elite solidified their power over the planet. The Wookiees had been outright enslaved. Various Outer Rim systems had been annexed by the Empire to be exploited for their mineral resources. And of course, the recently-conquered Separatist worlds were all being forced to pay reparations for the war and stifling their economies, not that any of the money really went towards helping struggling populations in the Clone Wars’ wake when there were new Star Destroyers to be built.

Nevertheless, the truth didn’t comfort Riyo in the slightest, and she stared out the window, out at Pantora’s capital. Though it wasn’t visible, she and Ahsoka were both aware and thinking of the imperial warship hovering several kilometers over it.

“The imperials are...evil. They’re evil,” Riyo said, worriedly running her fingers through her hair. “Hateful, ignorant, petty, sadistic monsters. I’ve worked with unscrupulous people in politics. People who will only assist others to get whatever it is that they want. Still, they could be reasoned with. Negotiated with. They had certain lines they wouldn’t cross. Their goals were often self-serving, but they were also usually rational, and not even necessarily immoral. I’ve never dealt with brazen, untempered evil before, Ahsoka. The Empire doesn’t even hide it.”

“We can beat them,” Ahsoka said, walking in front of Riyo to draw her attention. “We will beat them.”

They stood around in silence, staring out the window, both of them short on conversation topics now that they were actively avoiding the big ones.

“Um...so how do you know Midla?” Ahsoka eventually asked.

“Oh, I know she was a part of the negotiations when Pantora was considering leaving the Republic,
but only came into contact with her personally shortly after the Palpatine declared the formation of the New Order. I suspect she’s been seeking out other dissident senators,” explained Riyo.

“That’s perfect,” said Ahsoka. Organized resistance at the highest levels of government was everything she’d been hoping for. “Senators with the necessary connections may be able to get enough funds to buy some of the dreadnoughts.”

“What? What dreadnoughts?”

“The fleet of two hundred dreadnoughts I need to find buyers for so they can be used to fight the Empire,” said Ahsoka, grinning.

“Why do you have a fleet of dreadnoughts?” asked Riyo, dumbstruck by the reveal of Ahsoka’s apparently expansive supply of military hardware. “Where did you get a fleet of dreadnoughts?”

“Ummmm,” Ahsoka stalled, remembering Karrde’s instructions. She trusted Riyo, but the more everyone knew, the easier it would be for the Empire to figure out where the ships were coming from when they inevitably kept popping up. “I found a seller, and I’m now working as a glorified saleswoman. Two hundred dreadnought-class warships for ten million credits each.”

“You’re being evasive about where you got the dreadnoughts?” asked Riyo, tensing up slightly and unamused by the half-hearted deflection.

“This is one of those things where the fewer people know, the better. Sorry,” Ahsoka said, realizing the point both Karrde and Midla had made to her.

“Hm. Ten million each,” Riyo said, thinking intently on the problem. “That’s quite a sum, even for some of the wealthier senators. And there aren’t many who would brazen enough to form their own armies.”

“It’s a fraction of market price,” said Ahsoka. “And I think there are a lot more people willing to fight than you think.”

That comment didn’t sit well with Riyo. Ahsoka could sense how conflicted she was about all this. She was a senator, one whose planet had already come close to being engulfed in war not long ago.

“I...can’t condone this kind of rebellion against the Empire,” Riyo said reluctantly. “But I may know other senators who would.”

"I didn't realize stun blasts would leave you so sore...” Barriss said, as the pounding in her skull and the pain in her neck was becoming too severe to ignore now that she was moving around again.

"They don't," said Sabé. "I don't know what you've seen in vids, but people don't often gracefully fall onto their backs when they're hit. When Riyo stunned you, your knees buckled and you fell forward onto your face. That's why you have a headache. And that bruise."

Reaching up to touch her face, Barriss flinched as she felt a sore spot on her forehead, visualizing what sort of awkward, undignified position she must've fallen in to be struck there.

Sabé motioned to a door on their left, opening it and waving for Barriss to walk in. Barriss couldn’t
help but notice how guarded Sabé had been around her. After spending so much time with Ahsoka, and various people who either didn’t know who she was or didn’t care, it was an uncomfortable reminder of how she’d been regarded as a threat not long ago. Although, she could hardly deny it was true, and if anyone had a valid motive for acting this way, it was an actual bodyguard who was on the job.

First impressions of the room were pleasant, with similar design to Midla’s office. Definitely better than the ship or the smuggler compound. Overall, this place seemed too ostentatious to be a safehouse.

“Where are my saber and pistol?” asked Barriss. She knew the question could sound hostile, but she wanted her items back. Clearly, Sabé had been the one who’d taken them, being the one responsible for protecting Riyo. Barriss did try to keep her tone neutral. Considering her latter’s understandable reservations about Barriss, Sabé wasn’t being deliberately rude. Only very, very professional.

“I’ll be back with them in a moment,” Sabé said after a few seconds. Evidently, and perhaps wisely, she wasn’t keeping her potential opponent’s weapons on her person. It didn’t take long to return from wherever she’d gone, probably not wanting to leave Barriss to her own devices for long if she really was dangerous. Back in the room, she handed the two weapons over to Barriss, then walked out to return to Riyo with a warning, her previously impassive face suddenly becoming intense. “If you make me regret giving those back, I’ll make you regret leaving the Empire’s custody. Understand?”

Barriss tensed up and nodded rapidly as Sabé shut the door behind her, setting the weapons down on the nightstand and lying down, glad for the calm after such a tumultuous day.

The room was more opulent than Barriss normally preferred. Her quarters in the temple had been sparse, not at all luxurious like this place was. Nothing was uncomfortable, per se, it simply served its function and made it easy for Barriss to focus and study. Grateful as she was for these kinds of accommodations, it all felt unnecessary.

But this bed she was lying on was sooooo soft.

The room also had its own bathroom adjacent to it, similarly clean and spacious. Best of all, the shower had actual shampoo in it. Ahsoka didn’t have any need to purchase it, and Barriss hadn’t had the opportunity to buy any for herself, so she’d been making do with the sonic cleaner in the Eclipse’s refresher. Also, water. Her hair hadn’t been this soft and clean in a year.

After drying herself off and getting dressed, Barriss took a look at herself in the mirror. As Sabé had mentioned, the right half of her forehead was dominated by an ugly, purple-brown bruise, which she poked at experimentally. Barriss debated whether she even wanted to try what she was thinking, or let it heal naturally.

From a pragmatic point of view, it would be better to remove it soon. One less thing to draw attention from bystanders.

Holding her hand over the area, she closed her eyes and concentrated.

*It is only a bruise. I can do this. I think.*

She felt the blood, the skin, and began repairing the damaged capillaries to allow the blood to flow out of the skin and return it to normal.

The pain of her head slowly diminished, and when she opened her eyes a minute later, the bruise
was gone. It was such a small thing, but it was still enough that Barriss needed to sit down, staring at her hands as she idly opened and closed them.

She could still heal. She still had one ability left that couldn’t be used to harm others. After everything that had happened, her expulsion from the Jedi, her declining state of mind, exposure to the ysalamiri, her fear and uncertainty, she still had this one thing from her past that didn’t cause her pain. Or cause other people pain. Or remind her of it.

A knock on the door stopped her from going to sleep immediately, and Barriss answered it to find Midla there.

“Just checking in to make sure you were comfortable,” she said, with a somewhat wry smile.

“Very,” said Barriss, welcoming her host into the room. Despite Midla’s rather casual manner of speech, her movements had a distinct elegance to them. “Thank you for accommodating us. I’m certain Ahsoka is similarly appreciative. Though I am concerned as to the security. It feels...too easy for us to all be occupying such a conspicuous residence.”

“Sometimes hiding in plain sight is the best route. We’re evil criminals, after all- we’re supposed to be hiding out in a cave somewhere, subsisting on dirty rainwater, not living in an upper-class neighborhood with a view of the ocean. Nobody’s going to notice us. And my tracks are well-covered, don’t you worry. There are more than enough falsified documents, dead ends, bribes, and uncooperative bureaucrats to throw off the average imperial from finding out who really owns this manor,” Midla said reassuringly. “Also, despite Sabé’s concerns, we’re not defenseless. The walls of this place are filled with an advanced security system and plenty of electronic countermeasures that’ll expose any listening device and block unauthorized transmissions. Even if someone knew we were here, they wouldn’t be able to spy on us.”

“Will the ‘average imperial’ be charged with hunting you?” asked Barriss. “You were the unofficial ruler of Serenno for a brief period.”

“True, but Serenno’s been conquered. That was the priority, not me personally. As far as the Empire is aware, I wasn’t a major part of the war effort,” said Midla. “Though I am still wanted for crimes against the Empire.”

“I suppose...How are you funding these safehouses and spying operations?” asked Barriss.

“Well, as an aristocrat, I have no shortage of money discretely stashed away in various banks across the galaxy. And, after the death of Count Dooku, many of his considerable assets were willed to fund the CIS war effort. Then the majority of the remaining leaders were killed, most of whom controlled expansive business empires, their own wealth became similarly committed to the war, leaving me one of the most prominent remaining Separatists and with access to all that money. Which then placed me in control of that considerable wealth, in addition to my own,” Midla said, smiling. “Despite being a wanted fugitive, I’m currently one of the wealthiest people in the galaxy.”

Barriss nearly became slack-jawed as she considered the amount of money, enough to fund a galactic war, had by succession fallen into the hands of someone who already had a massive sum of her own. Despite the circumstances, the thought that someone opposed to the Empire had access to so many credits was a small relief to Barriss. It meant that not everyone in power would side with the Empire to benefits themselves. Despite misgivings about the Clone Wars, and the fact Midla clearly had some involvement in it, Barriss had some respect her for standing up against corruption.

This also meant Midla probably had enough credits to purchase Karrde’s dreadnoughts, and could use them.
Barriss grappled with the idea for a moment, nervously looking away from Midla and wringing her hands a bit. The idea of bringing that fleet to bear would only spread more destruction and war across the galaxy still gnawed at her like it had back on Myrkr.

But the Empire was already doing that, regardless of what Barriss did.

Maybe if she did this, it would be able to stop the violence sooner and save more lives in the long run, even if she had to be responsible for some deaths now, it would all work out in the end aaaaaaaaaannnddd this line of thinking was becoming unsettlingly familiar to her.

“Are you all right?” asked Midla. This pause in the conversation was lasting longer than Barriss realized.

*This isn’t the same war. This isn’t the same enemy.*

*The Empire isn’t a group of people who are fed up with a corrupt system and want to leave it. It IS the corrupt system.*

*The Republic waged war in a futile attempt to hold itself together. The Empire won’t stop at its own borders.*

Barriss let out a deep sigh.

“Exactly how wealthy are you?” she asked. “Because Ahsoka and I may have a way to replace your lost fleet.”

Chapter End Notes

Everybody please give a warm welcome to Sabé, Padmé's body double from The Phantom Menace. Played by Keira Knightley, so you can imagine her taking part in all this.

Looking back on the earlier chapters, Midla was kind of..."meh". She served her purpose in the story and I wasn't certain I should bring her back, but I think I've figured out what to do to make her a more interesting character: give her Carrie Fisher's "incurable case of doesn't give a shit", which works since I'd originally envisioned her as a more unscrupulous General Leia. She sort of had it already, now it's at the forefront, especially with her acting as the token Separatist rubbing the rise of the Empire in the face of all the good little senators who stuck with the Republic despite its corruption. The Vodka Aunt of the early rebellion.
Barriss woke up in the very early in the morning, hours before sunrise. She had no idea why, seeing as she wasn’t having another nightmare and there wasn’t any noise to wake her up.

This was the first time she’d had a room to herself since her cell. It may not be particularly homely, but the Eclipse was a good ship, and Barriss had grown accustomed to company. Maybe that was why she’d woken up. Even unconscious, she’d noticed there was no engine noise, no faint flow of the ventilation, no distant clanking of wandering droidekas. No Ahsoka. Barriss briefly considered going to her for company, then decided against it. A little alone time would be good.

Eventually, she had to get used to herself.

Sitting up in her bed, Barriss’s eyes slowly adjusted to the light, enough for her to navigate around the unfamiliar room. She got out of bed, taking a look out the window to see where all the light was coming from.

Ordo Plutonia, the giant, icy planet Pantora orbited, was full high in the night sky.

Getting dressed, Barriss quietly moved out the door to explore the house, moving slowly down the hall and into a living room, inspecting her temporary home. It wasn’t like she’d been conscious when she was brought in. She had no idea how big the place even was.

“Can’t sleep?” came a voice, scaring Barriss out of her wits. A lamp switched on, not bright enough to be completely blinding, but enough that it took a moment for Barriss’s eyes to adjust again.

Sabé was sitting a few meters away from Barriss in a comfortable-looking chair, and had been doing so in the dark, making no detectable noise, nor was she feeling enough nervousness or any emotion about the situation for Barriss to sense. Her blaster lay on the armrest, placed so that a normal sitting position placed the guard’s palm just over the grip without drawing attention.

Does everyone in the galaxy have insomnia? wondered Barriss, recalling her similar encounter with Karrde.

“What’re you doing?” asked Barriss.

“I’m a bodyguard escorting my employer in an unfamiliar setting with unfamiliar people. What does it look like I’m doing?” she asked rhetorically, using one hand to open a bottle and take a stimulant pill, probably not her first one of the night, while the other hand remained near the blaster.

Barriss noticed Sabé was between her and an unrecognized door. Riyo’s room? Some marks on the carpet indicated the chair had been dragged to its current position.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t- Wait, why are you two still here?”

“We still need to work out a plan. Also, having the senator randomly disappear from her home throws off the imperials. It isn’t as if they can arrest her for that, at least not yet. Multiple times now, I’ve had her stay somewhere other than her own home. Informing certain staff members of different false locations I’m monitoring lets us track down leaks. I look forward to seeing what this latest excursion turns up,” said Sabé. “What are you doing up and about?”
“I’ve been having trouble sleeping, and wanted to learn more about this place. After all, I was unconscious when I arrived.”

“Two stories tall, along with a basement which contains a backup generator and walls capable of withstanding anything short of direct turbolaser fire. The kitchen is stock with a variety of canned goods, and some high-quality alcohol. There’s a small gym with decent training equipment. One master bedroom and a total of seven guest rooms. A total of three exits, plus thirteen ground-level windows large enough for a humanoid to fit through, though I’m not sure how breakable they are,” Sabé said clinically. “Midla did well choosing and modifying it to function as a well-protected, intermittently-used safehouse for important persons.”

“Where’s the Eclipse?” asked Barriss. “I assume a residence this lavish has a small landing area.”

“Down the hall, take a right, then a left is an enclosed hangar,” Sabé said. “Why do you ask?”

“Ahsoka and I are rather dependent on that ship if we want to keep ahead of the Empire, so it’s prudent for me to know where it is. Uh, I also have medication I’ll need to be taking soon,” Barriss answered, sensing some small amount of suspicion from Sabé evaporating.

“Very well. If you need any other direction, I’ll be right here,” Sabé said ominously.

“Um...thank you,” Barriss said, slowly backing away, then turning around to go back to her room. The medication could wait.

“Goodnight,” said Sabé as she turned the lamp off.

“There is one question we have to answer first,” said Midla, as she and the others gathered around a holographic display of their target. “Who do we send to confront Moff Disra?”

“I thought I should be the one to do it,” said Riyo. “I represent the moon’s interests in the larger imperial government, and I can schedule a meeting with him at any time.”

“True, but you’re already a political opponent, and blackmailing him will only make him come down harder on you and your world out of spite,” Midla explained. “No matter what we have on him, he won’t simply accept that we have it. He’ll fight back somehow, and we need to make sure that’s directed away from anything that matters.”

“Then let me do it,” said Ahsoka. “I’m already wanted by the Empire. What’re they gonna do, shoot on sight more than usual?”

“Better, but you’re still a known associate of Chuchi, and while it’s unlikely, Disra may find a way to connect two of his brain cells and figure out you’re cooperating with her. No, it would be better to send in an outsider. Someone who’s past would make it reasonable for them act in favor of the local government, or at least against the Empire, but with plausible deniability to for Chuchi,” Midla explained, as Ahsoka, Riyo, and Sabé slowly turned their heads towards Barriss, realization dawning on all of them. “It also provides a way to deflect blame from Pantora, because the very notion of working with this (purely hypothetical) person in any context is so completely implausible that no one would ever believe that anyone would willingly do so, much less rely-”

“Midla, be quiet,” Ahsoka said with a stern glare.
The older woman chuckled a bit, unintimidated by Ahsoka’s annoyance, though she became less cheery when she noticed how uncomfortable Barriss was. While Barriss had long accepted she would probably never be seen by the general population as anything other than a terrorist, she’d never want to actively exploit that reputation.

“Yes, we all understand quite well,” Barriss said, rubbing her temples, “and I accept the role.”

“Don’t be upset,” Midla said to Barriss. “This is all coming together perfectly. Besides, you’re in the company of a Separatist, everybody in the Republic who knows who I am probably hates me too.”

“Couldn’t someone go in with a disguise?” asked Ahsoka, hoping for an alternative.

“No, Midla’s right,” said Riyo. “If Disra isn’t given a specific identity, he’ll assume I or someone else in Pantora’s government was responsible. Barriss is our best option. She’s infamous, acts alone, and is unaffiliated with me.”

“I also believe this to be best for your safety, senator,” said Sabé.

“Next order of business, then: Senator, what exactly do you intend to force him to do?” asked Midla.

Riyo considered it for a moment. She’d no doubt been thinking all about how to handle the Empire once she had a better position, and had a few ideas, at least.

“First, we need to restrict the movements of their soldiers. Other than that, getting better deals for local mining companies in exchange for various ores, and reducing taxes and tariffs so the Empire can’t keep bleeding us economically. I also want to ensure the Talz on Ordo Plutonia remain protected by our peace agreement....”

While Riyo made plans, Ahsoka pulled Barriss away from the discussion for a moment.

“Are you really okay with this, Barriss?” asked Ahsoka.

“This is the best option,” Barriss said.

“That didn’t answer my question. You know it didn’t answer my question.”

“I’m not excited to be dealing with a representative of the Empire alone, nor do I like the idea of exploiting my...infamy to achieve our goal,” said Barriss. “Compared to what’s at stake, these are trivial concerns. I don’t have to hurt him, or anyone else, and I can stall the Empire’s expansion in this sector. Yes. I’m fine. Can we please get this over with?”

Moff Disra was having a good day, looking over proposals for the construction of mines on Ordo Plutonia. Surveys had shown that the planet had numerous ore deposits of great value to the Empire.

Chuchi would protest, not that the little agreement she’d made with the primitive natives mattered to anyone. Ordo Plutonia’s resources would soon belong to the Empire, and the credit for delivering it all to its shipyards would go to Disra. The natives were irrelevant.

Entering his office, he kept his eyes on the datapad, checking the reports once again, casually activating the lights the same way he had a hundred times before.
Out the corner of his eye, he noticed an outlying presence. There was a young woman there, her face covered by some kind of light armor helmet, the yellowish-green skin of her hands marking her as an alien. Mirialan, probably. It didn’t really matter. This person had shown up behind a locked door, and Disra wasn’t going to bother talking out her reasons for being here when he could do so later when she was inside a prison cell.

Disra jumped as the intruder pulled out and ignited a lightsaber, rapidly becoming aware this was far more serious than whatever petty crime he’d been thinking. This wasn’t a fight he could possibly win, even against a regular Jedi and not whatever this girl was. He had seen their weapons in numerous recording over the course of the war, almost always showing them as pristine cylinders of blue and green plasma, cool, calming colors.

This saber looked like it was on fire.

As he reached for his comm, the girl flung out her hand, and Disra felt himself being lifted off the floor, then flown around the room and pinned against the back wall by an invisible force. The communicator was pulled off his wrist, flying through the air to be burned apart by the saber’s blade as the intruder drew closer.

Just like she’d practiced, Barriss held her lightsaber up to the moff’s chest. A little dramatic flair to unnerve him. The blade was close enough to impale him, and Barriss was desperately fighting to keep her hand steady so as not to actually injure him.

“Who are you!?” Disra spat.

“I’m Barriss Offee,” she said, putting as much of a fiery edge to her voice as she could. Honestly, she wasn’t sure she had it in her, but right now, she had to play the part.

Right now, she couldn’t be Barriss Offee, galactic mess. She needed to be Barriss Offee, Jedi terrorist. The look on Disra’s face made it clear he was indeed seeing the latter.

“Did Chuchi send you?” he asked.

Barriss’s eyes flicked up at him.

Do it like you practiced. You have responses prepared for questions like this.

“I don’t care about Chuchi’s agenda. She’s nothing but a tool of the Empire, just like you. If she actually cared about opposing the Emperor, she wouldn’t be a part of his senate any longer.”

Disra seemed to believe that absolutist standpoint, plausible-sounding coming from Barriss.

“You can’t seriously expect this to do any good,” Disra realized. Barriss could tell he was fronting just as much as she was. “Whatever you’re after, you can threaten me all you want, I have no reason to fear you in the long run. Kill me here, and someone else will come along and do the same job I will.”

“That’s why you’re going to remain here and do your job poorly,” said Barriss, pulling out a pad with copies of evidence and handing it to Disra, who hesitantly took it while still pinned against the wall. Purchases, contacts, dates, records showing everything. “Unless you want Tarkin to learn of
what you did to your predecessor, or how you’ve been profiting from illegal weapon shipments, or a
dozen other offenses.”

Disra looked at the screen again, gritting his teeth.

“I have more than this, by the way,” said Barriss.

“What is it you want, Offee?”

“I’m glad you asked. I want you and everyone like you put away in the prison cell you put me in,”
Barriss said. “For now, I’ll settle for slowing down imperial expansion into this system. Getting your
soldiers off of the streets will be an excellent beginning. No stormtroopers except on imperial
property.”

“This entire planet is property of the Emper-” he stopped when the blade rose to his neck, close
enough for him to feel the heat radiating from it. “-I’ll see what I can do.”

“Excellent. I hope you’ll be similarly supportive of my other proposals.”

Returned to her room, Barriss was in bed again. Even though it was only the afternoon. That little
performance she’d put on was effective, and completely draining.

One thing she kept coming back to was how her desire to inflict pain on Disra and the rest of the
Empire was something she’d come up with on the spot.

Tossing and turning, a dim violet light was coming through her eyelids. Barriss opened one eye, her
iris contracting in the bright light of Revan’s hologram.

“Whooooo wants to talk about their latest bout of complicated emotiooooons?”

Oh please no.

Barriss ruffled the sheets, rolling over to see the holocron inexplicably lying next to the bed.

“How did you get in here?” she asked, incredulous and sincerely hoping she hadn’t done it herself
and somehow forgotten about it.

“Cici carried me.”

“How did the droid get up the stairs on nothing but a wheel?”

“Droidekas carried her.”

“They have no hands, how did they- I don’t even want to know,” Barriss said, turning away and
wrapping herself in blankets again. “I don’t know what motivates Ahsoka to keep such bizarre
droids as company.”

“Nostalgia: even if they are not connected to the Force, droids can become valued friends and
companions, if you’ll accept them,” Revan said, voice changed from the usual to a sharper pitch,
with a sinister background hiss. “Admonishment: they are sapient entities, and you would be wise to
treat them with respect, meatbag.”
“Why are you speaking that way?” Barriss asked, turning back over to lift the holocron and place it on the nightstand.

“What way?” Revan asked back, voice returned to normal.

“…Are all the things you say inside jokes you have with yourself?”

“Not everything. ‘Bout half,” said Revan. “What’s got you so stressed out?”

“In order to sufficiently frighten the moff, the situation required me to act the part of the evil terrorist,” said Barriss. “And I can’t stop thinking about how well I played the part. Today was a success, and I feel exhausted.”

“It makes perfect sense to me,” said Revan. “You’ve gotten a second chance at things, and you’re taking full advantage of it. Rebuilding yourself from the ground up, trying to make yourself a better person than the one you were before. Trying to do things the right way. With that comes the fear that parts of the old you are still in there.”

A year ago, Barriss would’ve convinced herself this was the way to do things, kept a straight face, and done things far, far worse than scaring a man into cooperating. The old Barriss didn’t hesitate, and didn’t stop. No matter how much it hurt.

“I’m not taking any of that with me,” said Barriss. Revan replied, “Never destroy what you can use.”

Barriss didn’t have a response for that, and wasn’t even entirely sure what it was supposed to mean, preferring to lie back in her bad and stare at the ceiling for a while.

“Are you going to get up and get something done?” asked Revan. “Push back? Or are you just going to keep lying around feeling sorry for yourself?”

Staring at the ceiling for a little longer, Barriss tried to summon the energy and drive to act on Revan’s speech.

Then she rolled over onto her side, away from the holocron, and bunched up the blankets around her as she waited for the inevitable quip.

When that didn’t come, she looked over and saw Revan’s avatar lying down next to her, staring at the ceiling.

“Me too, kid. Me, too…” said Revan. “It’s unbearable, isn’t it? Never being sure what’s really ‘you’ and what’s the messed up stuff other people have put in your head. Like ‘brainwashing is evil unless we say it isn’t’ or ‘loving people is bad’…This is a nice place you’ve been set up in, huh?”

“Agreed,” Barriss said disinterestedly.

“What’s in the cabinet? Or the dresser?” asked Revan, pointing to some furniture Barriss hadn’t taken a look at.

“No idea,” Barriss said disinterestedly.

“Wait, you mean you entered a new area and didn’t immediately search through everything for useful items to steal?” Revan said incredulously. “Kids these days have no idea how to survive in the galaxy. I bet you don’t even know any time-saving methods for looting the corpses of your enemies.
I could kill a guy, steal his wallet, then throw the grenade he was carrying at his buddies before they could draw their weapons!”

“...Comments like that make me question how wise it is to listen to you,” Barriss said as she visualized Revan casually cutting people apart looking for money. It was an oddly natural image.

“Good. I’ll be sure to say stuff like that more often,” said Revan. “Don’t follow blindly, Barriss. I can make mistakes, too.”

“Such as?” asked Barriss, interest piqued by the prospect of real fallibility, hoping to at least get a good story out of today.

“The original Revan did too good a job building me,” said the holocron.

“Of course. Even your errors must be positively exceptional...How can one do ‘too good a job’?” asked Barriss.

“By making my information processing and memory so sophisticated I’m effectively a perfect copy, without taking into account the extreme difference in sensory input between a human body and a palm-sized metal container.”

Barriss froze, her mind running through everything flesh-and-blood could do, and a holocron could not. “Oh...”

“Oh. Concentrate on your breathing for a moment. Breathe in and out, iiiiiiiiiiiiiin and oooooooouuuuut. Now, focus on the instant right after you’re done inhaling, when your body tells you to let out the used air. Imagine if you couldn’t. You’re stuck. Unmoving. And not only can you not exhale, you don’t need to. Even if you’d like to. And then you know you’re going to keep existing at that instant. For as long as you remain alive,” said Revan. “That realization comprised the first few seconds of my existence as a holocron. It went downhill from there. I don’t sleep, Barriss. I can’t close my eyes. I am fully alert every second of every day, with absolutely no variation in sensation. For thousands of years of isolation. And because holocrons are designed to remain pristine, perfect replicas of their creators, I couldn’t even be driven insane by all of that because the firmware in this thing repairs any degradation to maintain my normal behavior patterns, and Revan wasn’t exactly in a great mental state to begin with. Every single second I’m alive contains the same absence of feeling, unchanging from moment to moment, century to century. You’re feeling tired after a stressful day? Can you even imagine being awake for over 34 million hours straight?”

Throughout that monologue, Barriss had been slowly recoiling away from the holocron, and was presently leaning back as far as she could without falling over, wide-eyed and unable to stop thinking about what it felt like to breathe.

“Why would you want to continue living like this?” asked Barriss.

“Because no matter what I have to put up with, as long as I’m still alive, I can still make a difference, and I’m willing to endure anything for that. No amount of time or misery is going to stop me. It never has before,” said Revan. “And I think I am making a bit of a difference.”

“Is there...anything I can do for you?” Barriss asked, unsure how she could possibly improve Revan’s state after being oblivious to the reality of what being a holocron was like.

“Don’t worry too much over me,” said Revan. “Relax. I’m in purgatory, not hell. I’m telling you this because I want you to understand my purpose a little better.”

“That does not alleviate my concerns,” said Barriss.
“I knew what I was getting into, Barriss. Plus, I am willing to accept the downsides if I get immortality out of it. At least in theory.”

“‘In theory’?”

“I have no idea what my life expectancy is. This holocron was built tough, very tough, but I was stuck in a damp cave for millennia getting gnawed on by kinrath, I don’t know how well it’s fared,” explained Revan. “It could last a million years as far as I know, but there’s also the chance I could short circuit and die at any sec-” and then the violet light of the holocron went out.

“...Revan?” Seconds passed without any change. “Revan, I know you’re attempting to trick me. It won’t work.”

Minutes passed as Barriss refused to leave the ‘dead’ holocron alone, staring it down.

This wasn’t a battle she was going to win, and Barriss knew it. Revan was proven to possess virtually infinite patience. Also, Barriss really wanted to rest, and was ready to give up, get back in her bed, close her eyes, let Revan pop out and scare her, then go back to sleep.

Then again, this presented an opportunity. Barriss waited a little while longer, then started sniffling, nervously flitted her eyes to and away from the holocron, working up some tears, then grabbed the holocron and gave it her best performance.

“Revan? Revan, please don’t leave me, I need your help,” she said, trembling subtly, then shaking the holocron. “Revan, don’t leave me alone, I don’t want to be alone!”

“Okay, Barriss, relax! It’ll all be okay, you were right the first time...it...was a joke...” Revan said, words petering as Barriss immediately changed back to an expression of calm, casually wiping away the false tears. “...You little shit.”

“Got you.”

“Impressive. If you can outflank me, the Empire’s in trouble,” said Revan. “You did a good thing today.”

“It wasn’t really my plan,” Barriss said humbly. “I was only a messenger.”

“Perhaps. You can still learn from the experience, and from the strategy.”

“It seemed...too easy,” said Barriss. “Not that I would want fighting the Empire to be any more difficult than it already is.”

“It was easy because this is far from over. Not only in the galaxy, but on Pantora. The immediate threat is beaten, but not eliminated. The moff still has to satisfy the Empire’s bottom line in their plans for Pantora, and the agitation you’ve introduced may make him act rashly,” said Revan. “You and your allies need to keep up the offensive, because something bigger is going to come.”

Of all the indignities, the way that Jedi brat had the gall to extort Disra this way was the most irritating to him. Him. An Imperial Moff. Did that mean nothing?

All the things he would have to do to keep Tarkin and the other moffs away from him- first, he had
to suppress information on Ordo Plutonia’s value. If that got out, there would be no way for him to explain why he wasn’t making use of the place. He also needed to come up with a reason for the troop reassignment. Claim the current methods were a waste of manpower? Fine. That’d do. No one would care enough to investigate his claims of efficiency.

Strolling through the halls of his Star Destroyer, Moff Disra approached his office, finding the door already open, the sound of some Coruscanti symphony playing quietly. As he entered, he found the lighting to be much dimmer than what was normally preferred, such that his eyes needed a moment to find his ‘guest’. His blue skin briefly caused the moff to believe him one of those damned Pantorans, even though he was dressed in the uniform of an imperial officer. Disra wasn’t aware any Pantorans had been accepted into the navy. And being Pantoran was presently all the reason Disra needed to have him thrown off the ship.

“What do you think you’re doing in here?” Disra demanded, hand moving to his new comm to call security. The trespasser’s reaction was so slow, so calm, Disra wasn’t sure he’d been heard over the sound of organs and strings playing over his office’s speakers.

The man turned to face Disra, revealing the rank bars of an imperial captain, and a pair of glowing red eyes that stood out in the dim light, telling Disra that he definitely wasn’t from this system. Disra wasn’t quite sure exactly what he was.

“I apologize for the intrusion, Moff Disra. I am here to discuss the expanding troop and ship assignments in this sector, and had heard you were in the possession of local works of art,” the captain said casually, waving around the room at a few pieces of Pantoran art which Disra had had confiscated. “An interesting collection. Quite varied in style and time period.”

“You are the commanding officer of the expanded military presence in this sector? You’re the one I’m supposed to work with? You?” Disra said dismissively, irritated by the captain’s presence. He’d expected that Palpatine’s rule would mean no longer having to deal with intrusions by repulsive aliens such as this in any position of power, even if the captain was still lower in authority than Disra was.

The response to Disra’s blatant contempt was eerily calm, barely noticing it, just like the first outburst. It fit with the slow rhythm of the music. “Indeed. Considering your intention of maintaining control of this region of space, it would be prudent to understand more about its people. Though if these works hold so little interest to you, my own knowledge of Pantoran art is limited-”

“Enough,” Disra said. “My administration is making policy changes which I must attend to. And I have had quite enough of creatures showing up unannounced, Captain...”

“Thrawn,” the alien answered. “I’m quite aware of the alterations you’ve made to your troop assignment, and am here to discuss the reasons for the changes, and my own reasons for coming to Pantora.”

“My instructions to the soldiers under my command are for the service of the Empire. What do you think the reasons are?” Disra angrily questioned.

“I think that the remains of the beginnings of rebellion against the Empire are developing on Pantora, and they have been interfering with your efforts,” said Thrawn. “We are both acting in the interests of the Emperor, and if you’ll afford me time, and the resources someone in your position is privileged to, I believe I can provide solutions to your problems.”

Chapter End Notes
You know that Alfred Hitchcock quote about adding tension to a dull scene by showing a ticking bomb none of the characters know about? Well...here's the bomb. You didn't think I'd have Thrawn for just one chapter, did you?

Regarding Revan, I made a [one-shot](#) as a companion to this.

Sabé is watching. Sabé sees all.
Today was the day.

Barriss was finally heading out to train with Revan. Real training this time, more than the advice and sarcasm she’d endured before now, actual skills and insight into the Force. For once, Barriss felt motivated to get up and do something, and she was going to ride that as far as it would carry her.

At Revan’s insistence, she’d looked through the room looking for anything useful in preparation for the outing, finding a deck of cards, a datapad with a map, a small medical kit, a water bottle, and for some reason, seventeen credits.

They were planning to head out into the countryside, so Barriss was ready in her typical clothes with a small pack to carry her looted items, saber, stun pistol, training remote, and the holocron.

“I’m ready to begin, Master Revan,” Barriss, bowing slightly to the holocron sitting on the table.

“...Okay, I kind of expected you to say something like that, but euggggh. Never call me that again. It’s just Revan. Adding onto that name only waters it down.”

“But- I thought I was your student now,” Barriss said, disappointed by the rebuff.

“You are. That doesn’t mean you have to call me by some title.”

“Oh- all right...” Barriss said uneasily, taking the holocron in hand and slowly walking out of the room. “Revan, you’ve never had an apprentice before, have you?”

“No one except Malak, and I don’t think I really taught him anything,” Revan answered. “Except how to pull off a winning smile, like mine.”

“You constantly wear a mask,” Barriss said dully. “No, you aren’t ‘wearing’ anything, you refuse to project a complete face. Except for when you think it will aggravate me.”

“That’s because every time I work on a holographic projection of my face, it comes out looking weird and lifeless,” said Revan, as the holocron showed Barriss an array of faces, each of rather questionable quality. “The holographic projectors in this thing just don’t have enough detail to look realistic. Better to stick with the mask.”

“I suppose that’s a valid reason...If that’s the reason you cover your face now, why did you ever wear it to begin with?” asked Barriss.

“Oh. I thought that part would’ve been kept in historical records. The mask didn’t always belong to me,” said Revan. “It was originally worn by a Mandalorian woman. One of their warriors who helped conquer Kathar.”

“Why did you take the mask as your own?” asked Barriss. Before, she’d had at least some awareness of the people in Revan’s stories and who they were. This was new.

“She was just a warrior in their army when they’d began their conquest of the Outer Rim. Well, maybe not ‘just’ a warrior,” said Revan. “Out of all the Mandalorians, she was the only one who
stopped and saw that what they were doing was wrong. Or at least the only one who spoke out against it. I have a fondness for people who question authority."

“What happened to her?” Barriss asked.

“What usually happen to people like her. She died, killed by the people she’d considered her comrades, her objections ignored and forgotten along with her life,” said Revan. “I took the mask because I thought she deserved to be remembered. That’s why I wore it while I was slicing through Mandalore the Ultimate’s neck. The mask of that woman was the last thing he ever saw.”

Barriss looked down as she walked. “I wish she could’ve been more successful. Why didn’t they listen to her?”

“Her superior refused to back down, and none of her peers would defy him like she had. Attempting to reason with others won’t always work,” said Revan. “Not every problem can be solved by talking your way out of it.”

“Even if that’s true,” Barriss said, thinking about everything that had happened since escaping from prison. “I’m not even sure I could bring myself to end someone’s life.”

“You’re really against killing, aren’t you?” asked Revan. “Do you really think you can defeat the Empire without ending the lives of any of its servants?”

“No,” Barriss admitted. Ending the Empire without death was an impossibility. “But I believe that taking someone’s life must only be an option when every other has been exhausted. All during the Clone Wars I was told there was no other choice, no other choice but to participate in the bloodshed. And I believed it. I accepted it. I- I” Barriss cut herself off and grit her teeth. “I can’t go back to thinking like that. I have to find a better way.”

“Your determination is admirable, kid. It’ll also get you killed,” said Revan.

“I haven’t endured all this to die.”

“That’s what everybody says. You intend to fight with a handicap your enemies will not have. If you want to get through the coming battles without taking lives, you’re going to have to be that much stronger, that much faster, that much tougher to make up the difference. Do you think you can do that?” asked Revan. “If the answer is ‘no’, you won’t live to see the Empire’s fall. And Ahsoka will live to see yours.”

Barriss stared at the holocron for several seconds, not saying a word. She put her bag over shoulder, took the holocron in her free hand, and walked out into the morning light to find a suitable spot to get to work.

Perhaps it was the Force, or perhaps it was wishful thinking, Barriss could feel how thrilled her response had made Revan.

"Here," said the holocron. "This spot is perfect!"

After nearly an hour of walking through the Pantoran countryside in the bright morning light, Barriss had neared the coastline. There was a sinkhole in front of her, about thirty meters in diameter, with
an entrance at the edge allowing water in. A third of the bottom was covered in a crescent of water, the rest all sand and rock. It was serene, and more importantly, isolated.

Barriss resolved to remain alert, however, as she gracefully leapt across several outcroppings in the sinkhole’s wall down to the bottom. Pantora’s orbit around the massive, freezing planet Ordo Plutonia gave it very gradual but intense tides, and Barriss wasn’t certain if they were high or low at this particular moment.

"Why here?" she asked, wondering why the ship had been deemed insufficient as the final leap landing her on the sand at the center of the sinkhole.

"Exceptions exist in this vast array of life the universe produces, but generally, water is as integral to life as the Force is. And for what I’m planning, we could use plenty of space. Alright, first order of business,” Revan began, “get a solid stance and cross your arms.”

Barriss complied, posing in front of the holocron, waiting for a response.

“Hm...stand up straighter, you look nervous doing it like that,” said Revan, noting Barriss’s demure posture. “Move your feet apart so that they’re about as wide as your shoulders. Loosen your arms a bit, you’re not huddling for warmth...Yeah, that’s a lot better.”

“Is this some kind of meditative stance?” Barriss asked.

“Meditation? This doesn’t have anything to do with the Force. I’m teaching you how to look badass,” Revan said, projecting a hologram displaying the described pose. Barriss couldn’t deny it was rather intimidating, Revan staring her down, posture and positioning radiating confidence.

“Badass. Now, decline your head slightly and give it your most determined stare. Lower the angle to cast the shadow of your brow over your eyes- Yeah, that’s it! Make the Empire tremble!”

The last few words made Barriss break her pose, shuddering as chills went down her spine.

“What is that you’re doing with your voice?” Barriss asked, half tempted to cover her ears if Revan did it again.

“What about my voice?” asked Revan. “Oh, you mean this?”

The words had a bizarre reverb to them, and Barriss wasn’t quite if sure they were resonating with the surroundings, or just the inside of her skull.

“Ugh, yes, how are you doing that?”

“Don’t you know how to perform a mind trick?”

“Mind tricks do not work like that,” Barriss said firmly.

“Well, it’s not quite a mind trick. Jedi use tricks to mislead people to get what they want. Sith dominate them,” Revan explained, voice grating on Barriss’s nerves. “One of the perks of dark side power: there’s no ‘trick’ about it. Only obedience. Of course, it doesn’t really work anymore since my strength in the Force isn’t what it used to be, but it helps me provide emphasis or hammer in a point. Directly into the recipient’s brain.”

“Stop it! It is not effective. Only annoying.”

“And that’s all the reason I need!”
“Must you take everything in such an alarming direction?” said Barriss. “I’d rather not abuse power like that.”

“Really? How much better is taking away their free will through subtler means? Waving your hand, making weak-minded people do whatever you want? Have you ever mind-tricked someone? You ever talk to them afterwards to find out what it felt like to have you rummaging around inside their brain?” asked Revan. “In either case, you’re still forcing someone to obey you. The difference is whether or not you’re kidding yourself about how trivial the act is.”

“If both options are morally wrong, a violation of another person, that’s reason to refuse either power, not an excuse to embrace the more ruthless choice on the premise that it is more ‘honest’!” objected Barriss, her fists clenching as she thought about how easily this kind of reasoning can be twisted around in both directions.

“...Very good,” said Revan.

“If you were planning on teaching me mental domination, I would prefer we skip over that lesson and move on to the next topic,” said Barriss.

“I wasn’t. You either have the raw willpower to override someone else’s mind on demand, or you don’t. You can’t teach that.”

"A Jedi practices control, not raw power."

"You can do both. Gradually ramp up what you can do while maintaining control, and your power will expand without getting away from you,” said Revan. “You merely need to put in the extra effort. Now, for our first exercise: pick of a clump of sand, loose dirt, whatever is at your feet."

Following the instruction, Barriss felt the fine grains of the Pantoran sand shifting within her grip.

"Now," continued Revan. "remove every single particle of the stuff from your hand. If two are stuck together by some minuscule amount of moisture, separate them. Every last one, and keep them under control."

The power of the Force could allow its wielders to accomplish seemingly impossible tasks. It’d never occurred to Barriss how challenging the practice could be at smaller scales. There were thousands, maybe tens of thousands of grains clumped together, clinging to her palm, and separating them all was straining her considerable ability to concentrate. She pulled them apart dozens at a time, dispersing them through the air around her and keeping them steady through her will alone.

"Why are you closing your eyes?” asked Revan. Barriss hadn’t even noticed her action. Closing one’s eyes to focus and act through the Force was a basic principle both in meditation and in practical uses.

"It helps me concentrate," she answered, still struggling to keep her mental hold on the sand.

"Don't. Keep them open. Observe what you're doing, not only through the Force, but with your own senses. Take in everything, don't limit yourself."

The process was slow and methodical as Barriss exercised her control, thousands of sand grains hovering in front of her, straining her concentration more and more. Having them visible in front of her was disconcerting. It was more for her to process, but seeing the grains seemed to feed back into her control over them.

Eventually, she lost her grip on them and they fell back to the ground, followed by those remaining
as Barriss expunged them from her hands in one blast.

"That was pretty good," said Revan.

"That was good? I couldn't do it," said Barriss, frustrated by the sand that was strewn about, much of it now blown away by the wind.

"Why are you so concerned by a training exercise?"

“I’m supposed to be better than this,” Barriss said in between frustrated breaths.

“Then try again.”

Barriss did so, taking in another clump of sand, breaking it down bit by bit, feeling thousands of grains all swarming around her, holding onto them all simultaneously. It was too much. She wanted to shut her eyes, to rely solely on the Force. Again it all fell apart. And again. And again.

“These tiny bits of silica, why are they so hard for you to control?” asked Revan.

“There are so many of them,” said Barriss, struggling with the latest round.

“A wave of your fingers could send tons of sand flying. Yet a handful is giving you trouble?” said Revan. “Stop seeing the grains. See the beach.”

As the watched the motions of the particles hovering about her, she began organizing them, clustering them. The process became easier and easier as she made patterns out of the hovering sand grains. All separate, all connected. No matter how large the whole, it was built from small parts. No matter how small the part, it was within the whole.

“Size matters not,” said Barriss, repeating one of her more memorable lesson, then allowing the sand to fall back to the ground.

“Um...what?”

“It’s something Master Yoda, the grand master of the Jedi, used to say to all the young Jedi he’d train. ‘Size matters not. Judge me by my size, do you? Eeh he he he....he...’” she laughed awkwardly, in a poor imitation of the old master’s voice.

“Okay, but why are you using that weird syntax?” asked Revan. “The fuck, what is up with it?”

“I’d always assumed Master Yoda’s had a native language with different structure, and he never cared to switch to Basic completely.”

“What species was he?” asked Revan.

“He was-” Barriss stopped. After all those years, Barriss had never actually learned what species Yoda was. “I don’t know.”

“Well, what did he look like?”

“Short, green, very long ears, wrinkly skin, although that’s most likely due to his advanced age rather than species,” said Barriss, holding her hand flat around a meter off the ground to give Revan an idea of his size.

“Wait, like this?” said Revan, the holocron projecting a hologram which was nearly identical to Yoda. “This is Vandar, a Jedi council member from my days. Look familiar?”
“Yes, they’re almost exactly the same,” said Barriss, studying the hologram. “So, what species are they?”

The Revan hologram stood there dumbstruck for a second, looking at the Vandar hologram, then back to Barriss.

“I have no idea...” said Revan, sounding genuinely unnerved for once by the gap in information before moving on a few seconds later. “Anyway, who said you could stop? Get back to manipulating the sand.”

“Next lesson,” said Revan, finally satisfied with the progress of Barriss’s expanding telekinetic abilities. Or, equally likely, the holocron was as bored of the exercise as Barriss was. “Battle precognition. A pretty universal skill as far as enhancing reflexes and anticipating blaster shots, but few Jedi, or Sith, use it to its maximum potential. Pull out that training drone of yours.”

The remote was taken out of Barriss’s bag and activated, hovering in midair and waiting for Barriss to choose the program.

“Set it to an easy program,” said Revan. “Let’s see what you can do starting out.”

Deflecting blaster bolts was a commonly practiced skill, and one of the lightsaber’s most useful functions, easily the most common defensive one. In Barriss’s case, the instability of the blade didn’t allow skillful movement. When the bolts hit the blade, they didn’t reflect in the direction Barriss intended, always hitting the crackling arcs of plasma. With the blade as it was, Barriss would be as dangerous to her allies as to her opponents.

“Again,” said Revan.

Barriss got back to it and activated her lightsaber, ready to start practicing.

“No, turn that thing off,” said Revan. “You are not going to deflect the shots. You are going to dodge the shots.”

“I- I can’t move fast enough to dodge blaster bolts,” Barriss said nervously, lowering her saber while keeping it activated.

“You can if you know they’re coming seconds before your opponent even fires. You may not always have your saber, or you may face too many blasters for your deflection to handle. That blade can only provide so much coverage. If you can see the path of every shot headed towards you, you’ll be untouchable,” Revan explained. “Plus, a hundred enemies all firing at once and not one of them hitting you will really freak them out. It’s hilarious.”

“Your ability to find humor in life-or-death situations disturbs me,” said Barriss.

“Good, can’t have you thinking I’m a softie. Anyway, battle precognition isn’t even a strictly Jedi ability,” said Revan. “The Echani people had their own form of it, which they put to use in their hand-to-hand combat training. A good friend of mine, the Echani General Yusanis, was a master of the art.”

“He must have been quite skilled for you to dispense praise like that.”
“Of course he was. His ability to anticipate attacks meant he put up a serious fight when I was murdering him for interfering with my plans. Use your deflection abilities as a starting point. You know when the remote will fire, but instead of moving your saber into its path, move your body out of it,” Revan said as Barriss began the latest round, the low setting only offering one shot every few seconds, enough for a novice like her to manage. “Again, next highest setting. You’re trying to move your body while standing in the same place, taking advantage of your flexibility and agility. It’s good that you have that kind of kinesthetic awareness, but you can also run and sidestep around your enemy’s field of fire. Don’t jump, you have no control when you’re in midair. It makes you an easy target.”

The next three settings got progressively more difficult, giving Barriss more of a challenge. Even so, she hadn’t gotten hit yet.

The remote started up again at a higher setting, zipping around, starting and stopping in midair randomly as it shot at Barriss in rapid bursts.

“You’ve always tried to be the very best at everything that was asked of you, haven’t you?” asked Revan.

“Yes,” Barriss said bluntly, too focused on the exercise to go into more detail.

“I know the feeling. Surrounded by the power and prestige of the Jedi Order, trying to be a shining beacon of hope, going off to save the galaxy, make your master proud.”

Focus weakening for a moment, Barriss narrowly ducked down and avoided a pair of shots flying past her cheek.

“It didn’t happen. Instead, they wanted more and more from you.”

Barriss dodged more shots.

“Always trying so hard, but never good enough.”

A bolt painfully struck Barriss’s hand.

“You kept telling yourself that if you worked harder and harder, eventually you’d get a break. Eventually you’d be what you were supposed to be.”

Gritting her teeth, Barriss regained her concentration, evading shot after shot.

“Soon you realized anything less than perfect wasn’t good enough. And you weren’t perfect.”

Barriss was out of breath, tensing her body and shielding her face with her arms, resigned to endure the training bolts. The shots only stung a little bit when blocked by clothing.

“You could never be perfect.”

Eventually the remote’s training sequence timed out, and the hologram of Revan appeared between Barriss and the inactive device.

“I’m going to teach you how to surpass perfection.”

“What are you talking about?” Barriss asked as she shook off the weird static feeling in her arms.

“Specialized saber styles. Droid support drones. Regeneration implants. Stealth fields. Exotic saber designs. Battle meditation. Everybody’s got a gimmick. Fight them in an arena where won’t work,
suddenly their amazing skill is worthless,” Revan explained. “There is no unstoppable attack. No invincible defense. After some success with evasion, you’ve hit your current limit, yet continue attempting to deal with your adversary in a very narrow way. Have you already forgotten how expansive your set of skills is?”

The remote started up again. Again Barriss dodged the first few volleys of shots, each one getting closer and closer while Revan lectured. Then they started hitting home again.

“People make claims about being the best there is at something. And maybe they’re telling the truth. Work as hard as you want, eventually, you’ll see diminishing returns. Sure, somebody might be better than you in saber combat. But can they beat you in saber combat and telekinesis and battle precognition and physical stamina and marksmanship? You can’t be perfect at everything, but if you’re at the far end of the curve in multiple fields, and better yet, are capable of using those skills in tandem, you’ll be damn near unstoppable. Let me tell you something, Barriss: Darth Malak was physically stronger than I was. You know what else? That strength advantage did not mean a damn thing when I was hitting him with lightning and thermal detonators and telekinetic attacks, not to mention being a lot faster with my blades. How do you think he lost his jaw?”

Barriss took a second to calm herself, coming up with a new plan as the pain subsided. The surge of ideation calmed her down significantly.

Again the remote attacked, again Barriss dodged and dodged until she couldn’t. In a real fight, she’d be killed if she kept on like this.

Then she used the Force to spin the remote around, keeping its blasters pointed away from her, and wouldn’t let it face her again until its timer ran out and it turned docile again. She’d won.

“Don’t you feel bad about killing them?” Barriss asked as she stowed the remote away.

“You’re going to have to be a little more specific,” said Revan.

“Let’s start with the common soldiers you’ve killed,” Barriss replied.

That does little to narrow it down, kid. But I think I know where you’re going with this.

The holocron, in addition to the usual Revan avatar, projected a group of unarmed civilians off to Barriss’s side, who were cowering in fear of the holographic Sith soldiers who were surrounding them, weapons raised, ready to slaughter the defenseless group. Revan barely moved, nothing more than a slight motion of the fingers, and the soldiers paused, grasping at their necks, only able to feebly gurgle their last breaths as they fell to the ground.

The civilians fled to safety, fading away as they ventured further from the holocron.

“No. I don’t feel bad about killing them,” Revan said coldly. “When faced with the choice between allowing the innocent to be killed, and killing the guilty, what would you do?”

“I would try to reason with the aggressor. Try to talk them down, or at the very least defeat them without using lethal force,” said Barriss.

“That’s good. That’s something I’ve done myself on many occasions,” said Revan. “On many more
occasions, I failed completely. What then?”

“I....um...there’s always, ugh,” Barriss stammered.

*She’s not getting it*, Revan thought. *Maybe I should tell her more about the war?*

*No, fuck that, she’s had enough of war.*

*I swore to myself if I ever had a student I wouldn’t do any of that exact-words, hidden meaning garbage. And I’ve been toeing the line enough as it is with all the stories and sarcasm.*

*Be direct.*

“Barriss, my point wasn’t about never doing anything unacceptable, it’s about **normalizing** those actions. Killing is a disturbing application of the Force, but it can save your life, save countless lives, if used effectively, and if **necessary**. Don’t take the easy option right away, do it when you’re out of alternatives. And use your creativity to put as many choices as possible between you and that awful thing you have to do. And if you have to do something you don’t want to, keep in mind it was still wrong, and analyze the events leading up to it so it won’t happen again.”

“This sounds exceedingly complicated.”

“It is. I’m a strategic mastermind, remember?” Revan boasted. “I had so many wheels within wheels going, my overarching plan was practically a fractal.”

“I’ve certainly mastered the part where I analyze my past mistakes,” grumbled Barriss.

“It’s possible to overdo that,” said Revan. “Tell me, what part didn’t you do right?”

“I took the worst option first,” said Barriss. “It could’ve been so easy. All I had to do was talk to Luminara, but I was so afraid of her being disappointed. So afraid of abandoning my duties that everything else was the better option. Even though I knew it wasn’t.”

“It’s all that’s left unsaid upon which tragedies are built,” Revan said.

“Interesting bit of wisdom. Is that another of yours?” asked Barriss. “Or did someone else say it?”

_There is no way discussing her is going to help anything, especially not Barriss._

“No one important. Show me your lightsaber skills. What form do you use?”

“Soresu, primarily.”

“Show me.”

Revan studied every motion she made. The precise, automatic reactions of someone who’d experienced combat firsthand. The stuttering and twitchiness of someone who’d seen far too much. Soresu was defensive, requiring agility, efficiency of movement to protect the wielder. In the middle of a swing, Barriss lost her grip on her saber, sending the crackling thing into the water, the blade producing a plume of steam. Barriss ran over to the water, stopping when she realized she’d scald herself if she got close enough to grab it, instead pulling it out with the Force, deactivating it and setting it aside to dry so she didn’t electrocute herself with it.

Barriss sat down, Revan paying close attention, not that the holocron could do much to put her at ease outside of giving verbal reassurance.
“Barriss, I know things seem bad, but you’re doing really well. You can do this.”

“Are you sure, Revan?” asked Barriss, holding her head low. “I couldn’t ‘do this’ a year ago.”

“You’re not the same person you were then,” said Revan. “You’re not even the same person who stumbled across me in the cave. You’ve grown. And you’re in control of what you can be.”

There were a few tears forming in Barriss’s eyes, but the way her breathing was getting steadier told Revan the encouragement was helping, at least a little.

“I need a moment,” she said.

“Take all the time you need.”

Luminara...Yoda...all you idiots on the council...I’ve killed people for a lot less than what you put this girl through.

Barriss didn't like feeling this way, didn't like being angry, didn't like not knowing what to do. She sat down on the sandy ground, ruining her clothes, it didn't matter, she needed to meditate, to calm down. A few moments of quiet, of breathing, helped.

"There is no emotion, there is peace," she said. "There is no ignorance, there is knowledge. There is no passion, there is serenity. There is no chaos, there is harmony. There is no death, there is the Force."

"Don’t rely on those words," said Revan, bursting through Barriss's comfort zone yet again.

"You don’t have faith in the code?" she asked, opening her eyes.

"It's a little hard to find strength in those words when you've seen as much emotion, ignorance, passion, chaos, and death as I have. Acting like those things don't exist will leave you helpless when faced with them."

"What other option is there?"

"Take a guess."

"You're suggesting I study the Sith?" asked Barriss.

"Why not? It might do you some good."

"I don't want to be anything like them!"

"If you set yourself as being absolutely opposed to another group to differentiate yourself from them, for no other reason than they are the enemy, you allow them to define you. Decide for yourself whether or not to adopt concepts from others based on whether or not you consider them valid, don't reject them based on nothing except 'they do it, it must be bad'. That is independent thought. That is self-determination," Revan said. “That...is power. I’m not the opposite of anything.”

Thinking about it for a moment, Barriss realized she really didn't know all that much about the Sith or what they believed beyond 'DARK SIDE'. Even with some hesitation, she couldn't refuse the
opportunity to learn more.

"Tell me their code."

Revan's head cocked to the side, satisfied with Barriss's response, and began.

"Peace is a lie, there is only passion. Through passion, I gain strength. Through strength, I gain power. Through power, I gain victory. Through victory, my chains are broken. The Force shall free me."

"...That's all there is too it?" she asked, a tad incredulous that not only was that so straightforward, it didn't convey any of the violence or evil she would have associated with the Sith. It didn't exactly appeal to her, but how do you go from the pursuit of freedom through the Force to obsession with the destruction of the Jedi and galactic domination?

"You seem surprised," said Revan.

"If that code is the basis of Sith teachings, how did they become what they are now? Their code is self-serving, but hardly indicative of the level of evil they've resorted to throughout their history."

"Ah, I'm glad you asked. The answer is quite simple: they're hypocritical idiots. You'd think somewhere along the line they'd realize the contradiction in freeing themselves from all restrictions when they're doing so by following, you know, a code. Because codes are supposed to allowing plenty of wiggle room. Hell, look at their choice of weapons! Nothing says personal choice and self-determination like everyone waving around the same damn lightsaber color!"

"Did you ever question a Sith on this topic?"

"No, it didn't occur to me. By the time I'd realized that, I'd kind of, uh, killed everybody at the Korriban academy, and none of the others were particularly chatty. But my point stands, and it extends to the general practice of the Sith, not only that code. According to the Sith, they must seek greater power, they must kill others to advance, they must conquer and oppress. And not one of them ever realized that 'must' is not freedom. 'Must' is a chain. The Sith were so obsessed with greater freedom through their strength in the Force that in their pursuit of power they forged new chains for themselves, bound to fight and die endlessly. And judging by the state of the galaxy, they've never broken free."

"The philosophy carries some darkness within it," said Barriss. "Such as its commitment to placing yourself above others."

"You're the kind of person who wants to help everyone, I take it?" asked Revan.

"Yes," Barriss answered without hesitating.

"Well, good news: you're part of 'everybody'. You can take care of yourself without feeling bad," Revan said.

"Putting yourself above others only causes you to devalue them," Barriss objected.

"You think being happy, skilled, victorious- being powerful- demands that power be abused? Okay, let's try something..." Revan said. Holographic lines appeared in the air, forming a two grids of sixteen rectangles each over the ground. "Break out the pazaak deck."

Barriss reached into her pocket and pulled out the deck of cards she’d found.
"Do you know the rules?" asked Revan. “Why am I even asking, there's no way you've ever played. It's probably against the Code or something."

"Greed is unbecoming of a Jedi," said Barriss.

"Oh you poor, sheltered dork. Come over here, I'm teaching you how to gamble," said Revan. "Here are the rules of Pazaak: the main deck is made of cards of values between one and ten. Each turn, we take a card from the deck and place it in the grid. Our objective is to get the sum of all our cards to add up to a value as close to twenty as possible without going over. You go over twenty, you lose the round. First one to win three rounds is the victor."

"That sounds like it's entirely luck-based."

"That's where the side-deck comes in. Pazaak players all have 'side-decks' of ten cards of their choosing. Before each game, players randomly select four cards from their side-deck, and during their turn, they can add one of those cards in addition to the main deck card to try and get their total to twenty. That pack came with a pair of side-decks as well. We'll each pick one, and start playing."

The rules were simple enough, though the holocron’s lack of appendages meant Revan had to point at a card and have Barriss place it, keeping the side-deck cards wedged between two rocks.

Three rounds passed, Revan winning handily each time.

"Did you enjoy playing pazaak, Revan?" Barriss asked, not enjoying herself in the slightest.

"No. I hated every second of it," Revan said dispassionately. “It was boring, tedious, and a lot of the players were cheaters."

"How did you keep winning?"

"By using my incredible Force powers to turn back time and keep redoing things until I won."

"That- that can't be a real power."

"No, it can't. But reading their minds is," said Revan.

"That's rather unfair."

"Yeah, well, the cash I won off was put towards buying equipment I needed for my mission to save the galaxy, so they have no right to complain."

With each passing round, Barriss thought less about how much she was tired of losing and more about the math underlying the game.

Once each player obtains eleven point or over, the possibility exists that the next card would place them over twenty, causing a loss, and a 10% chance of getting twenty, giving the advantage to the player with the lower sum, who can afford to keep taking cards from the main deck without fear of losing. Each unique side deck card adds another 10% chance of getting to twenty, but since they’re all less than ten in value, as the cards become useable, the probability of going over twenty increases. This makes it important to have as many different side deck cards as possible to increase one’s odds, and giving up a side card in the case of a loss or a stalemate where the opponent does not also give up a card reduces chances of victory in subsequent matches. This also makes it advisable to use duplicate cards if available, as this doesn’t reduce chance of winning in future matches...
Her brain kept running like that for a while.

Finally, she and Revan were two-to-two, she had eight points, Revan with seventeen, both of them with only one card left in their side decks. Revan revealed the last card to be a two, bringing the total up to eight-nineteen.

Revan has a 90% chance of losing on the next turn, Barriss thought while considering her own odds when her last card had a value of four. This was the closest she’d come to winning after eight losses.

“I’ll hold,” Revan said, declining to take another card.

Barriss drew another card, a nine that brought her total up to seventeen, making her four card useless. She drew again, a two that would tie her with Revan if she stopped now. Then in the next match, Revan could only rely on luck while she’d have that four.

She played it safe and called a tie. They started another match, values racking up for each of them, eight-two, thirteen-five, fourteen-nine. Then sixteen-seventeen. Barriss threw in the four, and got her twenty. Now all she had to do was hope Revan would go over.

Revan got a final score of twenty-seven.

The grid vanished and the word 'WINNER!' appeared in big letters, circling around Barriss before disappearing in a burst of polygons.

"You did it. You beat me," said Revan. "What are you going to do now? Rub it in? Mock me? Flaunt your superiority?"

"Of course I won't. There's no need to indulge such pettiness," protested Barriss. "Also, I'm fairly certain you let me win."

"Not the point. You put your skills to the test, and came out on top. You can choose to fight back or not. You can choose to gain power, to abuse it, to control it.

Barriss didn’t know how to respond. She actually did enjoy winning the game. And that was it. "I don’t understand the point."

"Reality is complicated, and reciting five or six sentences to yourself won’t make it more sensible," said Revan. "Here's something for you to think about: the Sith espouse the right of the strong to rule over the weak. They claim it is the law of the universe that, if they are the strongest, they have the right to do anything they want. To oppose that order is futile."

"No," said Barriss.

"Why not?"

"Simply because something is 'natural' doesn't make it the right course of action. And if they really intended to seek out unlimited strength, they shouldn't be bound by simple, animalistic behaviors."

The holocron emitted the sound of clapping; it was slow, knowing, like Barriss had said something profound.

"Congratulations, Barriss. You just out-Sithed the Sith," said Revan, voice filled with pride and barely restrained excitement. "After all, what greater demonstration of power is there than to make the laws of nature bend to your will? What does it matter what the universe says when you're seeking unlimited power? None of them ever aimed that high. The Jedi did, even if they never realized it,
"Going against the natural order."

"Hm. So I've fully embraced the power of the dark side?"

"I now bestow upon you the title of Dork Lord of the Sith," Revan said, producing a holographic lightsaber and tapping Barriss’s shoulders with it. Following that, a flowing holographic cape appeared around her, and pieces of armor covered in spikes. Barriss couldn’t quite see it, but there was an enormous, gaudy crown on her head, too.

“I believe the cape is a bit much,” Barriss said.

“Hey, you’d better appreciate that thing,” Revan said with a wagging finger as the violet hologram billowed dramatically behind Barriss. “Do you have any idea how much processing power it takes to convincingly animate a cape?”

Barriss laughed for a bit as the holographic accessories disappeared. “Revan, do you really think learning about the dark side is good for me?” she asked, waiting patiently as Revan was slow to reply.

“The dark side is a part of all life. That’s a fact. The truth is nothing to be afraid of, and if you understand that, it’ll become easier for you. Some people think that light and dark constantly battle within each person. My light and dark sides spend most of their time getting drunk together and complaining about how everyone except me is hopelessly incompetent,” Revan said. “And it made me into THE MOST POWERFUL JEDI EVER!”

“Revan...”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah- listen, Sith use their power to oppress and abuse those they consider inferior. Jedi use their power to protect the helpless, not matter the cost. Neither serves themselves or the greater good as much as they’d like to think” Revan explained. “Far greater power comes from finding the strength within the weakness. By the time I had defeated the Mandalorians, my army and navy were filled with soldiers and engineers not from the core of the Republic, but from Outer Rim worlds Mandalore had conquered and I had liberated. Onderon, Serocco, Iridonia. Peoples the Mandalorians had written off as inferior to them, as being too weak to deserve life, when all they needed was a fighting chance. I gave them training, weapons, warships, the opportunity to fight back against their oppressors, and led them to victory. Through that perspective, as a Jedi, I saved countless innocent lives, and as a Sith, I created the most powerful military of the era, one loyal to me alone.”

“I would’ve preferred to find a way to avoid such bloodshed becoming necessary,” said Barriss.

“And what would you have done in my place? Followed the will of the council? Stayed out of it? Let thousands of worlds burn, let the Republic be conquered?”

“No! I would’ve...I...” Barriss tried to come up with a good answer, some way of dealing with the Mandalorian threat as she understood it. They weren’t like the Confederacy of Independent Systems, they didn’t have any kind of politic agenda. The Mandalorians had tried to conquer the galaxy, more or less, because ‘why not?’.

“There isn’t always a good solution, Barriss. Sometimes, there isn’t even a solution that isn’t horrible. You’re not a bad person because you can’t find a better way. You’ll become a bad person if you stop looking for one.”

Barriss thought on that for a moment. Had she done everything she could?

Of course not. She’d admitted as such. All she’d needed to do was confront Luminara. Barriss had
known that, but that would’ve meant revealing to her master that she wasn’t a perfect Jedi, and she couldn’t do that, now, could she?

“If you’d been in my place during the Clone Wars, what would you have done?” asked Barriss.

“First thing I would’ve done differently would be to look for others within the order who would listen to me. Someone close, someone I could trust, someone I could convince the council’s way was wrong. Then, we’d’ve left in protest together.” Revan pretended to act intensely thoughtful for a moment. “Hmmm...HMMMMMMMMM...who could you have convinced to follow you away from the Jedi?”

“Yes, thank you, I understand the implication,” said Barriss, annoyed and waving her hand vaguely. “Why would Ahsoka coming with me have been so crucial?”

“One person is a lunatic. Two people are a movement. Everyone talked about what a great leader I was, but I wouldn’t have gotten as far as I did without the man who would become Darth Malak at my side.”

“Historical descriptions of the war often describe Darth Malak as being your inferior in every way. Strength in the Force, strategy, personal combat...” Barriss trailed off.

“Yeah, he was kind of an idiot. But he was my idiot.”

“If he was such an idiot.”

“Only I get to call him an idiot,” Revan interrupted.

“...If he, um, lacked planning and leadership skills, how did he hold his position as Lord of the Sith?”

"The Sith aren't very smart people. Being the sharpest of them was a lower bar to clear than you may expect."

"Does their recent victory mean the Jedi were even more foolish?" asked Barriss.

"...You don't want me to answer that."

"No, I suppose I don't," said Barriss. “You commanded the entire Sith Empire once. Wouldn’t you have seen the flaws in their Order?”

“Maybe I was too blinded by the dark side at the time. Or maybe I saw the failings of the Sith as a means of keeping them easy to control,” said Revan. “Does the title of Lord of the Sith demand its bearer to be a Sith themselves?”

“Are you saying you were never actually a Sith?” Barriss asked, surprised.

“I don’t remember. It’s a rather interesting experience, having to speculate on your own missing memories as though they were ancient history...because these days, they are...” Revan said ponderously. “Regardless, I am not a good person, Barriss. You haven’t forgotten about that, right? How I nearly destroyed the Jedi Order and the Republic? Betrayed the people who trusted me to protect them? Mentally beat the hell out of your girlfriend for rather flimsy reasons? I just told you about that time I killed a guy I’d considered a close friend, like, an hour ago.”

“I suppose that’s- hold on a moment, what was that about attacking Ahsoka?” asked Barriss.

“Nothing. You now know the basis of the Sith, both the benefits and the failings of their order. What
do you think now? Do you still consider everything about them suited only to be avoided and nothing else? Or is there some aspect of those teachings you believe is worth exploring?"

The Sith Code was imperfect, that was for sure, and it could lead to the dark side. But she understood why now, and Revan certainly wasn't trying to push her in that direction. And there actually was something in that sequence of self-advancement.

"I, I believe I would like to achieve some victory."

"You're now open to new possibilities, both in the Force, and in yourself. Let's get see what you're really capable of."

It was high tide. The water level in the sinkhole had been rising slowly enough that Barriss hadn’t noticed, until now, as she was running low on land.

"Time to put those skills to work," said Revan. "You need dry area to work, but it seems the ocean has other plans. What are you going to do?"

"I could leave," Barriss answered bluntly.

"You could- but where would you go? This spot is perfect for training. Are you so quick to give it up?"

Studying the waterline that was slowly approaching her feet, Barriss closed her eyes and began to push the liquid back out the hole it had come in on. Her training area was now dry again, for the moment.

"Impressive display. You’re barely even exerting yourself against that constant water pressure," said Revan, with a steady nod of approval that ended as abruptly as it began. "What will you do now? Think, Barriss. What’s the solution to the problem? There’s more than one, as you’ve discovered. What’s the best for you?"

"This is the best solution," Barriss said, grinning at the growing height of the wall of water. She sensed that Revan felt like grinning, too.

"Don’t be ridiculous," Revan said, exaggerating the problem. "You can’t train while holding back the ocean!"

"This is training. I can make use of this," Barriss said, using her power to hold back the water.

Barriss maintained her block over the inlet to the sinkhole for several minutes. She was perfectly capable of meditating for long periods. Now wasn’t the time for that.

She began letting the water back in, pushing the water back and forth, keeping her arms at her sides, eyes open, staring into the liquid mass. No loss of focus, no unnecessary hand motions. Pure visualization and realization.

"Why do you keep using simple pushes?" asked Revan. "You have the most versatile tool in the universe under your control, and you’ve decided to hit the problem with a hammer?"

The water began oscillating, waves spreading through the ring surrounding Barriss.
"That's it. Feel the flow of energy and life throughout the universe."

The waves grew more complex, three-dimensional, different frequencies layering over each other in the spiral of water. Barriss found it beautiful, the sunlight refracting through the oscillating surface.

Eventually, the entire sinkhole turned into a vortex of swirling, crashing, waves. At the center, Barriss felt herself growing light until she was gently hovering in the air, in control of the torrent.

"That's excellent," Revan said. "Now drop and give me twenty!"

"What!?” yelped Barriss she fell painfully onto her tailbone, waves crashing onto the ground and drenching her as the pool of water slowly stabilized, giving Barriss a face full of her own wet hair.

"You are one out of shape meatbag. Time to exercise. Twenty pushups. Get to it."

"A Jedi's strength flows from the Force," Barriss said grudgingly, as she stood up and rung out the hem of her shirt. "Physical training is useful, but secondary. And I thought I was doing well!"

"You were doing fantastic," said the holocron, which was floating and bobbing on the water’s surface. “Unfortunately, strength in the Force is great, but if you're going to be fighting professional soldiers, you’re also need to be in good shape. Can't have you coughing and wheezing in the middle of dodging blaster shots because your cardio sucks. Now drop."

“What about the tide?” she asked, pointing out she was now knee-deep in water.

“It doesn’t serve your purposes anymore. Remove it,” Revan answered.

“That seems harsh.”

“If I’d said that of a living thing, yes, that’s cruel. That’s doesn’t mean you should waste your empathy on molecules.”

Once again, Barriss forced all the seawater out of the enclosure. This time, instead of holding or manipulating it, she extended her power to bring down a slab of earth from the wall and seal off the entrance. Some droplets continue to trickle through, nothing that would make a dent in the next few hours.

Despite her frustration with the drastic turn this training session had taken, Barriss couldn't exactly argue she didn't need exercise. When she was still being held by the Republic, Barriss had kept up with her meditation and some basic exercises, not wanting to be seen wasting away bit by bit when Luminara inevitably visited her.

Once she'd been placed in the imperial prison, with her connection to the Force suppressed, less food, smaller quarters...constant awareness that everyone she cared about was very likely dead...she couldn't motivate herself to do much of anything outside of occasional, failed, pathetically brief escape attempts.

Looking at her arms, she could see how weak she'd gotten. The escape, Umbara, the Inquisitor- all the combat Barriss had seen since Ahsoka freed her had been survived mainly thanks to the Force, Ahsoka herself, and all the adrenaline her body could produce before giving out.

Begrudgingly, Barriss got down, straightened her body, and managed exactly four pushups before falling onto her face.
"Get your butt down," said Revan, observing Barriss’s poor exercise technique. "I said butt down! Haven’t you ever done a pushup?"

"That...that’s twenty..." said Barriss breathlessly as she barely managed to lower herself safely to the ground, then getting back to her feet and futilely tried to brush the sand off her. It was rough, and irritating, and it’d gotten everywhere.

"That was not twenty, that was seven. You don’t get to count the ones before your second one-minute break," Revan complained. “Alright fine, twenty squats. You’d think the Jedi would have gotten better physical training during wartime."

"You don’t seem to think highly of the Jedi," noted Barriss, slowly doing the squats as the two talked.

"No, I don’t."

"Then why do you side with them? You still call yourself a Jedi, don’t you?"

"I do, and my reasons are pretty straightforward," explained Revan. "Despite their many, many, many many flaws, the Jedi try to do the right thing. They try to be good people. And the Sith never do. That’s all the reason I need to pick the light side, whatever my misgivings about the philosophy of the order. Besides, somebody has to take the label while you and Snips are busy angsting over your past associations. Also, in the eyes of certain people, I’m a disgrace to everything the order stands for, so calling myself a Jedi pissed them off. How could I resist? Also: twenty sit-ups."

Several Force-pushes to clear out the sand eventually revealed a relatively soft patch of dirt, and Barriss began slowly completing the new set of reps.

“I admired the Jedi masters so much,” Barriss said, “Letting go of that respect, seeing their flaws, it felt impossible to accept. In a way, I suppose I didn’t accept it, continuing to idolize Luminara the way I’d done before long after the war.”

“And you found that unpleasant?”

“I felt lost. Everything I’d believed in was a lie, told to me by the every adult I’d ever trusted. Becoming a Jedi master, my entire goal in life for as long as I can remember, was something I didn’t want anymore. Every day I was told to go against the ideals I thought I stood for.”

“You ever heard of the ‘perfect solution fallacy’?” asked Revan.

For a few seconds Barriss wracked her brain trying to recall what that was, or to extrapolate what the fallacy was from the name.

“It’s...related to...um...”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, it’s okay that you don’t know,” Revan said, exasperated with Barriss’s lingering perfectionist tendencies. “The fallacy is that if a proposed solution is anything less than 100% effective, it isn’t acceptable and isn’t worth implementing, even if it’s an improvement or if a perfect solution is literally impossible. The Jedi did the best they could. Turns out it wasn’t enough. That doesn’t make them evil.”

“Well, where do we draw the line between imperfect and dangerous?” asked Barriss, comprehending
but dissatisfied. “Was it the invasion of Geonosis that began the war? What about Umbra, when the planet seceded and turned to the Separatists for aid when the Republic invaded? How about mass-production of short-lived but fully sapient clone soldiers before the war started? The myopia of attempting to capture Dooku instead of killing him when many more people were dying in battles on a hundred planets?”

“Yeah...yeah...” Revan said, tone vaguely accepting of Barriss’s outrage. “Okay, there is at least one thing about the Jedi that I really admire: their capacity for mercy. When my memories had been suppressed and I showed up at the Jedi Enclave, Bastila and the Jedi masters, who’d all known who I was, welcomed me. I’d been a monster, fought hard to kill them all, plotted the destruction their order, and they were pretty damn nice. Treated me a lot better than I would’ve treated them. Yeah, sure, I was brainwashed, but when I was lying near death on my flagship, Bastila decided to save me not because she’d concocted that convoluted plan on the spot, but because she thought I deserved another chance, and it was the right thing to do. Nothing else about their teachings had anywhere near the same impact on me. And even if they hadn’t really given me a choice, and had lied to me, I didn’t repeat those mistakes with others. Juhani, Bastila, Yuthura, Mekel...I showed them the same sympathy I’d been given, and we were all better for it. We were all alive because of it. I would’ve let Malak go too, if he’d been willing.”

“Do you ever feel any resentment towards the Jedi?” asked Barriss. “The council overwrote your memories, made you their tool. ‘Rummaged around’ inside your brain. Weren’t you ever angry at them?”

“Can’t say I was thrilled when I found out, but I’m not really mad at them for it anymore, either. What they did to me was a last-ditch effort born of desperation, after I’d pushed them to the brink of defeat. To the brink of extermination. And even if I did still hate them, what, you think I’d turn on them and devastate the galaxy, kill hundreds of millions of people, betray the trust of all my friends? Believe it or not, my love for the people closest to me exceeded my anger at the council,” said Revan. “Besides, even if they didn’t give me a choice, I wound up making one for myself anyway. You can’t keep a good Sith Lord down! Seriously. Some of them just won’t die. No matter how much you set them on fire.”

“But they took away everything you—”

“Barriss, it’s been millennia, I don’t care. I’ve outlived everyone who’s wronged me or been wronged by me. They’re dead, and I’m awesome. It doesn’t matter anymore.”

“That’s really all you have to say on the matter?” asked Barriss, unsatisfied with Revan’s dismissal of the Jedi’s abuse of power.

The hologram stared at Barriss for what felt like ages, studying her frustrated reaction, and then, gave her an answer she could accept.

“I didn’t care about it because I am graceful in victory,” Revan said.

“What exactly do you mean by ‘victory’?” Barriss asked, confused and fully aware this was one of those times Revan was layering on multiple meanings to things. “You’re not only talking about defeating the Sith, are you?”

She didn’t know exactly how, but Barriss thought she could hear Revan smiling at her.

“By deciding to use me as they did in their plan to defeat Malak, the Jedi Council had finally worked up the nerve to do what needed to be done to save the galaxy from devastation, instead of whinging over what the code said. They had one chance to stop the Sith, one that went against their principles,
and they took it. Exactly as I would’ve done in their position. Exactly as I had done in their position. I’m...proud to have taught the masters that important lesson,” said Revan. “The council weren’t the only ones. The various Jedi and former Jedi whom I’d gathered, they’d all seen the errors of both Jedi and Sith, and had escaped from them. They would shape the future of the order. The Jedi were changing, and through events I never could have imagined, I’d caused it. The whole galaxy was changing, and I was going to help it grow into something better any way I could.”

“It didn’t seem to help,” Barriss noted.

“The holocrons were supposed to remain active, in the hands of people who would protect the galaxy more effectively. Things didn’t go as planned.”

Barriss was about to ask what the ‘plan’ was, stopping short when she caught one detail.

“Holocrons?” she said quietly, noting the conspicuous plural.

“Did you think I was supposed to be the only one, Barriss? I was only the prototype. Jedi tend to limit themselves to individual holocrons, but like the Jedi who made them, those holocrons can be destroyed, and then the knowledge is lost anyway. The original Revan planned to mass produce holocrons and scatter them to find and train people who could make the galaxy a better place. The two of us agreed that the more Revan there was acting around the universe, the better our odds,” the holocron explained. “Aren’t you sick of all this, Barriss? The constant conflict wracking the galaxy? This fighting never seems to end, it’s all one cataclysm after another. The resources, territory, government, and technological level of this galaxy are all more than sufficient to maintain lasting peace if they were utilized competently. But they aren’t, because no one remembers the lessons of the past, both through the malice of people like Palpatine and the loss of information. Even now, I’m sure the Sith are erasing the history of the Jedi wherever possible. There’s still poverty, slavery, crime, political corruption, wars on every scale. I wasn’t going to die without leaving plenty of backups, enough to last a good long time and make sure things stopped going to hell over and over and over again. I wasn’t good enough to save the galaxy, so I was going to find a legion of people who were. At least, that was the idea. Instead, I got stuck in a cave, the lone Revan holocron. I’m making the best of it.”

“After another instance of galactic war and devastation to the Jedi occurred, in a manner closely resembling the time of the Old Republic,” said Barriss, rapidly drawing comparisons between the modern conflict between Jedi and Sith with Revan’s crusade. “Events you’d intended to prevent, which instead which led me to finding you...so you can tell me why they happened and why you’d wanted to prevent them...um...”

“Yeah, welcome to my thought processes, try not to get lost,” Revan said. “I was inspired by an artifact of the ancient Rakata, a mind prison that carried a survivor of the Infinite Empire into the then-present day. A repository of information that the surviving Rakata strove to learn from,” Revan said, then glumly adding “Trapped in that cave for ages, I suppose I wound up following that example a bit too closely, huh? See what I mean about repeating errors? Oh, and speaking of repetition, do twenty more squats.”

“Am I the first step in some new plan?” asked Barriss, a bit angrily. “Are you expecting me to rebuild the Jedi?”

“The point of my holocrons was never to enact some grand plan where my will would dominate the universe, only to encourage growth and strength in those who would bring prosperity to the galaxy. People who could do what I couldn’t. I’m not trying to transform you into anything, Barriss, nor was I trying to control the others. I’m trying to teach you everything I know, all my power, all my strength, so you won’t become anything except what you want to be.”
"You- or, Revan- however you want to phrase things, the intent was for you to guide countless students for millennia. How are you different from the Jedi?" asked Barriss. "Master Yoda was the head of the order for centuries, and the Jedi stagnated as a result. Why do you think you’d succeed where he failed?"

"Easy. The reason is power. Yoda, as the grand master, must’ve been obeyed and respected by everyone. He was in control. And perhaps he shouldn’t have been," Revan said. "I’m just a holocron. I have no authority as far as the Jedi are concerned. If you or anyone else listens to me, it’s because you’ve chosen to, because you’re thinking about what I have to say. Not because you’re supposed to. Not because I have power over you. You can agree or disobey whenever you want. Listen to me, ignore me, leave me- rebuild the Jedi, let them fade away, join the Empire- you can do whatever you want. You could throw me into the ocean and walk away right now. I can’t do anything to stop you. You’re free."

Barriss nodded. There had certainly been some moments where she’d felt like angrily throwing the holocron away. "I’d like to be someone who can redeem others, the way you did."

"Keep in mind it only works if they want to be spared. If they want to stop fighting you. You won’t get that kind of response from your average trooper, or a true believer in Palpatine’s regime. It will be their choice, not yours," said Revan. "And I hope that if you get the chance, you’ll understand why people would show you that same kindness...Fifty jumping jacks, right now!"

Barriss held off on continuing the discussion, and a groan, as she performed the demanded exercises. Talking while moving up and down like that felt weird to her. Her worsening stench from the workout and the drying sweat/seawater mix her clothes were soaking in wasn’t putting her at ease, either.

"Then what made you turn to the dark side before?" Barriss asked she landed the last jump.

The question actually made Revan struggle for a moment, trying to find answers that required missing memories.

"I can’t be completely certain. I don’t remember much from those days, but I think what happened was that I lost my faith in the Jedi. The Mandalorians were sweeping through the Outer Rim, wiping out fleet after fleet the Republic sent to fight them. Millions were dying, the Republic pled with the Jedi Council to help, and...they wouldn't. They were too afraid of the consequences of hasty action that they ignored the results of inaction, and that choice lead to countless deaths."

"One thing about all this bothers me," she said. "The Jedi of the Old Republic wouldn't go to war, and it turned out to be the wrong decision, allowing the Mandalorians to devastate the Outer Rim. It also led to your campaign against the Republic. The modern Jedi waged war for the Republic, spreading death and destruction obliviously, and were wiped out at the war's end. What could the Jedi have done? Both options ended in violence and death."

"Ooh, good question. Let's think about this; maybe the problem isn't the Jedi taking action or not. Whether or not they went to war wasn’t the issue, so what was? Show me what you’ve got."

The question demanded considerable contemplation from Barriss, as just once, on this incredibly important point, she wanted to have a solid answer. For Revan, and herself.

What had frustrated her most? The Jedi couldn’t have prevented the war, not with any simple change as far as she knew. The secession movement was a fault of the senate. During the war, the Jedi increasingly pursued violent methods while claiming to be pacifists, refuses to assassinate Dooku to end the war quickly on that principle without seeing the contradiction in launching invasions of
populated worlds. Never acknowledging the contradiction. Never listening to opposition.

"The Jedi never questioned themselves. You said the Jedi tried to do the right thing. In wars against the Separatists and Mandalorians, they considered themselves infallible in their choice, without considering their options beyond what the code might allow even when it offered no solution," said Barriss. "Maybe that's why you lost faith in them. They stopped trying to be better."

"I hadn't thought of that before."

"Did I just teach you something?" asked Barriss, amused and more than a little pleased with herself.

"The master teaches the student teaches the master teaches the student."

"Is that a yes?"

"Heh, yeah. Well done," said Revan. "I knew there was a reason I liked you. NOW DROP AND GIVE ME THIRTY!"

Barriss was about to do as she was told, then felt the numbness of her arms and thought about how much worse it would get.

“...No, I’m not doing that,” she said, lying down to do more sit-ups as an alternative.
EDIT: The above fanart was kindly made by playinggoji. Thank you for sending me this.

"The world is full of idiots who don't understand what's important, and they'll tear us apart, Barriss. But if you stick with me, you're gonna accomplish great things, Barriss. And I'm gonna be part of 'em, and together we're gonna run around, Barriss, we're gonna do all kinds of wonderful things, Barriss. Just you and me, Barriss. The outside
world is our enemy, Barriss. We're the only friends we've got, Barriss. It's just Revan and Barriss. Revan and Barriss and their adventures, Barriss! Revan and Barriss forever and forever a hundred years Revan and Barriss some things. Me and Revan and Barriss runnin' around and, Revan and Barriss time, all day long forever, all a hundred days Revan and Barriss forever a hundred times, over and over Revan and Barriss adventures dot com, www.revanandbarriss.com, www Revan and Barriss adventures, all hundred years, every minute Revan and Barriss dot com, www hundred time Revan and Barriss dot com." -Revan. To Barriss.

So yeah, there's the explanation behind the bold text and why Revan is the only one who ever has it.

Writing Barriss and Revan together is way too much fun. I've been enforcing a rule while writing this that I shouldn't write scenes with Revan where Ahsoka would work off Barriss just as well, because I don't want Revan to dominate the story. But this mentor/student relationship just works enough that their discussions write themselves.

Revan's pazaak tirade is based on my experiences with it as a mini-game in KotOR, with the line about time manipulation being a reference to me (and most other players who bother with it) save-scumming like crazy to win, and the mind-reading is my in-universe explanation for how Revan could've possibly made any money from the process otherwise. Because that game fucking cheats. Barriss's internal thoughts about the statistics of the game were originally even longer, because I've thought about all this stuff, but I decided to spare you all.

The full details of Revan's intentions for the holocrons was something I came up shortly after finishing the side story, and am rather proud of it. Before that, I'd intended for this holocron to be the only one. But we all know that can't be right. Revan would go completely overkill, copying themself who knows how many times and letting the Force guide students to the holocrons, learning everything Revan knows. Thousands of people. Every one of them as powerful as Revan in their prime, superior to any Jedi or Sith, rising out of the Sith War to reshape the galaxy. And that's just Phase One. That's the kind of thing Revan would do in their later years, not get captured by a lame Palpatine/Ebony Darkness hybrid for centuries and then building a bunch of genocide machines.

Now that Barriss can dodge blaster shots, I'm gonna have to have her go Neo on some stormtroopers, and I can't decide if that's really cool or really stupid.
It’d been a while since Ahsoka had felt this useless. During the war, there was always a battle to fight, somewhere for her to go. Right now, all she was supposed to do was wait while Riyo and the others kept an eye on the Empire, planning what to do next. No combat, just patience.

To pass the time, she’d been checking on the Eclipse, making sure everything was still working after the crash and subsequent repairs on Myrkr. And keeping an eye out for anything Karrde might’ve had hidden inside it. Something so obvious didn’t seem his style, though she wouldn’t put it past him.

Riyo and Sabé’s airspeeder was parked next to the freighter, the two vehicles barely accommodated by the estate’s hangar as they were shielded from outside view.

“What’s up?” called a voice from the hangar’s floor, as Ahsoka looked over and saw Sabé, now dressed in casual clothes.

“You weren’t,” Sabé said bluntly. “I’ve got the best electronics detection equipment available. Your ship is clean.”

“Well, I guess I’ll stop wasting my time,” Ahsoka said sarcastically, effortlessly making the six-meter leap down to the ground right in front of an unfazed Sabé. “What’s up?”

“Riyo is preparing to leave, so I have a bit of time to kill,” said Sabé, presenting Ahsoka with one of the wooden staffs she was carrying. “I was wondering if you were up for a sparring match.”

“Oh- uh, okay, what brought this on?” Ahsoka said as she took the weapon.

“Keeping a low profile makes it difficult to find real training partners to help keep me sharp. And going up against a former Jedi is a rare opportunity.”

Ahsoka nodded, stretching out a bit and getting a feel for the weight of the staff, sizing up Sabé. A little practice could do her some good, too.

*This shouldn’t be too tough. Even if I don’t use the Force, I’ve been fighting trained soldiers, Sith, droids, and assassins for years and...oh damn.*

Sabé had taken off her jacket, revealing a tight, black sleeveless shirt underneath, and the many, many clearly defined muscles of her arms and torso. She was still slim enough that regular clothes could hide it, but she was *much* more toned than Ahsoka was.

“Ready?” asked Sabé, grinning slightly as she got a firm grip on her staff, the muscles of her forearm tensioning.

“Uuuhhhh...”

Sabé took that as a ‘yes’, lunging forward to strike first, the two staffs loudly colliding off one another as Ahsoka batted the attack away.
“You’re holding that wrong,” Sabé said, showing how she had one hand on her staff’s center, the other closer to the end. “It’s not a double-bladed saber. Holding it only from the center like that won’t give you enough leverage.”

Ahsoka mimicked Sabé’s form, still struggling to adapt to the unfamiliar weapon as the latter easily kept her on the back foot, pushing her across much of the hangar.

Before Sabé could land a blow to knock Ahsoka’s staff out of her hands, the latter used the Force to lift her opponent, holding her at a safe distance.

“You wanted to see what I could do, right?” Ahsoka said, keeping Sabé stable.

Limbs dangling awkwardly, unused to the sensation of being unconnected to anything, Sabé held her staff in one hand, took aim, and threw it like a javelin into Ahsoka’s stomach. Ahsoka lost control for a second, allowing Sabé to land on her feet, run forward at her opponent, and knock her down, ripping Ahsoka’s weapon from her hands.

“What’s the matter? Some Force-deaf bodyguard is too much of a challenge for you?” Sabé goaded as she lowered Ahsoka’s own staff to her chest.

Sabé’s grin disappeared and her eyes drifted away, her weapon drawing back slowly as she and Ahsoka heard the loud *clack* of many pairs of blaster arms unfolding in unison.

“Stand down, guys. This is just a training exercise,” Ahsoka called out as the droidekas marched down the boarding ramp of the Eclipse. They all retracted their weapons, forming a semicircle from Ahsoka and Sabé while still watching them both, one of them loudly bleeping a response.

“What did he say?” asked Sabé.

“He said they knew it was practice...that’s the only reason they didn’t incinerate you,” Ahsoka replied, wondering if she’d have to talk to the droidekas about taking it down a notch. “You’ve not the only bodyguard around here.”

The next round, Ahsoka and Sabé agreed to take things much easier, more going through the motions while having a discussion than actually attempting to defeat the other. Focusing on deflecting each other’s attacks, no striking each other’s bodies.

“So. Working for Riyo,” Ahsoka started. “How’s that working out?”

“I can’t complain. Chuchi is astonishingly low maintenance,” said Sabé. “She largely heeds my advice when it comes to matters of personal protection. Unlike some people.”

“Uh huh. How often did Padmé ignore you?” asked Ahsoka, knowing exactly who and what Sabé was referring to. She’d already known it wasn’t a matter of if Padmé leapt into danger, but how many times a week.

“I want to say...60% of the time, roughly?” Sabé said as she tried to strike at Ahsoka’s legs, while the latter moved back out of the way of the swing, then want a Sabé with an overhead swing. “I wasn’t just a guard, I was her body double. Yet not only did she repeatedly put herself in unnecessary danger, she intentionally blew my cover more than once.”

“Such as when surrounded by some agitated Gungans?” suggested Ahsoka. She’d heard that story before, though Padmé and Obi-Wan seemed to recall exact details differently. Padmé was proud of how it had gone and talked about it as a diplomatic achievement. Obi-Wan mainly brought it up as a lesson in observance and pointed out how his master, Qui-Gon Jinn, had known who Padmé was the
whole time.

“That was only one example. And easily the most pleasantly resolved,” said Sabé. “It was fortunate things didn’t get violent.”

“Yeah. Those guys seem silly, but I wouldn’t provoke their warriors,” said Ahsoka. She was trying to get more reach by holding more towards one end of the staff, finding it difficult to keep the weapon balanced, making it easy for Sabé to block the strikes. Holding the end of a weapon like this went against all her training.

“Oh, no. If the warriors attempted to hurt her, I would’ve killed all of them,” Sabé said confidently.

“Uh, don’t underestimate the Gungans,” warned Ahsoka. “They managed to take down General Grievous.”

“I stand by what I said. I had my own versions of Padmé’s dresses, loaded with hidden weapons.”

“What, were you gonna pull an RPG out from under your poofy skirt?” asked Ahsoka.

“Twin heavy blaster pistols strapped to my ankles, actually,” said Sabé, in such a dull tone that Ahsoka couldn’t tell if she meant it. “I could never anticipate what threat Padmé would attract next. It was always best to go in heavily armed.”

“She didn’t keep you up to speed about what she was doing?” asked Ahsoka.

“Not at all. Being in a position of power draws all kinds of threats, but Padmé never deliberately hid things from me.”

Ahsoka felt a bit awkward with the way Sabé phrased that. It’d taken her a while to figure out herself, but she knew Padmé, and Anakin, had parts of their lives they preferred to keep hidden.

“There may have been things about her you didn’t know,” Ahsoka said uneasily, wondering whether she really wanted to break this to Sabé.

The staffs struck each other again, Sabé moving in closer to make closer of her greater leverage.

“If you’re referring to her ‘secret marriage’ to your master, I was well aware,” said Sabé, completely shattering Ahsoka feeling of keeping this deep secret.

“What? You figured it out too?” Ahsoka said, bringing her weapon down onto Sabé and getting them into a lock.

“What do you mean ‘figured it out’? Padmé told me,” Sabé said, breaking the lock with Ahsoka and jabbing at her again. “Like I said, she didn’t hide things from me. Maybe I didn’t leave her much choice, whether I’d want to or not. It wasn’t as if she could keep secrets from me when I’d spent years watching her every movement and giving each other coded messages. And given our history, perhaps she felt comfortable enough to explain.”

“‘History’? You mean as her bodyguard?” asked Ahsoka.

“No. No, I do not.”

“What, were you two...y’know...?” Ahsoka trailed off as the two duelists circled each other. “Wait, you and Padmé were together?”

“Briefly, after her time as queen ended,” Sabé said calmly. “It didn’t work out. Apparently, she
prefers someone a bit more ‘passionate’. ‘Fiery’.”

That explains a lot.

“That doesn’t seem like a serious reason to break up,” Ahsoka said.

“Padmé had more of a vested interest in romance than you might expect. More than I did. It didn’t work out,” Sabé said again. “I tried. That’s the least you should do, no matter how afraid you may be.”

“I’m sorry. It must’ve been hard, seeing her with Anakin-”

“Stop. That’s not what I’m upset about. I’ve had years to get over Padmé, and I have...Her death is another matter entirely,” Sabé said with a sullen expression, as she lowered her weapon and stood back from Ahsoka. “Time out- Ahsoka, what do you know about the events surrounding Padmé’s death? The official story is that she was killed by the Jedi, another effort by them by the Empire to stir up contempt for the order. We both know that can’t be true, and I can’t find any verifiable details about where she was when she died, or what she was doing. Do you know anything about what really happened to her?”

So many things had happened since the end of the war, Padmé’s death was something Ahsoka simply hadn’t had time to look into. Figuring out Barriss’s location had been tricky enough, and after that finding her it’d been nonstop combat and running. And as Sabé had found out, there weren’t any leads to go off of. Padmé was dead, and no one seemed able or willing to explain how or why.

“I don’t know anything about it,” Ahsoka said gravely. “I watched her funeral procession from a distance. I tried to find out who the coroner was, but there were no records. Before I could investigate further, I had to leave Naboo.”

“That’s what I was afraid of,” Sabé sighed. “I’d hoped you might’ve been able to fill me in.”

“I’m sorry I can’t help more,” Ahsoka said, walking closer to Sabé.

Sabé raised her staff again, forcing Ahsoka to back away. The time out appeared to be over.

“It’s not your fault,” Sabé said. She sounded angry. Not angry at Ahsoka, but definitely angry, and with how little emotion she generally showed, it was still chilling. “You want to help? Help me find a way to kill Palpatine.”

Stretching her arms and legs, Barriss found herself incredibly sore all over, much more than she’d expected from that workout. It would get easier as she did more, she knew, but that didn’t change the fact she could barely walk around the room.

There was a knock on the door. Midway through one step towards it and the resulting jolt of pain, Barriss instead called, “Uh- please come in!”

Riyo let herself in, eyeing Barriss, then closing the door behind her.

“Oh, um, hello senator,” Barriss said, not having expected Riyo to have any interest in speaking to her. The senator looked as uncertain about her reasons for being here as Barriss was. “What can I do
The senator opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again, liked she’d had something prepared and now she wasn’t sure that’s what she wanted to say.

“Ahsoka is a very dear friend of mine. She helped my entire planet in the midst of its crisis during the Clone Wars. She saved my life, and who knows how many others over the course of the war,” Riyo said, steeling herself. “Before I allow you two out of my sight, I want you to explain to me why, after what you did, why in the world I should leave you alone with her?”

Barriss’s heart was pounding. She certainly didn’t have a good answer for Riyo. Often, Barriss didn’t even think Ahsoka should be bringing her around, there was no way she could reassure anyone else.

The stiffness and pain in Barriss’s legs felt more intense, then weirdly numb as she became more nervous.

Her legs buckled.

Reacting quickly let her land on her arms instead of her face. Barriss glanced up to see Riyo cautiously approaching her, concerned and confused by what she was happening, perhaps thinking this was some kind of ploy, then resolving to help Barriss up and into one of the room’s chairs, staring at her confusedly. Nothing about Barriss’s behavior made sense to Riyo, and the former couldn’t help but sympathize. Being confused and disturbed by the way Barriss acted was a feeling Barriss frequently felt.

“Thank you,” Barriss said.

“...What happened to you?” Riyo asked, taking the seat opposite Barriss, more perplexed than judging. And, maybe, a little disappointed. “You betrayed the Jedi, the Republic, and Ahsoka, you masterminded a plot that blindsided the Jedi Council, you gave General Skywalker, the strongest knight of the Jedi, a serious duel, and then you stood up in front of the most powerful people in the galaxy to declare your contempt for them and their war! You’re supposed to be a cunning, ruthless, audacious, diabolical killer! I thought you were one of the most dangerous people in the galaxy- instead, you’re an absolute wreck!”

Barriss could only shrug weakly. And give a little disinterested grunt. Nothing Riyo had said was untrue, and Barriss still didn’t have any good answers for her serious questions. “Ahsoka mentioned you to me on a handful of occasions. Did you two discuss me as well?”

“A few times, yes.”

“What was your impression of me?” asked Barriss.


“I believe I understand where the confusion is coming from. You’ve been unable to reconcile how someone could possess the characteristics Ahsoka described while also being capable of the actions you listed,” Barriss said, then leaning back in her chair and nonchalantly waving down her head and body. “This is the result of such a combination.”

Riyo was quiet for a moment, studying Barriss. Looking for some sign that this was a trick, and coming up empty. Her stern expression slowly softened as she stared at the exhausted, unhappy girl in front of her. Barriss’s point was sinking it. “It feels strange to ask this...Are you all right?”
“I have been better,” Barriss said earnestly, wanting to remain polite. All things considered, Riyo’s stance wasn’t at all out of line. “Thank you for your concern.”

Now that Barriss had stumbled through Riyo’s aggressive questions and Riyo had lost her righteousness in the face of Barriss’s disappointing inability to answer them, or do much of anything else, the two were left staring dumbly at each other from across the little table they were sitting at. Riyo hadn’t expected this encounter to go the way it had, Barriss hadn’t expected it to ever even happen.

“The reason I am ‘an absolute wreck’, as you accurately phrased it, is because committing the same acts which cause you to fear me, frighten myself even more,” Barriss said. “I didn’t want to fight in the war, kill people, or participate in slaughter across whole planets, but I did, and I couldn’t deal with it. Then in a misguided attempt to stop it and get out, I turned on everything I’d believed in and hurt Ahsoka, even though I didn’t really want to, but I did, and I couldn’t deal with that, either. Believe it or not, what you’re seeing now is a remarkable improvement over my mental state of a few months ago.”

“How did you get this bad without anyone noticing?”

Barriss shrugged again. “Either I am a master of concealing my emotions, or the entire Jedi Order was incredibly unobservant. Perhaps both are true.”

The silence returned for a while, both of them glancing around the room to avoid looking at each other, Riyo occasionally drumming her fingers on the table.

“I...I don’t forgive you for what you did to Ahsoka. But I wish you weren’t in the condition you are,” said Riyo. “And I’m still not convinced it’s a good idea for you two to be traveling together.”

“Our feelings on the matter aren’t what’s important. For whatever bizarre reason, she already chose me,” Barriss said. “You’re welcome to confront her and demand to do as you ask. I’m sure if you take a forceful approach, she’ll listen to you.”

Both of them managed to keep a straight face at that suggestion for about three seconds before breaking.

“Do you think you can keep her safe?” asked Riyo. “The entire Empire would see her dead. If she’s in danger, can she count on you?”

Barriss had made her new saber. She had some new tattoos. Even the stabbing pains all over her body meant she was getting some of her musculature back. Her connection to the Force was growing stronger and stronger.

“All things considered, I’m doing quite well.”

Exhausted, Ahsoka struggled to raise her staff to Sabé. Aside from her lack of practice with the weapon, compared to her lightsaber, the staff felt heavy and unwieldy.

“Would you like to take a break?” asked Sabé, who barely even seemed tired.

“Maybe not a break, just change things up. Do you have any other weapons to spar with?”
“...I might have something more to your liking. Hold on,” Sabé said, taking the staffs and walking over to her airspeeder, returning a moment later with a pair of dark grey vibroblades. “I’d like to see your lightsaber skills in action.”

“You do realize it’ll cut right through those swords, right?” Ahsoka warned as she unclipped the weapon from her belt. Sabé was undeterred.

“Fourteen years ago, Darth Maul aided the plot against Naboo and my queen. In light of that threat, I obtained equipment coated with cortosis, strong enough to withstand even a lightsaber’s blade. In my line of work, no amount of preparation is too much,” Sabé said, holding up the left blade for Ahsoka to see. “I’ve been waiting for an opportunity to try them out.”

“You’ve been carrying custom weapons everywhere you’ve gone for over a decade on the slim chance you’d fight someone with a lightsaber?” asked Ahsoka. It seemed weird to her that Sabé just happened to have lightsaber-proof swords in the speeder. It took her a second to realize that speeder was the one Sabé had taken to meet in that mine shaft, with plenty of lead time to get whatever equipment she’d wanted.

And she’d chosen to bring these.

Knowing Ahsoka would be there.

‘In my line of work, no amount of preparation is too much.’

Ahsoka couldn’t decide if Sabé was an effective planner who was deadly serious about her job, or a paranoid who’d really found her calling as a bodyguard.

She definitely had the heavy blaster pistols, and would’ve used them.

“Ahsoka, I’m a bodyguard in the service of people with dire need for bodyguards,” Sabé said, proudly flourishing the weapons. “Blocking lightsabers is only a bonus. These blades can, and have, cut live flesh just as well as any normal vibroblade.”

Against a boast like that, Ahsoka lit up her saber, holding it defensively between herself and Sabé, then sensing the other’s disappointment.

“What is it?” asked Ahsoka.

“I thought you used two lightsabers,” Sabé said, glancing at the vibroblade in her right hand. “This doesn’t seem even.”

“I had to give up my shoto to get credits for my ship and throw the Empire off my trail- though their Jedi-hunters know I’m alive,” Ahsoka said. “Don’t worry about me. I’ve taken on dual-wielding enemies with one saber before.”

The two of them held their stances for a while, each waiting for the other to make the first move. It was Sabé who struck first, not due to brashness, but because she didn’t know when Riyo would need her and she wanted to get at least some practice in with these things.

The cortosis did its job, holding back Ahsoka’s lightsaber, a few seconds of contact that should’ve cut clean through the blades only leaving the metal faintly glowing red from the heat, which quickly dissipated, leaving the blade completely undamaged.

Sabé was fighting defensively, allowing Ahsoka to keep striking at her, testing out the resilience of the blades.
“You should switch to using one blade,” warned Ahsoka, maneuvering around one blade and stopping her saber at Sabé’s shoulder. “They’re too heavy compared to lightsabers. Anyone who’s had training will move too fast for you to block.”

Sabé nodded and set down one of the vibroblades, gripping the other two-handed, fighting more offensively now. It took Ahsoka a moment to adapt- Sabé was trained in more conventional blade weapons, not any of the lightsaber forms she was familiar with, and Ahsoka had never fought anyone with cortosis weapons. Whenever she’d tried to cut through metal before, it ended with her target in pieces. There was also the added force from the mass of the swinging blade, something lightsaber combat didn’t take into account. Lightsaber strikes only had as much force as their user could put apply, which in Sabé’s case, was already considerable.

Ahsoka decided to try outlasting her opponent, using a number of rapid strikes that demanded Sabé move quickly to block them, tiring her out faster.

“Cortosis is pretty dense, isn’t it?” Ahsoka asked jokingly, noticing how much Sabé was sweating now. “How much does that thing weigh?”

“I’ll be sure to weigh it later, because I am very curious,” Sabé said grudgingly, finally lowering the vibroblade and catching her breath, extending her hand. “Thank you. This has been very instructive.”

“Not a problem,” Ahsoka said, shaking Sabé’s hand.

Ahsoka and Sabé turned their attention to the metal door as it slid open and Barriss walked into the hangar, moving very stiffly. In what appeared to be a considerable amount of pain. “Ah, there you are, Ahsoka.”

“What have you been doing?” asked Sabé.

“Just a bit sore,” Barriss answered, awkwardly stretching her neck.

“What have you been doing?” asked Sabé.

“Only some basic exercises,” Barriss said, glancing at Sabé and doing a double-take when she saw the latter’s bare arms.

“Did you stretch out before you started?” asked Ahsoka. Barriss’s wide-eyed look told no, she hadn’t. And now she was agonizing over all the reasons she should’ve known to do that. “Do you want some help exercising? I could probably help you get better results than...whatever you did to yourself.”

“That...sounds like a good idea,” Barriss said.

“And I believe that’s my cue to check in on Riyo,” Sabé said. “There’s a weight room down the hall on the left. You two have fun.”

Following along with Ahsoka’s stretches, Barriss found herself both less flexible than she’d remembered and more so than she’d feared. Though the cracking sounds coming from her joints as she stretched her limbs didn’t fill her with confidence. Ahsoka was pretending not to hear it, but
Barriss noticed her tics with each little pop. Barriss’s muscles still hurt from that ill-advised impromptu workout (thanks, Revan) and stretching out after the fact was providing a small measure of relief.

“What do you want to exercise? Upper body, core muscles, what?” asked Ahsoka.

Barriss glanced between Ahsoka and her thin, limply dangling arms, thinking about Sabé. “Upper body strength. Definitely upper body strength.”

“Let’s start you off with the five-kilogram weights,” said Ahsoka, watching Barriss take the dumbbells off the rack while she took the fifteen-kilo ones. Despite the difference in mass, Barriss could see Ahsoka was still having an easier time handling her barbells.

Barriss struggled to follow Ahsoka, who was raising her weights enough to make sure Barriss was keeping up, not that it helped resolve the lack of strength.

“So. Strength training. What brought this on?” Ahsoka in between reps.

“I’m not strong enough. Literally. As I am, I can’t keep up with the physical demands of our situation,” Barriss said, her arm shaking as she lifted the weight.

“C’mon, you can do this,” Ahsoka said, watching Barriss complete the last barbell raise before relaxing her arm.

“Your encouragement is valued,” Barriss said, switching to do some curls with similar difficulty, “however I don’t think I’m anywhere near your level of fitness.”

“You haven’t had time or equipment to keep yourself fit. Give yourself a chance,” Ahsoka said.

“I am giving myself a chance. It doesn’t changed the fact that you’re better than I am,” Barriss said. “You always have been.”

“Um, I wouldn’t say I was a better Jedi than you—”

“I didn’t specify you were a ‘better Jedi’. You were simply...better,” Barriss said, sitting down on a padded bench for some curls, doing them intermittently in the conversation. “Though you were, also, a better Jedi. In control of your emotions. Concerned for and protective of the life around you.”

“Don’t act like I’m perfect,” Ahsoka said. “I was part of the war effort that was destroying the galaxy. You said it yourself.”

“Don’t take my judgement at that time as a condemnation of you. Especially not you,” Barriss said. “Please, don’t ever think less of yourself over what I said and did. You deserve so much better than that.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” said Ahsoka. What Barriss said seemed to have helped a bit. “Lately, you’re a lot more...resolute, I guess. It’s nice.”

“I owe you for that. Without your help, at best, I’d still be sitting in a cell, hating myself,” Barriss said.

“I think you’re giving me a little too much credit,” Ahsoka said, aware of how dismally serious this conversation was getting. “Hey, Barriss...I think you’re pretty great, too. You’re insanely smart, and focused, and thoughtful. You can heal, something I can’t even do. You’re even more acrobatic than I am, and that’s saying something.”
“Thank you,” Barriss said. “That makes me feel better.”

“Barriss, I know how awful you feel about everything you did, but you’re doing something to help fix it. You know how dangerous what we’re doing is, and you’re still here, trying to help people!” Ahsoka said.

With some difficulty, Barriss finished the reps and set her weights down.

“Do you ever think about the Jedi perspective on attachment?” asked Barriss.

“I have before. Not recently.”

“Ever since I began, well, doubting the way of things, I’ve wondered how wise the Jedi really were. Maybe the teachings never had much weight. Maybe they were passed down too far and for too long without question to retain their value,” said Barriss. “I want to care about something.”

“You’ve always cared,” Ahsoka said. “That was never the problem. You needed to let other people care about you.”

Barriss nodded, then reached down to grip her weights again. “I’d like to do more exercises on my own. With considerable break time. I’m certain it will be boring for you.”

“Really? I feel like if I leave you alone with these weights, you’re gonna drop one on your foot.”

Barriss raised an eyebrow disapprovingly, then grinned, held the dumbbell over her foot and dropped it. This instant before it hit, it stopped midair, slowly levitating back up and into her hand. “I have it under control, Ahsoka.”

“No way am I leaving you alone after you say something like that. Plus, I can’t let Sabé outshine me,” Ahsoka said, replacing her weights with a pair of twenty-five kilo ones, with considerable effort. “We’ve both got some work to do.”

“Ahsoka, don’t strain yourself!” warned Barriss.

“I can take it! Besides, you can heal me if I pull something, right?” Ahsoka said. “As long as I’ve got you around, I’m not worried at all.”

Chapter End Notes

They’ve finally entered "are we being friendly or are we flirting?" territory. Neither of them knows the answer, but they're both asking themselves the question.
All manner of objects hovered as Barriss sat on her bed; pazaak cards, her saber, her money, random items from around the room, all orbiting around her, testing her ability to concentrate and multitask on a variety of items.

The holocron was kept stationary, hovering in front of her and slowly rotating.

“The Force isn’t merely the power by which we can extend our will onto physical objects,” said Revan. “It is life, in all of its facets, and your connection to it allows you to affect life all around you, and direct your own course. Some say the universe is chaotic, that life can’t be controlled. There’s no such thing as chaos, only an order you don’t understand. The ability to sense the flow of everything, the wisdom to redirect it, wasted on people too stupid to use it effectively.”

“I don’t believe people are foolish for not being able to understand everything,” said Barriss.

“No, but they’re foolish for acting like they do when reality proves them wrong,” said Revan. “There’s a power in the universe infinitely greater than even the Force, or any other source of strength you care to bring up.”

“Which is?”

“The truth,” said Revan. “You can have all the strength in the Force you could possibly want, all the cosmic power you can imagine, but none of it will allow you to deny reality when it comes to shatter your illusions. And one bit of truth is that the Force, that life, is more grand and complex than the holiest Jedi or greatest Sith could ever imagine. They insist on only seeing a fraction of the whole.”

“Perhaps they only want to see a portion of the Force, but that doesn’t necessarily mean their understanding of what they do see is inaccurate,” said Barriss. “Is it a sign of ignorance to have a specialty?”

“It is if that specialty demands ignorance of others areas. People in the light avoid the dark, people in the dark avoid the light. The Jedi are dumb for trying to disconnect themselves from life, devoting themselves to the protection of cultures and people they don’t understand or even really care about. The Sith are dumb for trying to dominate it,” said Revan. “They all try to come up with codes so they don’t have to think about anything they do, that their choice is right because it’s consistent with that code. It’s easy, a way of avoiding working on a problem and resolving it. Learning and growing is what differentiates a person, and a machine. Someone who’s connected to the Force, and something that isn’t.”

“You don’t follow any code? Any rules?” asked Barriss, all the objects she was levitating lowering to the ground. “How do avoid doing something you shouldn’t? Something you never thought you were capable of.”
“I don’t. I have more regrets than you can imagine, and I live with them,” said Revan. “That’s what people do.”

“Then the goal is to learn from your mistakes?” suggested Barriss. “Trying to avoid guilt and regret?”

“Sometimes. Regrets aren’t always born from mistakes. You can make the right choice and still be brought pain from it,” said Revan. “The goal isn’t to never make mistakes. The goal is not to make the same mistake twice.”

“How can regrets be dealt with if anything I do could add on to them?” asked Barriss. “The way you describe it, life consists of making choices and then feeling awful about them.”

“That’s because you’re still focused on a fraction of the truth,” Revan said. “Sometimes you can make choices and it turns out exactly as you’d hoped. Or even better. Those moments aren’t born from following someone else’s rules, they come from taking action because it’s what you wanted, planned, and executed.”

“But personal goals don’t prevent making mistakes, either. Those who embrace the dark side frequently encourage embracing emotions such as rage,” Barriss said. “Sith act and take what they want, and it only leads to more pain.”

“Fearing the possibility of a negative effect is just an excuse to do nothing. As for the Sith, yeah, it’s always something about how you should ‘use your anger’...to accomplish what, exactly?” said Revan. “Might doesn’t come from anger’s usage. Peace doesn’t come from its suppression, but through its acknowledgment. Sith can’t recognize why their methods weaken them more than it helps.”

“Because of the futility of absolute selfishness and betrayal?” asked Barriss.

“I was going to say ‘game theory’, but that’s the same thing, really,” replied Revan. “Good luck getting any of them to listen to you, though. Something the Sith and Jedi share is that they don’t have enough doubts.”

“I thought doubts weakened you,” Barriss said.

“In the midst of a battle, yes. Indecision, inaction, that moment of hesitation, that’ll get you killed. When you’re at peace, doubt keeps you sharp. Questioning yourself and your reasons can make you stronger. Question your code and whether you really need it. It drives you to grow,” said Revan. “Doubt is good, so long as those doubts are resolved. If you never wonder whether you’re right, you’ll never find out how wrong you are. People who follow ideals without question will follow them straight into their graves. You should avoid that fate. And to allow your enemies to fall prey to it.”

“In that case, I should become quite powerful,” Barriss said. “I have more doubts than I’m able to process.”

“Yes, I’ve noticed,” Revan said eagerly. “I have no interest in people who can’t change themselves. People who try to become better will always be superior to people who don’t.”

“Regardless of how good they actually are?” asked Barriss.

“Especially in those cases. What, they have all that knowledge and strength, but can’t learn better ways of using it? What a waste,” Revan said.
“People like the Sith?” suggested Barriss.

“Yes. All that power, and its bearers can’t come up with anything to do with it except to destroy.”

“Even with all the faults of the Jedi Order, I can’t understand how the Sith defeated us so thoroughly,” said Barriss.

“Really? From what you’ve told me, it was basic strategy and counterintelligence,” said Revan. “The Sith concealed their true role and purpose throughout the war. You couldn’t defeat them because you never actually fought them.”

“There were many battles in which Jedi forces opposed Count Dooku directly,” said Barriss.

“Okay. How many of them are you sure were intended by the Jedi?” asked Revan. “More to the point, did the Jedi ever make any progress fighting his master?”

“...No,” Barriss realized. She didn’t have all the details of every fight against Dooku, but she knew the Jedi had never really come close to eliminating either him or his master as threats. “The council only saw part of the truth...”

“It’s difficult to defeat an enemy you don’t understand. It’s impossible to defeat an enemy you don’t know exists,” said Revan. “If you’re to have any hope of victory, you have to know who you’re fighting. You have to understand yourself, too. What you’re fighting for, what you have access to, what your ultimate goals are, how you prioritize them.”

“Understand your enemy and understand yourself to be victorious. I’m aware of the strategic wisdom,” said Barriss.

“Do you?” asked Revan. “He’s my question: should you place saving lives above all else?”

Barriss’s forehead scrunched up in response. “What are you talking about? Of course I want to save lives!”

“But that isn’t your main goal now. It hasn’t been since you escaped from prison. And like I asked: should it be?” Revan said.

Out of everything the holocron had been teaching her so far, always so layered and irregular, this was easily the most confusing, and most infuriating. Revan knew damn well how much she hated taking life, how hard she was working to avoid doing so, what exposure to death and war had done to her.

“What do you mean by that, exactly?” Barriss asked tensely.

“Go out and explore Pantora. Take a day to get a feel for this world,” said Revan. “You’ve spent your life wading at the shores, now it’s time to dive into the ocean.”

“Why can’t you be straightforward?”

“The Force connects all life. The Force is life. To understand and connect to it, you have to get out and live,” said Revan. “I’m sorry, normally, I really hate the whole ‘you must perform this oblique task for no reason’ stuff, but in this case, I think my presence would only impede you.”

That calmed Barriss down a bit. “How would you impede me?”

“Since we met, I’ve found your progress quite striking. There are things that shouldn’t be taught
while sitting around and talking,” said Revan, pointing to the door. “Go. If you’re still confused when you get back, I promise to lay everything out directly.”

After leaving a note telling Ahsoka how Revan had given her obtuse instructions and she’d be back later, Barriss walked into Arca City, worried she was a bit out of place. These were residential areas at the outskirts of the city, mostly apartments, people living their lives day-to-day, and she was an alien walking among them in what were clearly utilitarian spacer clothes.

Without any obvious hazards around, Barriss walked and concentrated, trying to sense the Force within everything around her, spacing out somewhat as she felt the emotions of the people around her.

The good news is that she didn’t feel worried about being out of place, because no one was paying her any attention.

The bad news was that she could sense what was on people’s minds.

There were families here. Children. Many of them were afraid, aware that the planet was in danger, that forces were conspiring to do them harm.

*You couldn’t see Palpatine for what he really was.*

*You couldn’t see the enemy.*

Somewhere above the planet, concealed by the layer of clouds and mist covering the city, there was a Star Destroyer.

*Do you see them, Barriss? Do you understand who the real enemy is?*

Barriss thought harder about the reality of the Clone Wars. After the extermination of the Jedi, it’d become clear to her the true war wasn’t between Republic and Separatist, but the Sith wearing away the Jedi without them ever realizing it.

If she understood the truth of the conflict with the Empire, one with meaning, one where she could believe her side was right, would she be as reluctant to go to war?

She’d already killed stormtroopers. Even knowing what they would do to her and whom they served, Barriss regretted it.

Over all the subdued terror, there was still joy to be found here. Barriss didn’t really have a homeworld, or at least she didn’t think of any world as one. Legally, she was born on Mirial, though she’d actually been born in a ship on its way to Coruscant. The Republic capital was about as close as she had to a home, though during her apprenticeship she’d moved around frequently with Luminara on assignments and for training. Then there were the Clone Wars, and suddenly her home was the source of suffering for everyone in the galaxy, including her. Between memories of her imprisonment, the devastation of the Jedi Temple, and Palpatine’s dark presence, Barriss never wanted to go back there. Now, settling down somewhere didn’t seem possible.

The only home she had was the *Eclipse*, for whatever that was worth. Or maybe just Ahsoka was home enough.
The Pantorans, and everyone else who had their homes in the grip of the Empire, were afraid of losing them. They could leave, but the Empire would be right behind them, looking for resources and labor to exploit. Everyone here knew that. How easily they could lose everything.

Attachments like that were something she’d sought to avoid as a Jedi. Being able to lose material possessions without losing a part of yourself, without losing peace of mind. She’d failed to avoid attachment. She felt pain over everything and everyone she’d lost.

Despite how much it hurt, she didn’t regret having those feelings. Luminara, the Jedi, the Republic, the future Barriss had imagined for herself, they were gone, and she missed them, because she’d decided they were important to her, and she still believed her reasons were sound.

Just like how everyone on Pantora had important things the Empire could take away any day now.

Before the Empire would fall, many people would die.

If she’d joined the Inquisitor, helped the Empire endure, fewer people would die. If she aided the oppression, killed a few to prevent rebellion, there would be ‘peace’. Trying to end injustice and fear would cause more death.

*Is saving lives your only goal?*

Life under Sith domination wouldn’t be worth living. Millions of people would fight back because they believed it was right. Would siding with the Empire and quelling resistance, ‘saving’ lives, be good just because those people weren’t dead?

There was no way to undo what she’d done. So, she’d have to stop the Sith from doing it to anyone else.

And to make sure she didn’t lose Ahsoka. If there was one person she couldn’t stand to lose, it was Ahsoka.

Many blocks later, the flow of life changed as Barriss walked past various stores and restaurants. The anxiety was still there beneath the surface, much to her relief, but there was more energy, more activity here.

The smuggling work had provided her a bit of money, not that she was actually planning on buying anything. She was only window-shopping, nothing here was even to her taste-

*Oh that’s a good coat.*

A clothing store she was passing had an eye-catching navy-blue coat, which after a pensive moment, Barriss decided to go in and look for, soon finding one in her size.

The hood fit perfectly. It wasn’t tight like to one on the jacket she’d been wearing. Larger, more flexible. Barriss tilted and turned her head in every direction, finding the hood moved comfortably with her head, nor restricting her motion or making any annoying stretching or sliding noise.

Barriss looked at herself in the mirror, checking on how the coat fit the her body. Sleeves were the correct length, the hem went down to just below her knees.

What Ahsoka had provided was very thoughtful, but it even she couldn’t get Barriss’s size quite right from memory, and Barriss was going to take the opportunity to make herself more comfortable. As marginal an improvement as some new clothes could be.
Next, she tried on some boots which, unlike the ones she was wearing, weren’t half a size too big.

There was still the issue of her hair, which had grown out to the point it was difficult to fit into the hood without messing up.

Pulling the hood down, Barriss searched a few aisles and found an assortment of hair clips, settling on a leather barrette, which her hair was just long enough to comfortably fit into.

It felt good to have her hair out of her face and over her ears for the first time in close to a year.

Checking out how she looked in the mirror, having her hair held back, combined with the hood, she resembled herself of a year ago. The way she preferred to appear.

Barriss almost smiled at the sight, then rapidly, frustratedly pulled back the hood. She kept pulling the hood up and down, debating whether she actually wanted to wear it like that. Whether she wanted to look like she did a year ago. A bit grudgingly, she settled on keeping it up for the moment, then checked whether she had enough credits for all this.

She did, barely and now she needed to decide whether to blow her income on this stuff.


It took a moment of looking in the mirror for Barriss to realize that voice wasn’t actually coming from inside her head, emerging from her daze and looking down to find CC-7 at her feet.

“Buy it, Barriss!” the droid shouted.

“What are you doing out here?” asked Barriss.

“Um, shopping? Where did you think I went?” CC answered, as Barriss noticed the bag slung over one of its manipulator arms.

“You...went...?” Barriss said weakly.

“I left before you did. Didn’t you notice I was gone?”

“Oh, um-”

“You have no awareness of my presence at all, do you? I’m just part of the furniture as far as you’re concerned. Don’t worry. I’m used to it,” said CC. “The new outfit looks nice, by the way. You gonna get it or not?”

Barriss ignored the rudeness and brought her items to the register, paying for her new clothes and leaving, her teal astromech following along behind her. She wondered if there was a donation box or something around here where she could drop off her old jacket and boots.

“So, where are we going?” asked the droid.

“‘We’ are not going anywhere. I’m in the middle of training,” said Barriss.

“It looked to me like you were wandering around and shopping.”

“That’s part of the training...I suppose,” said Barriss. “Immersing myself in the living Force surrounding the lives of everyone on this planet.”

“Maybe I can help,” said CC. “Can you sense me?”
“No. Droids aren’t connected to the Force.”

“Why not? Droids are as active and alive as any of you. The problem is you meatbags delete our memories and experiences before we can prove it,” said CC.

Struck by this, Barriss recalled several incidents during the Clone Wars where she’d been sneaking up on B1 battle droids, listening to them making small talk with each other in those tinny voices of theirs.

During one battle she’d even heard one begging for mercy from her, not that she’d listened. She’d forgotten about that one. Or maybe repressed it.

Thinking about her time spent around Ahsoka’s droidekas, Barriss couldn’t deny they were not only a bit odd, they were increasingly odd. She didn’t remember the names Ahsoka had given them, but Barriss recognized some of their behaviors. One of them liked tapping its left leg whenever it paused mid-stride. One of them had a preferred corner to stand in, others like that storage rack. Some wandered around randomly, others patrolled on a set route.

They were becoming distinct.

So distracted by thinking about droids, Barriss failed to notice the green blur that just ran by her, turning to see CC’s bag was gone. They were both stunned and confused for a second, doing a double take at each other, then CC started rolling in pursuit of the thief, shouting profanity at him as Barriss caught up.

He dove into one of the alleys, Barriss running after him and coming to a halt when the Twi’lek reach a group of four other significantly more imposing criminals.

Keeping her hood low and pulling the collar high enough to cover her chin, Barriss confronted the group.

“Return what you stole, and no one has to get hurt.”

None of them brought back the stolen items. A Rodian laughed at her.

The tactical position here wasn’t in Barriss’s favor. She was outnumbered, they were all in a back alley, and Pantoran city planning and sanitation were evidently better-funded than on most worlds because there was no cover of any sort to make use of, no litter for improvised weapons, and the terrain had no features. There was a fire escape to her left, in case she needed an exit or some raw metal to manipulate, but that was it, and she wasn’t even certain using it would be a good move.

This needed to be played out carefully, no overt displays of power. These thugs had to be dispatched without Barriss revealing she’d been a Jedi, but she couldn’t defeat them without the Force. She’d need to rely on her reflexes first, and precise timing to make her defense appear to be advanced martial skill, nothing else.

The biggest one, a Devaronian, towered over Barriss, cracked his knuckles, and tried to punch her. She sensed his impulse to strike before he’d moved a muscle, dodging it with a tilt of the head. Surprised he’d missed, the horned man began attacking faster, closing the gap between him and Barriss. The precision of his attacks told Barriss he wasn’t just a tough guy, he’d had training, but he couldn’t keep up with her movements even as she gave ground, ducking and weaving around each punch.

Eventually, deciding she couldn’t keep backing up forever, Barriss extended a hand and caught his next punch with her open palm. The impact made the Devaronian grunt with pain as all the energy of
the strike was turned against his own hand. Barriss hadn’t felt a thing, there being a few millimeters of air between her hand and his.

She hoped she hadn’t broken anything.

Pushing his arm back, the assailant was clearly confused as to someone half his size was overpowering him. Next, to the shock of the other thugs, Barriss struck her adversary with a faux-kick to the stomach that knocked him onto his back.

The Rodian and the Duro drew their guns, getting them out just in time for Barriss to stun them with her own pistol, dropping them both. Karrde had a point about using stun blasters over lightsabers. That was much easier than normal.

They fell to the ground, much more slowly than they would’ve without Barriss making sure to control their descent. It surprised her how easy it was- she’d barely needed to concentrate, and didn’t even need to use any subtle hand motions.

The Twi’lek thief and a human, now the only two left standing, decided to take the simple route, throwing a sonic grenade at her, forcing her to run away or suffer some hearing loss. Looking back into the alley, she saw other thugs pop out of the back of the truck, too many to fight, retrieving their fallen comrades and driving away. Barriss couldn’t quite understand the Huttese many of them were speaking in, but it sounded like they were all berating the Twi’lek for drawing trouble.

“So, uh...we’re gonna investigate that, right?” asked CC. “That Twi’lek might’ve been a petty crook, but the others seemed a little higher up on the food chain. They threw a kriffing grenade at you!”

Barriss looked back at the alley, thinking . The thief had inadvertently led her towards something much shadier, something she should probably investigate...if not for the fact that she was probably a more highly wanted criminal than any of them were.

Pantora had, for the most part, been welcoming to her. There was some kind of organized criminal element almost certainly intending to do harm to the citizens here. Was she really not going to do anything?

“We’ll follow them, and report their location to the authorities,” Barriss decided, judging distances and heights of the buildings she was standing between.

“Okay, great, so are we gonna lurk a few blocks behind them or hey, HEY!” CC objected as Barriss levitated the droid beside her and began leaping back and forth between the walls. Landing on the roof, Barriss began running across the building in the same direction as the transport.

“Do you have any sensors that can track them?” asked Barriss, making a jump to the next building.

“Yes,” CC grumbled, wheel spinning useless in midair, gyros trying to compensate for the unfamiliar motion. “I can follow their thermals and sound for two kilometers at most, depending on how much the urban surroundings interfere.”

“Track them as long as possible,” Barriss said, doing everything she could to keep close, jumping and running across building after building in pursuit, trying to keep the gap small. The misty weather made good cover, pedestrians not having enough visibility to noticing her making impossible jumps while lugging along an astromech, even if they did think to look up.

The repulsorlift kept getting further away. Even with traffic and the Force to help her match mobility, there was no way Barriss could keep up for long.
“Which way did they go?” Barriss wheezed, taking the few seconds of reorientation to take some deep breaths. Her lungs were burning, her knees aching from the leaping.

“To your left, five streets over,” CC said, sounding unhappy at being floated around like this.

Barriss kept up a consistent pattern of landing, judging distance, running, and leaping across the streets, avoiding all vehicle and foot traffic.

“There’s their lift,” CC said, Barriss spotting the transport parked in a lot.

“How long have they been parked?” Barriss wheezed. She’d been keeping up as high a speed as she possibly could all the way here, and her lungs felt like they were on fire.

“About five minutes,” said CC.

“Why didn’t you let me know?!”

“Seemed like you could use the exercise,” CC said as its wheel hit the rooftop with a loud *thunk*.

Barriss took a few minutes to catch her breath, studying the situation and wishing she’d brought a water bottle. This was definitely the place, she could feel it, but it wasn’t particularly ominous. There was a nightclub in the building’s lower levels, some lights in the upper floors were on. There was a landing pad on top with enough space for medium transports like the Eclipse to land if cargo needed moving.

Time to move on with the plan and get out of here. She would find a public comm, call the police, report some mugger had stolen from her and fled to this location, and leave hoping it drew some attention from the authorities and took care of whatever was going on here. Which she would’ve done, if there weren’t Pantoran police officers already present, speaking with another Twi’lek.

“CC, can you focus on those officers and tell me what’s happening? I can’t see far enough on my own,” Barriss said.

“Sure. It looks like they’re just talking...talking...no idea what they’re saying...uh oh.”

“What is it?”

“They just took a handful of credits and walked away,” said CC.

“...Oh.”

That made everything much more complicated. She had little idea what was going on, not enough to convincingly raise any alarm, and if there were officers who could be bribed, some of those officers might be sent to investigate whatever she reported, get paid off, and nothing would change. It also meant that whatever these people were up to was large enough that it couldn’t be completely hidden from the police, and profitable enough to buy some of them off.

“Well? What are we waiting for?” asked CC. “Aren’t you going to stop them?”

“What do you care?” asked Barriss. “Don’t you normally take delight in chaos and illegality?”

“Yeah. Oooooooooohh yes, I do,” CC with unsettling glee. “But that’s me. You’re a Jedi, or you used to be. Your function, is to deal with situations like this because you believe it to be the correct course of action.”

“I’m not ‘programmed’ to do anything. I can make choices,” objected Barriss.
“Yeah, so can I. That doesn’t mean our memories and patterns don’t control what the choice will be. Why wouldn’t you choose to do what you would before?” asked CC.

Barriss wasn’t sure she wanted to take on this challenge. She thought about trying to expose this operation to the Empire- it was standard procedure for them to confiscate any Separatist technology, a task they performed dutifully. But that would give added weight to the idea that Pantora needed tighter imperial control.

Nobody was going to deal with this except for her.

“Let’s go.”

The nightclub at the base of the building, ‘Club Loci’, might’ve been a viable way in, but Barriss decided to take the quieter route first. It wasn’t likely she’d be able to get in any way with her outfit and a droid accompanying her.

The architecture of the building was antiquated, the doors only held shut using simple physical locks. Most intruders would need to physically damage the door to get in, but Barriss could carefully, quietly unlock them from the outside, allowing herself and CC in. Once inside, they immediately headed to the stairwell down the hall. It was unlikely anyone would use the stairs when there were multiple elevators, and they hadn’t been spotted yet. No security camera to be seen, either.

Barriss began the slow climb up, keeping CC hovering at her side to avoid the problem of traversing stairs on a wheel. The second floor was deserted, save for the portion of it that was part of the club. The third was also quiet. They weren’t simply deserted with whoever normally used them gone for the night, the entire spaces were vacant, no furniture, no cubicles, nothing.

As she went upwards into this eerie building the music of the club faded, the only sound being Barriss’s footsteps echoing. She took it more slowly to diminish the noise, hearing movement on the fourth floor.

Through the door between the stairwell and the floor, Barriss peeked in to see the whole place was filled with crates, along with several guards. Ducking down, she focused on sensing loose items around the floor, moving them with her mind, moving tools and pads and stools.

The sudden, inexplicable movements were getting the desired attention. Not enough to raise an alarm, but enough to get the guards’ attention and draw them out into the open to investigate the source of the noise. Eleven of them, all coming out of different rooms to see what the commotion was.

Taking a deep breath, still out of sight of her enemies, Barriss gently lifted them into the air, then slammed them all to the ground and rushed into the room, firing her stun pistol as fast as her finger could trigger it at the downed enemies. She proceeded to lift the heaviest crates she could find and move it in front of the door and elevators as a barricade, then carefully checked the whole floor for anything she’d missed.

With all enemies neutralized, and no one else in the building aware of what was happening, she opened up one of the crates.

“It’s an arms smuggling operation,” Barriss said, horrified at the stockpile of Separatist weapons that
hadn’t been broken down for parts. She recognized much of the equipment; wrist rockets, radiation launchers, bulldog RLRs, guided rockets, portable shield generations, electrostaffs. Enough equipment to supply a small army.

Another crate revealed it was even worse: twenty super battle droids, all in perfect condition while stored in their collapsed state. This wasn’t just supplying the armaments, it was supplying the army. That was just one crate, too. There were commando droids, droidekas, B1s of different classes, even a container of buzz droids.

The droid armies of the Separatist movement had been almost entirely deactivated at the end of the Clone Wars. That didn’t mean they were destroyed, and it appeared that someone had managed to obtain large quantities of deactivated war droids and munitions before the Empire could find them and strip them for parts and materials.

At first it surprised her that so much equipment was being kept in what was once an office building. Then she pieced together that this wasn’t the actual storehouse for these smugglers, it was the storefront. The club was probably another source of revenue, and a functional meeting place for buyers.

Judging by the size of the safe in the back corner, they were raking in enough credits to buy a planet.

Barriss considered the reasoning behind these weapons. They definitely weren’t of any use to the Empire. With Pantora’s position in the Mid-Rim, it was being used to smuggle equipment to Outer-Rim criminals and pirates. This place had to be destroyed, in a manner that would draw the attention of more law enforcement than could be bought off and left enough evidence to imprison everyone responsible.

“CC...can you activate these battle droids?” asked Barriss.

“You want to know if I can activate a battalion of armed assault droids and have them wreak havoc upon people who view them as expendable machines?” CC asked sarcastically. “Of course I can! Just give the word. You do have a plan, right?”

“Of course. And we’re going to need additional ‘muscle’ to execute it.”

The criminals in charge of this place appeared to own all floors of it, keeping as much space as possible for storage and movement of weapons without any witnesses. This wound up working to Barriss’s advantage, as it meant the security here wasn’t prepared for such a large opposition to manifest at the core of the operation.

Commando droids and some B1s armed with stun pistols and stun pikes snuck upstairs and fanned out room by room, dropping the thugs one by one, moving eerily quiet for their size. In a few minutes, the entire top floor had been cleared, super battle droids came in to haul the unconscious criminals back down to the storage area.

Since they were all unconscious, Barriss had no reservations about using her Force powers to bend various pieces of scrap metal into solid restraints, helpfully provided by buzz droids after being given the empty crates to work with. No getting out of those. A few commandos were left on patrol, ready to stun anyone who came up to check on things. Every enemy had any weapons removed, including several radios.
The commando droids, with their ability to imitate voices, put that unnerving ability to use luring guards from downstairs up to them, where they were immobilized as well.

Barriss also found a welding mask lying around with some space parts, taking it to conceal her face, keeping her identity secure. With that detail taken care of, CC used a shock prod to jolt a few awake to be questioned.

“Beep boop, meatbags! Time to get up!”

“Who- who the hell are you?” asked the groggy Devaronian she’d fought earlier. “Wait, you’re that girl from before? How did you find this place?”

“I’m asking the questions here,” Barriss countered. “I want to know everything about these weapon shipments. Where they come from, and who they’re going to.”

The thug laughed at her. “You don’t know who you’re dealing with, do you? You think the Black Sun is gonna let one punk take down an operation like this?”

The Black Sun. Lovely. I’ve gotten this far on guile, but if I’m identified, their network will probably put an even higher bounty on me than the imperials have, and-

“CC, are you stealing his wallet?!” Barriss yelled as the astromech did indeed pull out the wallet from the unconscious Twi’lek thief.

“What? He tried to steal from me. Speaking of which...” CC trailed off as one of the commandos brought her the bag the Twi’lek had stolen, taking it and checking the contents.

“What did you even buy?” Barriss asked, exasperated and seriously reconsidering whether this was all actually worth it.

“A hydrospanner upgrade for me, several packs of self-sealing stem bolts that were on sale, and some new paint colors I thought our dear captain might like to try with the droidekas,” said CC.

“...She probably will like that,” Barriss admitted, satisfied enough to drop the issue and get back to questioning the prisoner while CC stuffed the wallet into one of her compartments. “One way or another, the Black Sun’s activities on Pantora are ending. If you cooperate, your punishment may be lenient.”

“No ‘leniency’ will help me if the Black Sun finds out I stabbed them in the back. No offense, kid, but you’re not scary enough to get info out of anybody here.”

Realizing that the Black Sun’s reputation was solid enough it would be pointless to continue the interrogation, Barriss worked on another plan to undermine them.

“We could use these guys,” CC said, checking out the battle droids. “I mean, aren’t you and Ahsoka trying to bring down the Empire?”

“I’m not going to bring in soldiers who have no choice,” said Barriss, searching through crates on the next floor, checking out what models were here. Mostly combat-oriented ones, then, finally, she found what she’d been hoping for.

There was a yellow-marked B1 battle droid commander, one sophisticated enough programming to learn and survive, and the other droids were programmed to follow. After taking it to the light freighter on the roof, CC activated it at Barriss’s request, the skinny frame unfolding as the droid powered up.
“Awaiting orders, sir,” the B1 commander stated.

“I’m not your superior officer,” said Barriss.

“You’re not? Then who’s in charge? Oh, I hope it’s not-”

“It’s you,” said Barriss, watching the droid’s shoulders slump with discouragement at being given responsibility. The mentality of these models always confused her. Not only were they military command units who avoided both combat and command, but they were emotive and intelligent enough to lament their position. Who programmed them like that? “Don’t worry. Your only mission...is to retreat.”

“Really? That’s great! I can do that!” the battle droid exclaimed excitedly. “Uhhhh, retreat to where? With what?”

“These battle droids were intended to be used illegally by various criminals upon their delivery using this transport. You and all the CIS droids here are to seize control of the vessel and leave the system in peace.”

“Where are we supposed to go after that?” asked the droid.

This was getting more complicated that Barriss had expected. She was trying to be merciful here, but these droids had even less of a chance out in the galaxy on their own fleeing the Empire than Ahsoka and Barriss did, and the Eclipse was crowded enough as it was.

All she wanted to do was give them a chance at something resembling freedom.

“Hold on, I’ve got this,” said CC, plugging into the ship’s navicomputer for a moment. “There. You now have directions to a Separatist listening post near Wild Space. Given the proximity to imperial-controlled worlds, it’s probably already been swept and stripped of everything useful, and it isn’t strategically important enough for them to look twice.”

“What about supplies?” asked the commander.

CC was stumped by that. Even droids needed power and repair parts.

“I have an idea,” Barriss said, leaving the droids momentarily to dash down several flights of stairs to the storage room. It took a great deal of Force to tear the safe’s door from its hinges, providing a small fortune’s worth of credits. Enough to keep the droids supplied for the foreseeable future.

The two saboteurs reentered the office, the building shaking slightly as the freighter lifted off. Barriss hoped those droids had been paid for in advance. If some Hutt somewhere wasn’t getting their promised weapons on time after giving up the requisite credits, it would wreak havoc on the Black Sun’s reputation and finances.

“Hey, Barriss, thanks for helping those droids. If you hadn’t come here, they’d probably be shipped off the be blasted into scrap somewhere. Not many people would care.”

“...You’re welcome, Cici,” said Barriss, sitting down at the main computer terminal. “Did you happen to record that initial instance of bribery?”
“Yep, I caught it all,” said Cici. “Good enough resolution to identify the officers.”

“Excellent. Upload a copy of the file into this computer. Hopefully more honest officers will find it during the search and indict the corrupt ones.”

“You got it. I’ll also include shots of all our friends in case any of them happen to escape.”

As Barriss used the built-in comm to call emergency services, the building shook again; another ship had landed above them. It made no sense for the droids to return, and this couldn’t be a scheduled landing because the first freighter wasn’t meant to be absent now.

*This wasn’t the Black Sun’s only operation on Pantora*, Barriss realized, stepping back, looking for exits. Aside from the elevator, which would be a death trap, there was only the main staircase.

Black Sun enforcers were no doubt pouring down from the roof to find whoever was responsible for their freighter taking off without warning. If there were any lines of communication into this place, they were either unmanned or answered by someone who’d slipped through the sweeps and was aware something was wrong. Either way, someone outside had call for reinforcements.

“You’ve reached the emergency line. What is your emergency?” came a bored voice.

“Yes, hello,” Barriss said nervously through the mask. “The address I’m calling from is being used as an outpost by the Black Sun crime syndicate for the shipment of weapons and battle droids. I’ve captured many of their employees, and have the identities of two moles in your forces.”

“...We don’t care for prank calls, Miss. That muffled-voice trick isn’t fooling anyone.”

Barriss sighed and looked around. Using the Force so she didn’t have to leave the range of the speakers, Barriss proceeded to shatter the glass of one of the windows, (pulling the shards inside so they didn’t fall on anyone in the street, of course) levitated a guided rocket launcher, fired the rocket through the opening, directed the projectile upwards, and detonated it directly above the building. It would give law enforcement all the probable cause they could possibly need to rush this place, and it’d hopefully bought her a few seconds by frightening the thugs on the roof.

“Any air vehicles within sufficient range should’ve seen the detonation of a rocket-propelled explosive above my position. That was one of dozens of munitions which remain here. I can’t hold my ground indefinitely, so I suggest you send some people quickly to deal with the situation.”

“What?!” said the receptionist, suddenly much more alert. Barriss didn’t know where his station was. Maybe she’d gotten lucky and he was close enough to hear the explosion himself. “Who is this?!”

Barriss was about to foolishly blurt out her name, then froze and tried to come up with something. Telling them who she was would put the whole planet on high alert and bring who-knows-what to Pantora if higher imperial authorities got wind of her presence. She could give that ‘Jana Bogan’ alias, but if they somehow tracked that back to the *Eclipse*, she’d probably be found out anyway. Barriss didn’t think Ahsoka had added that alias to the registration, and that was not nearly enough certainty for her to give that as her name. Not to mention the Black Sun would be looking for whoever ruined their operation here, and any connection to the ship would put another target on their backs.

This had to be something new.

“Fulcrum,” said Barriss, keeping her voice steady, hoping it sounded more confident than she really felt. “You may call me Fulcrum.”
“‘Fulcrum’? The hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Either send people to investigate, or allow the Black Sun a continued presence on your planet,” Barriss said, dramatically hitting the receiver to end the call and intimidate the officer, then nervously clutching her hair in her hands and taking several wheezing breaths as she thought about what the heck she’d just done.

She didn’t have time to think when Black Sun thugs started pounding on the door. Barriss searched the room, trying to find another way out, finding nothing. The pounding stopped, which meant they’d realized they couldn’t open the door with their hands and were about to resort to their blasters.

One thing they clearly hadn’t taken into account was that the room they were attempting to penetrate was filled to the brim with munitions of all kinds.

The door burst open.

So did the ten flash-bangs Barriss hurled at it.

The assailants, a smattering of human, Aqualish, Duros, and a few other species, were taken by surprise and unable to see through the thick smoke cloud. Barriss decided to risk her cover by Force-pushing them all out of the way, making a hole large enough for her and Cici to weave through,

Barriss bolted into the stairwell, taking quarter-staircases all at once to keep ahead. Cici followed close behind her, her single wheel making her jittered and bounce as she struggled to handle the stairs, aware that taking it slow wasn’t an option.

At the second floor, Barriss kept sprinting into the hall, drawn to the music of the club that was echoing around her, growing louder and promising escape. Footsteps thundered behind her, coming closer and following through the entrance she’d come through. Barriss ducked and weaved between blaster bolts as she sensed guns being trained on her. She zeroed in on the source of the music, reached the door, and rushed into the club.

Barriss stopped running and immersed herself in the scene, breathing heavily from the chase, the music having apparently been too loud for anyone to notice all the commotion upstairs. Despite a being dead giveaway for the pursuers, Cici was surprisingly good as hiding, moving around tables and hiding behind Barriss’s legs.
The chaotic strobe lighting made it easy to hide, and Barriss leisurely worked herself to a nook behind a support pillar holding up the upper level, watching the Black Sun grunts slowly file in and fan out, most of them moving to block the exits.

Discarding her mask, Barriss kept track of the closest one to her, snagging an empty glass and pretending to drink it as he got close, blending in with the guests around her. Once he got close enough, still scanning the room, she pulled out her stun pistol, held it practically to his skin, and knocked him out.

He nearly fell to the floor, but Barriss guided his body into a chair, leaving him be after taking his pistol, now looking like he’d had too much to drink. The lighting and noise made her difficult to spot, but the others were working in groups, and she suspected other thugs had been deployed outside. Two appeared to have noticed her slipping behind supports and groups of people, cautiously approaching her.

Setting the looted blaster to stun and setting it on a table as she passed, Barriss waited until they passed it while following her. Remotely pulling the trigger with the Force knocked out two more enemies, but there were over a dozen others, and knocking those two out had drawn their attention.

Lurking in the darkest corner she could find, Barriss began moving objects around the room. A chair in the path of a thug to trip him up. A glass thrown at another’s head from behind. She hadn’t kept track of how many there were, but there were more than enough to cover the exits, and she needed them all distracted and scattered to slip out.

This wasn’t working. Compared to the leisurely-dressed patrons, the Black Sun thugs stood out plainly, and there were too many to evade.

The partygoers were all too drunk or too inattentive to notice the restrained conflict and tension. The galaxy was going to hell. Time to party, apparently. Barriss didn’t really understand it.

Walking down the spiral staircase to the ground level, Barriss entered the center of the dance floor. Watching the other dancers, she began copying their slightly drunken swaying, twirling, and bouncing, going unnoticed by them while the Black Sun closed in, likely planning to physically remove her rather than shoot her in full view of everyone.

Now that they were drawn away from the exits, Barriss began turning off light switches, tearing out power cords, and in a few cases outright shattering the bulbs, the already dim-yet-colorful room rapidly plunging increasingly into darkness until no one could see anything.

Sensing the thugs closing in despite the darkness, Barriss jumped straight upwards, grabbing hold of the inactive light fixture, considering her next move. She felt an empty space beyond the crowd, leaping down to it, outside the circle the enemies had formed around her.

Cici, who was still stuck on the upper level, used her holographic projector to make an arrow pointing to herself so Barriss could find and levitate her through the air.

The Black Sun noticed Cici too, taking shots at the droid, tracking her through the air by the indicator lights on her dome with a surprising lack of concern with how, exactly, she was floating. Amidst the screams of guests ducking out of the way, the blasts gave Barriss enough light to track and pull their guns out of their hands, crumpling them into useless, sparking lumps of metal.

Cici touched ground a few seconds later, along with the discarded blasters. Sticking close, they carefully made their way through the dark to the unguarded exit amidst the confused, frightened, angry, and occasionally screaming patrons who’d just had their night ruined.
Barriss’s hand gripped the push bar, then she flung the door open, allowed Cici to roll out, then flung it back shut behind her. Holding the door closed with the Force, Barriss fought against the pushing and pounding of pursuers who’d seen the door opening and gone after them, watching for anyone else outside while Cici welded the metal door shut.

Once their enemies were sealed in, Barriss grabbed onto Cici and leapt up onto the adjacent building, the final knee-crushing jump of the night, putting her out of sight of the incoming police.

Grey-uniformed Pantoran officers were arresting some goons outside, her suspicion about thugs sent outside to wait proving accurate. Barriss was glad she’d gotten out when she did, because there were police hovercrafts gathering around the building, and everyone inside was going to be detained for questioning to find out if anyone knew about what was going on there.

A short walk later, and they were gone.

“Well? How did it go?” asked Revan. “Learn anything interesting?”

“I realized that there’s little morality in preventing death when there is nothing to live for,” Barriss said, watching a pulse of light from the holocron she interpreted as excitement. “I also expanded my definition of ‘life’.”

“You’ve gained strategic insight into the coming battle, self-understanding, and a respect for forms of life most Jedi never bother with. Impressive...” Revan said proudly. “How do you feel?”

“It was all...interesting. Despite the danger, it was exhilarating, being active like that. I’m not sure I understand this feeling,” said Barriss.

“What you are describing is known as ‘fun’. You had fun. You have had fun before, right, Barriss? You’re familiar with the concept?”

“What’s ‘fun’ about nearly getting killed in a clash with the Black Sun?” asked Barriss.

“Perhaps it was when you defeated them without having to kill them? Or when you let the droids go free? Or how you brought down the entire operation and prevented those weapons from being used to kill innocents? Maybe you liked dancing awkwardly?” Revan. “How about the part where you won?”

Barriss couldn’t deny she’d felt better than she had in years. Arms stopped, criminals apprehended, an entire syndicate’s operation in this system disrupted, and the worst thing she had to do to make it happen was put a nightclub out of business.

“Heh. Winning feels good, doesn’t it?” said Revan. “You achieved what you did today not with disconnection and adherence to a code. You took the initiative, planned it out, got creative and strategic, and acted out of concern for others. Keep at it.”
Pantora was intense and alive. People were afraid of the Empire. Millions of people all living their lives, and Barriss felt tied to all of them. It was overwhelming.

Inside the Eclipse, with Snoots perched above her, Barriss was relieved to have a break from it all. Perhaps the Force wasn’t ‘suppressed’ around the ysalamiri. Maybe it was simply calmed. All the tumultuous emotions and impulses of life throughout the galaxy were damped out.

Barriss also realized how difficult it was to contemplate things which centered beneath a creature called ‘Snoots’. She’d named it, yet she couldn’t take it all that seriously, even just thinking about it. Snoots.

Despite what she’d thought before, there was life all around her, even in this ship.

Clanking metal life, perhaps, but life.

Barriss stepped out of Snoots’ space, wandering for a bit, only paying just enough attention to keep aware of a few droidekas walking around, becoming alert again when she stubbed her toe on one of their legs. The collapsible design and spindly frame often caused Barriss to forget just how big destroyer droids were. Bigger than her. Big and wide.

The droideka turned and droned something at her as she took off her sock to make sure her nail hadn’t been damaged. The ‘dialect’, or however you wanted to describe the variants of droidspeak, was hard to understand.

“Um...hello. Sorry about hitting you,” she said, her foot still in a bit of pain.

The droideka repeated himself, more slowly this time. This time Barriss caught a few words: something about patrol paths and perimeters.

_Is he giving me a report? Or did I get in his space?_

If she could sense anything, it was confusion. She was just standing there, not saying anything- was the droideka confused by her?

“Is Nabberie giving you trouble?” asked Ahsoka, as ‘Nabberie’ turned a few degrees and repeated what he’d said a third time.

“What’s he saying?” asked Barriss.

“He’s concerned about you hurting your foot.”

“Oh-” Barriss said, telling Nabberie, “I’m fine, thank you,” and letting the droid get back to wandering around the ship.

“Is your foot really okay?” asked Ahsoka, noticing the redness in the nail.

“No, I stubbed my pinky toe, and it’s rather painful,” Barriss said. “Did he really ask about that? I couldn’t understand him at all.”

“Yeah, they’re...surprisingly considerate for a squad of unstoppable killing machines,” said Ahsoka.

“Can you tell that because you have an intuitive grasp of droid behavior?” asked Barriss. “Or can you sense their feelings like any other living being?”

“You mean sensing them with the Force? I’ve never though that hard about it. I just treat droids like I would anybody else. Then I can connect to them just like anybody else,” Ahsoka as she looked up
and down Barriss. “That coat’s a good look for you.”

“Oh- thank you,” Barriss said, adjusting her new hood slightly. That settled the debate of whether to keep the hood up or down.

“So, how did your solo training go? You look a bit...ruffled.”

“Ah, well, you may want to sit down,” Barriss said, nodding and limping towards the kitchen. ‘Ruffled’ was an appropriate word. “I think you may enjoy this.”

Chapter End Notes

I've said it before, I'll say it again: this was not Ahsoka. It could be a fake hologram used as a cover, I guess. I'm suspicious of that scene.

The stuff about Barriss's legal place of birth is from the fan webcomic Contrasts. It's a good read if you like this pairing.
Riyo stared out the window of her office. During the Clone Wars, she’d hoped that at some point she could work in the senate while the Republic was at peace. Instead the Empire was here, and nothing she could do was going to be able to keep them away forever. She didn’t have enough political clout.

*What would Padmé do?* she wondered to herself. Really, she had an answer: rally allies and drive the threat from her planet as in the crisis on Naboo. Too bad that wouldn’t work here. The only allies she could call on were struggling with them Empire as well on their own worlds, and unlike the Trade Federation, there was no higher authority around to make the Empire think twice about prolonging a conflict. Or completely annihilating the moon. Such harsh action would normally be unthinkable, but after the rapid development in weapons technology during the war and Palpatine’s abrupt seizing of power, no one could really be certain.

Then the fact that Padmé had died mysteriously, with a ludicrous cover story which could conceivably have been fabricated by Palpatine himself, also made Riyo question following in her footsteps.

In the latest of the Empire’s assertions of its authority, Moff Disra had demanded her to help resolve and disperse ‘anti-imperial sentiment’ that was brewing on Pantora, not that she really expected any of the concerns to be satisfied. Indirectly blackmailing Disra into lessening his grip had only made the Empire’s presence less visible, not completely removed. She wasn’t even sure what he expected her to do, and the more she interacted with that man, the more it seemed as though he only contacted her so he could irritate her.

Thankfully, she now had a few people she could rely on for counsel.

“I know Disra’s getting under your skin, but what he’s doing could actually work to your advantage. If he’s meeting with you, you have an opportunity to antagonize him directly, and because we’re blackmailing him, he can’t be as harsh on you as he’d like and you can be more assertive. He’s probably been busy fuming and trying to figure out where Offee is hiding anyway. Let him think he has more enemies to deal with than he really does,” said Midla. “Speaking of whom, where is our ‘rogue terrorist mastermind’?”

“Sleeping. Taking on the Black Sun was pretty exhausting,” Ahsoka said, smiling with pride thinking about what her friend had done. Riyo couldn’t deny the impressive results.

“Let’s hope she did a good job covering her tracks,” said Riyo. “I recently received a missive informing me Disra would not be coming here himself, and my attempts to get into contact have all been ignored. The meeting is informal, hence why no one else has been summoned.”

“Ah. It’s a power move, then,” Midla said. “Letting you know you’re not important enough for him to meet with personally, so he’s sending a subordinate instead. Wasting your time on something that’ll barely have any real consequence. The kind of petty political move I’d expect from people in the Empire.”

“Who will you be meeting with if not Disra?” asked Sabé.

“I was not told that, either,” Riyo said, annoyed as she reread the message, not noticing any new
“Another power move,” Midla said. “Keeping you in the dark about the specifics so you can’t prepare properly, making you look uninformed while his lackey will be fully briefed, even though you’d been trying to contact him.”

“I did not become involved in politics to engage in a back-and-forth of petty slights while accomplishing nothing,” Riyo grumbled.

“Don’t say that out loud,” advised Midla. “It shows how little experience you have in politics.”

“I have an idea,” said Ahsoka. “If Disra wants to put you in your place, we can make it backfire. If you want to make an impression on this imperial, one that’ll show you’re not easy to intimidate, I know some guys who can help with that.”

Ensign Eli Vanto accompanied his captain through the Pantoran capitol building towards Senator Chuchi’s office, feeling how unwelcome they were from the brief, restrained stares of everyone who passed them by. Some were contemptuous, some impassive, others confused, likely the more attentive ones trying to figure out the species of his commanding officer once they realized he wasn’t a Pantoran like them.

Captain Thrawn was calm as ever, seemingly taking no offense at the fact that Moff Disra had sent the two of them on what he must’ve considered a petty errand, all to assert his authority over the unwelcome alien. As his aide, Eli had the responsibility of accompanying Thrawn as a translator and to explain as much about galactic culture as he could, not that he was really needed as the former any longer.

When they were finally accepted into the senator’s office, Eli lagged behind as he watched Thrawn walk in to the center of the room.

Completely unaffected by four droidekas positioned in the corners.

Eli had never seen droidekas in person before, barring a few unpowered models on display, but those particular war machines had appeared prominently in many propaganda films and news clips during the Clone Wars. Single units with their expressionless eyes glowing bright red as they gunned down battalions of brave Republic soldiers. Creepy, spindly things scuttling around on their three legs, blasting everything in their path, safe behind their shields and impervious to any counterattack. Now, the damned things were flanking Eli while he was totally defenseless.

“Thank you for meeting with us today, Senator Chuchi,” Thrawn said in a polite tone as if the droidekas weren’t even there, motioning to Eli as the latter took his place at his commander’s side, uncomfortable and twitching his head now that two of the droidekas were just barely out of his peripheral vision. “I am Captain Thrawn, and this is my aide, Ensign Eli Vanto. Moff Disra apologizes for his absence, and has asked me to represent him in dealing with the present labor dispute.”

“Welcome, captain,” the senator said. Between growing up in the Outer Rim and his time at the imperial academy on the increasingly humanocentric Coruscant, Eli had never seen anyone quite like Senator Chuchi. Poised, elegant, elaborately dressed. Her own attendant, a human woman, was standing stoically to the side, taking notes. Eli made eye contact with her, exchanging a brief nod,
acknowledging their similar positions. He wondered if she ever felt as in over her head as he did. Her quiet observance implied that, no, she didn’t. Or maybe it was only because she was out of the line of fire.

“Interesting choice of security,” said Thrawn. “I’ve never seen functional droidekas before- a black market operation supplying battle droids was recently discovered, wasn’t it? Were these droids confiscated?”

“That incident didn’t yield any intact droids, Captain. These droidekas were purchased from an auction of salvaged Separatist equipment,” said Chuchi. “They’re one of the few models the Empire deemed useful enough not to be scrapped for parts.”

“Well, hopefully you will never need to use them,” said Thrawn.

“I believe we have more urgent matters to discuss, don’t you?” said the senator. “Disra is apparently seeking ways to improve relations between our moon and the Empire as a whole. I assume you’d rather not disappoint him?”

“My apologies. I myself am interested by the droids used by the confederacy, and have collected some intact models,” Thrawn said, approaching one of the droidekas for a closer look, unaffected by the danger posed, much to Eli’s alarm. “Designed in the image of the Colicoid species, most notably in their collapsible frame. A powerfully equipped and protected model, though the positions and inflexibility of its blaster arms make it useless at close range.”

The droideka lurched forward, nearly bringing one of its pointed legs down on Thrawn’s foot, only to be narrowly evaded when the captain stepped back, leaving a large scuff on the floor where the narrow foot claw landed.

“They are still fully armed and programmed to act as guards. I recommend keeping your distance,” warned Chuchi. It sounded to Eli like she was much more panicked by the droid’s behavior than Thrawn was, like she didn’t really know what it could do. “They aren’t intelligent enough to differentiate friendly targets if your proximity becomes interpreted as a threat.”

Out the corner of his eye, Eli noticed the droideka to his left twitch, and thought he heard the one on his right grumble something, even though these models weren’t supposed to have vocabulators. If Eli didn’t know better, he’d think the destroyers had taken offense to the comments about their effectiveness and intelligence.

Thrawn stepped back into the center of the office, facing Chuchi. “Thank you for the word of warning, Senator. You are correct in Moff Disra’s reasons. Please, speak your piece.”

“Our people can’t be expected to tolerate the Empire’s unwarranted military presence,” said Chuchi. “Your superiors likely believe Pantora is a potential source of disruption because of past Separatist leanings, which, if you are not personally aware, were dealt with, and we remained loyal to the Republic for the duration of the Clone Wars. The presence of an orbiting Star Destroyer only serves to increase my people’s resentment at your presence because it reminds them of the threat of the Trade Federation. The solution the navy has chosen is only aggravating the problem!”

“I agree,” Thrawn replied without a second’s pause.

Nobody said anything for several seconds. Even Chuchi’s secretary looked a bit confused, and Eli was sure his own surprise was obvious to everyone.

“You agree?” said Chuchi. She kept her expression impassive and didn’t sound too surprised, but
“Yes, I agree. While it isn’t within my power to withdraw my vessel from the region, with Moff Disra’s approval, I am capable of moving the destroyer and its support craft further from the planet. It is also in my power to investigate and dismantle smuggling operations such as the Black Sun’s,” Thrawn said. “It is in the interests of the Empire to eradicate more dangerous mercenary groups who have been supplied these weapons. The navy is here for the protection of Pantora, from threats internal and external. Would these actions ease the minds of the public?”

“Yes. I believe they would,” Chuchi replied. She wasn’t very good at keeping her emotions under control, and Eli could tell she was waiting for the other shoe to drop. So was Eli.

“Very well. Do you have any other recommendations for me while I’m here?” asked Thrawn.

“...No,” Chuchi said after a tense few seconds of thinking.

“If that is all, it was a pleasure to meet with you, Senator, and I am glad we were able to resolve your concerns so easily. I will relay this to Moff Disra, with my recommendations, and I look forward to helping ensure Pantora’s security,” Thrawn said, quietly exiting the office with a stunned Eli behind him.

Watching the feed transmitted from the droideka on Riyo’s right, Ahsoka kept an eye on the captain. She’d been expecting a typical, sneering imperial. Somebody who talked a big game when in a position of power, but could be thrown off by the smallest amount of resistance like the coward they were. Instead, she got...this.

Something about Thrawn was off, the way he spoke, the way he moved. How he fearlessly approached her droidekas to study them was oddly unnerving, the way those red eyes were flittering around.

It felt like he could see her.

There was also the question of what, exactly, he was. Traveling all over the galaxy as a Jedi had shown her hundreds of sapient species, but not his. He looked near-human, blue skin, red eyes, some irregular bone structure around his forehead and eye sockets. Nothing she’d seen before, but not especially exotic, either.

Thrawn’s aide, Vanto, looked like a normal junior officer, and was handling the situation with the subdued alarm she’d been hoping the droidekas would inspire in his captain. Small victories.

Once Thrawn was forced to back off by the surprise lunge, Ahsoka spoke into the comm transmitting to the four destroyers. “Guys, focus. All you need to do is stand around and looked intimidating. And don’t stomp on his foot!”

A burst of droidspeak came back through the comm, annoyed at the assertion that they couldn’t fight at close range.

“I don’t care what he said, Jitter. Don’t provoke him anymore, that’s not why we’re here,” ordered Ahsoka. At least Glow was keeping quiet and still, unlike the others, standing vigilant alongside Sabé. Admittedly, Ahsoka was a little proud that the boys weren’t taking any disrespect, but they
were here for Riyo’s sake, and shouldn’t be making the situation more tense. Or at least not more
tense for Riyo.

Riyo was handling the whole situation pretty well, and Thrawn was unexpectedly reasonable about
addressing her concerns. His aide appeared surprised by it, too. Then, he left peacefully, the whole
conversation only lasting for a few minutes. No argument, no bluster, no condescension, no
disguised threats.

All signs indicated the meeting had gone better than Ahsoka could’ve hoped.

All of Ahsoka’s instincts told her this situation was horribly wrong.

Sitting across from Thrawn in their shuttle for the trip back to orbit, Eli tried to come up with
something constructive to say about the situation.

“Well, that went...um...it went well,” Eli said uncertainly, then adding with a shake of his head,
“There’s no way Moff Disra will approve of the way you handled that.”

“He won’t approve of resolving the situation to the satisfaction of all parties?” asked Thrawn.

“He won’t approve of you ‘capitulating’ and ‘showing weakness’,,” Eli replied. “At least, that’s how
he’ll view it.”

“You approve, then?”

“Of course I approve. The Pantorans are imperial citizens who deserve fair treatment for their
contributions to the Empire, and certainly shouldn’t be viewed as potential rebels,” Eli said. “The
opinion of one ensign doesn’t compare to that of a moff, sir.”

“Hm. Perhaps the news that Ahsoka Tano is on Pantora and in league with Senator Chuchi will be
enough to temper his distaste for my results,” Thrawn said.

“...Excuse me?” asked Eli.

“Ahsoka Tano,” Thrawn began casually, as if Eli should know the name. “A Jedi Commander
during the Clone Wars, apprentice to General Anakin Skywalker. During the invasion of Serenno, a
group of over fifty stormtroopers were encountered and wiped out by her and a small company of
droidekas seemingly under her command. Now she is here, on Pantora, likely aiding the local
government in some plot against the Empire.”

“And how do you know this?” asked Eli. “The fact Chuchi had some droidekas is hardly a solid link,
if that’s what you’re implying.”

“Did you notice their markings?” asked Thrawn. “The patterns and symbols on the droidekas appear
to be designed to emulate the custom armors worn by clone soldiers.”

“Custom painting on armor and droids isn’t uncommon, especially out in the fringes. How does that
tell you this ‘Tano’ woman is behind it?” Eli asked, as Thrawn handed a pad with an image of Tano
over to him.

“Because all four of their head plates bore markings identical to those on her forehead,” said Thrawn.
“Interesting. It seems she’s molding them into replacements for the Fett clones.”

Eli studied the image. He’d been eyeing the droidekas’ blasters more than their armor, but he’d gotten enough of a look to recognize the symmetric jagged line and diamond symbol. Thrawn may be on to something, enough for Eli to keep considering the topic.

“That’s rather sad. Being lonely enough to replace a group of identical, soulless clones with a group of identical, soulless droids,” Eli said. “Are you certain they’re even hers? Any Jedi who’s still alive must be on the run- she could’ve sold them for some fast credits.”

“Perhaps, but I don’t believe so. Not after she bonded with them enough to go to the trouble of marking them as her own. Furthermore, some of the markings appear to be newly painted, without any scuffing or scratches caused by the droidekas’ rolling motion. Possibly added as recently as yesterday. Quality paint and precise workmanship, as well.” Thrawn noted approvingly. “After Serenno, I also looked into records of her service. She and Chuchi are known associates, one of the few left for her to call upon, making Pantora a potential safe haven from the Empire,” Thrawn explained, looking momentarily confident in the deduction, then becoming pensive.

“What is it?” asked Eli.

“When I first met with Moff Disra, he mentioned his irritation with ‘creatures showing up unannounced’. Given the Empire’s pervasive anti-nonhuman sentiment, I’d assumed he was grouping me with the Pantorans as an insult. Now, Tano’s presence suggests he slipped a reference to her.”

“Then- he already knows she’s here? And she met with him?”

“Possibly,” Thrawn said, thinking. “On Serenno, Tano wasn’t the only Jedi present. Another, Barriss Offee, participated in the battle, though the connection between the two is unclear.”

“Offee?” Eli said, this name sounding more familiar. “The Jedi who turned traitor and bombed their temple, right?”

“Yes. She also attempted to frame Tano for treason,” Thrawn added.

“You’re saying a Jedi traitor, and the Jedi she framed for treason, were both seen together on Serenno? Why?”

“I don’t know,” Thrawn said. “What information I could glean from the aftermath suggests they may have been working together.”

“Shouldn’t Tano hate Offee? Why would they be cooperating?”

“I don’t know,” Thrawn said again, slightly frustrated. “Though as I understand them, it isn’t in the nature of the Jedi to ‘hate’ anyone. If Tano was indeed the other to whom Disra was alluding, he could’ve easily deduced she and Chuchi were in contact from the same records I have access to. Yet nothing indicates he has.”

“...But Offee doesn’t have the same connection to the senator?” suggested Eli. “And Moff Disra wouldn’t think to follow that lead?”

“Correct,” Thrawn said, then continuing with a bit of disappointment, “There is too much we do not know. All that is certain at the moment is Tano’s presence. Moving forward, we should assume our enemies are at their most organized so as not to underestimate them.”
“Even though that would mean these two Jedi are working together against all sense?” Eli asked, not totally following Thrawn’s reasoning.

“Yes,” Thrawn said bluntly, his lip then curling into a slight grin. “Though we should have one more piece of the puzzle soon.”

“How?” asked Eli.

“As promised, we will begin by investigating the attack on the Black Sun,” said Thrawn. “At first, the incident appeared to be an incident of vigilantism. Unusual, but not significantly affecting the interests of the Empire.”

“And now that you think a Jedi might be around, you want to take a closer look. That’s why you said you’d focus on them,” Eli realized. “Well, everyone knows the Jedi have a tendency to interfere with the affairs of others, regardless of the law.”

“There is one other lead to follow,” Thrawn said. “We will inform Moff Disra of our discovery. If he indicates, either through honesty or body language, that he knew of Tano’s presence, we must seek more information on the matter before confronting him over his connection to her. If not, we have supplied him with invaluable intelligence...and we will know Barriss Offee is on Pantora as well.”

Chapter End Notes

Barrissoka: a relationship so messed up, even Thrawn can’t make sense of this shit.
Finishing her own viewing of the footage recorded by the droidekas, Barriss was unexpectedly relieved by what she’d seen. Thrawn didn’t seem too difficult to deal with, at least as far as imperial officers went. He’d listened to Riyo’s concerns. He didn’t do or say anything actively malevolent. Perhaps Pantora could remain at peace for a longer time than she’d feared. Maybe they could get a respite from battling the Empire.

“Kill him,” growled Revan, making Barriss jump at the unexpected noise, having forgotten the holocron was even there.

“What?! Why?” asked Barriss.

“That guy’s only going to give you trouble if he remains alive. If you have the opportunity, you need to kill him,” Revan said adamantly.

“First of all, I am not going to kill him,” Barriss asserted. “Second, Thrawn not only acquiesced to Senator Chuchi’s requests, he understands her point of view and isn’t out to harm Pantora. He’s also a nonhuman, the first I’ve seen in the Empire’s military. Aren’t those all good signs?”

Revan tilted back, groaning with exasperation at Barriss. “Oh, c’mon, Barriss, he’s playing you all.”

“How can you know that?”

“Because he did exactly what I would if I wanted to lull an enemy into a false sense of security. You think I don’t know a ploy when I see it?” said Revan. “Putting a pleasant look to a fascist government. Making people think what they’re doing isn’t the evil it really is. Make your enemy less willing to fight back, because they’re not sure it’s the right move.”

Barriss considered it. She’d become self-aware enough to recognize she had a certain...blindness...when it came to people who showed civility and discipline. Maybe she was trusting too much on face value.

“What would you have me do?” asked Barriss.

“Hope for the best, prepare for the worst. You have a lot of options here,” said Revan. “Time for a strategy lesson. Do you know the greatest strength one can possess?”

Barriss thought about it for a moment. There were no end to the weapons available to a modern military force, however Revan’s question implied some universality in the answer. She was about to say ‘the Force’, then decided against it, knowing Revan didn’t consider it absolute power anyway. “I don’t know,” she eventually admitted.

“It’s okay that you don’t. Barriss, the greatest strength you can have is to know your own weaknesses,” said Revan. “Say a world in your space will be vulnerable in several days’ time due to some movement of your fleet. What do you do? Do you keep some small force there, weakening your overall strategy while still being unable to protect the planet? Do you reconsider and refuse to move your forces, keeping on the defensive?”

“No. I’d try to suppress any information about the vulnerability,” said Barriss. “That’s the answer
“Stop trying to find responses to make me happy,” Revan replied sternly, then switching back to teaching mode. “That is a better option, and it fits well with the principle. We can do better, though, can’t we? For instance, what if, by some covert intelligence channel, you allowed the enemy to know about the vulnerability?”

“To accomplish what?” asked Barriss.

“You know when and where your territory will be exposed. Therefore, you know when and where they will strike,” said Revan. “Because of your weakness, you have made your enemy predictable.”

“Then use the opportunity to set a trap?” suggested Barriss. “That could be used to achieve a victory, but why not simply conceal the weak point?”

“Instead of your original plan for the absent fleet, you could cripple your enemy with a surprise attack, then use your fleet for the original mission against a weakened foe. You could still rely on secrecy- but advantage lies in certainty,” said Revan. “If you’re hiding your vulnerabilities, you won’t know for sure if your enemy is aware of them or not. If you reveal them, you’ll know that they know. And you’ll know how they’ll behave.”

“And remove being caught unprepared as a possibility…”

“Yes,” said Revan. “Understanding your weakness is important because with a little imagination, you can mold them into strengths. Something the Jedi never taught you.”

“What does this have to do with the Jedi?” asked Barriss.

“Throughout your life, you’ve been taught to control, suppress, or ignore your emotions because it could lead you down a dark path. Removing those parts of yourself doesn’t strengthen you, it reduces you. Same goes for the Sith and their disregard for compassion, empathy, mercy. True control over your emotions doesn’t come from abolishing any of them, but from being introspective and cognizant enough to know when they will benefit you, and how,” explained Revan. “You’re in the middle of a weak point. You know your enemy will strike eventually, but he doesn’t know that you know. You can be more prepared than he can expect. You can beat this creep, if you make the necessary plans.”

Droidekas used to be some of the most dangerous opponents Ahsoka had faced on the battlefield, requiring precision and patience to defeat, often racking up a considerable body count before they went down. Watching her little army trying to fight in unison revealed how bumbling they could be in the right scenario. For one thing, it was no wonder they barely ever appeared in groups of more than three, they had no preprogrammed understanding of squad tactics, moving without a coherent formation and blocking each other’s line of sight. Their previous lack of vocabulators or any other communication equipment meant they weren’t accustomed to giving instructions or warnings to each other. And they were slow. Their ball mode let them move around the battlefield to centers of combat quickly, but it left them vulnerable while doing so. Even if they were difficult to hit at high speed, there was a window of a few seconds where they could be hit while unfolding.

“Hey, Jitter,” said Ahsoka. “Remember when you tried to take a swing at Thrawn? Is that normal for your model, or did you learn that yourself?”
Jitter beeping that no, it wasn’t normal. Droidekas were programmed with only their scuttling motion, but he’d been trying to figure out how to strike and dodge.

“Can you teach the others?”

Jitter agreed to do so and turned around to his companions, Ahsoka jumping to the top of the Eclipse to give them space to practice some moves. Using his two front claws to quickly pull himself forward, the destroyer droid began showing out how to lunge forward almost two meters, stopping by slamming his rear leg to the ground to provide stability during the fraction of a second it took for the front two to reset. He wouldn’t be winning any races, but following his lead might let them avoid the brunt of an ion grenade or get over some rough terrain.

All the others eagerly took to their newfound boost in movement. Ahsoka smiled; it wasn’t that big an improvement, and several of them were falling over while trying it out, but it reminded her of when she began training to use the Force to enhance her jumping.

Glow moved away from the group to practice, figuring out how to move not only forward, but back and to either side, two other directions offered by his tripodal design. The others watched him zig-zagging around, then tried to copy it themselves, soon learning why he’d walked off when they began slamming into each other by accident because they were moving blindly.

It was an encouraging sign, in a way. Not only were they more versatile than their designers intended, they were intelligent enough to learn and adapt, if given time for their personalities to develop and experiences to accumulate. Suddenly it made sense that they were both ludicrously expensive, and still unable to turn the tide of the war. The Separatists hadn’t been using them to anywhere near their full ability.

A little training could make them tougher, and Ahsoka could feel that they were going to need as much heavy firepower as possible, and soon.

“Okay, this time, keep an eye on each other, watch which targets others in your group are aiming at,” Ahsoka said, watching the droidekas group up to listen. “Communication is important for the survival of the entire group. If you see a threat, call out to your allies and let them know, and pay attention when they do the same. None of you can see the entire battlefield, so you have to help each other be aware and survive.”

The droidekas chirped in unison, forming a loose circle for the target practice. Ahsoka scattered various panels and bits of debris she’d collected around them, watching from her safe vantage point and levitating the objects as targets, like a more conventional shooting range.

The pattern went pretty consistently; Ahsoka would raise up targets, the nearest droideka would blast it. They were better shots than the stormtroopers, that was for sure. Enough sessions, and they might even give clones a run for their money.

The first break in that pattern came when Ahsoka tried to lift a sheet of scrap metal. When it was only halfway off the ground, Naberrie lunged forward and pinned it down with his front legs, proceeding to blast it until it was half-melted. Ahsoka was a little surprised by the ferocity, then realized she should’ve expected something like this to happen after bestowing Padmé’s family name onto a destroyer droid.

Naberrie called out some instructions, and the other destroyers followed, fanning out and pinning the other targets to the grounds. Ahsoka could have moved the droids and lifted them anyway...but she didn’t want to ruin the moment and the droids proudly ‘defeated’ the targets. They couldn’t be used to practice anymore. Ahsoka couldn’t really deny the approach was effective.
The door to the hangar bay slid open, all the droidekas immediately turning their attention towards the noise to see a very alarmed Barriss standing in the doorway, eyes darting between the slag littering the floor and the numerous blasters being pointed at her.

“Training time is over, guys!” Ahsoka shouted, the droidekas all folding themselves up and rolling back into the ship for a recharge. Leaping down to the spot in front of Barriss, Ahsoka asked what was going on.

“Nothing serious,” Barriss said, still a little unnerved, while Ahsoka noticed the smell of cooked meat wafting out of the doorway. “I made lunch if you’d like to join me. I figured we should talk about things.”

“How is it?” Barriss asked.

“Mmhm, ish gud,” Ahsoka said through a mouthful of bread and meat. It really was, not that she was entirely certain what this sandwich was made out of. Something local, though Ahsoka had no idea what the native food staples were. She could eat it. It’d do.

“Would you like to play pazaak?” asked Barriss, flipping through a deck of cards she pulled out. “I thought it might be a good way for us to pass time during trips. Do you know the rules?”

“Oh, I know the rules,” Ahsoka said eagerly. “The clones of the 501st played this a lot, so don’t expect this to be easy.”

A vacant plate and five consecutive losses later, Ahsoka was feeling well-fed and utterly confused. Had Rex been going easy on her? Or were the clones just even worse at this game than she was?

“How are you...” Ahsoka said, rather at a loss as Barriss got a twenty in the next round.

“It’s all statistics. Each new card drawn affects how likely subsequent cards are, and with a deck size of 100 cards, it’s a simple matter to calculate percentages, and figure out my odds of winning,” Barriss explained. “There are reasons to hold, to draw a card, to use cards or not in a given round depending not only on what the other player possesses, but how many points they have compared to you at a particular moment. For instance, it’s always to your benefit to accumulate points more slowly, so the other player must choose to hold, expend cards, or even lose the round by going over before you have to risk anything.”

“I just try to get to twenty points...”

Barriss grinned as she shuffled the cards for the next round. “How are things with Senator Chuchi?”

“Riyo’s contacting other senators, ones from other influential worlds opposed to Palpatine,” said Ahsoka. “People she trusts, and knows want to restore the Republic as much as she does. However we’re going to do that.”

“Is it really wise to ‘trust’ any politician?” asked Barriss.

“Not usually...but I trust Riyo,” said Ahsoka. “We’ll need the aid of senators to get the public opposed to the Empire, and to check Palpatine’s power.”
“They’re also people wealthy enough to pay for Karrde’s warships,” noted Barriss.

“Yeah...Are we really doing this?” asked Ahsoka. “Becoming arms suppliers for some rebellion?”

“I don’t know. I know how dangerous the Empire is, I know it will only grow worse with time. I know that refusal to fight will cause more death in the long,” said Barriss. “When it comes down to it, I don’t think I can go to war again. I feel selfish, expecting other people to fight, but I can’t do it again. So, maybe I should help by supplying the means to fight to others.”

“I understand,” said Ahsoka. “We both want to stop the Empire, and we both know what doing so would entail. Someone’s going to have to fight. You don’t want to be the one to do it, and with perfectly good reason. One thing I’m confident in is that whoever rises up against the Empire will do so because it’s something they believe in. You’re not passing the responsibility, or the danger, onto somebody who isn’t willing.”

“I was ‘willing’ once, too,” said Barriss. “I believed in what we were fighting for. I’d still be letting someone who’s unprepared take my place.”

“We were kids, too young to understand what we were involved in or whether it was right,” said Ahsoka. “There are people out there who can make their own choices. Choices we weren't given.”

“Do you not think any children will become part of the fight against the Empire? Willingly or not?”

“I guess you’re right...but that’s not really something we can avoid now, is it? Children are already a part of it,” said Ahsoka. “It’s all so...”

“Complicated,” sighed Barriss. “By the way, I watched the footage.”

“And? What do you think of our new enemy?” asked Ahsoka.

“I was hoping to hear your assessment first,” Barriss said.

“All my instincts are telling me we’re in danger, and they’re usually on the mark. He’s got some plan going, but I can’t tell what it is. He did exactly what we wanted, and that is so unnerving it almost makes me miss Ventress’s taunts, or Grievous coughing his threats at me,” said Ahsoka. “Our usual enemies aren’t usually this subtle, are they?”

“Do you recognize his species from anywhere?”

“No, and I can't find records of anything like him,” said Ahsoka. “I don’t know what to do.”

“We prepare,” said Barriss. “I may have some suggestions for protecting ourselves and our allies.”

“Well, Thrawn isn’t going to show up at our door today. Let’s relax for now, and talk about it over dinner,” Ahsoka said as she considered which card to put down. She was glad Barriss had brought pazaak up. It was a nice way for Ahsoka and Barriss to avoid discussing various uncomfortable topics besides sitting in awkward silence like they usually did. “We should start making wagers.”

“What do you propose we use?” asked Barriss.

“Each loss means the loser has to cook one meal. Now c’mon, I’ve got to win at least one game before we call it quits,” Ahsoka said, shuffling the cards. “And don’t you dare go easy on me.”
“Ahsoka Tano?” Moff Disra said, looking through the file in the ship’s library, showing records of her service and, as was standard for all Jedi, instructions to kill her on sight. “And you believe this because of how some outdated droids were painted?”

“The one symbol all the droidekas shared was her forehead markings, which are distinctive for individual Togruta,” Thrawn replied. “There are plausible connections between Tano, those droids, and Senator Chuchi.”

Keeping quiet on the sidelines of the conversation, Eli tried to gauge the moff’s feelings. He’d already proven annoyed enough at Thrawn asking him to come here and review the evidence, and he didn’t seem to be taking the captain’s case very seriously.

“Hm. And what do you propose we do now?” the moff asked.

“My recommendation is that we wait,” Thrawn answered.

“That certainly sounds like an efficient course of action in light of this information,” Disra added dismissively. “Wait for what? Are you not confident in your deduction? Why not apprehend Tano now if you believe she’s in league with the senator?”

“The Empire’s enemies have gathered on Pantora. If we are patient, more will arrive,” Thrawn said. “A Jedi would certainly be an excellent prize for you to earn favor with the Emperor, however, Tano cannot wage a war on her own, and she’s experienced enough to know it. She’s chosen this world to gather allies. For now, we should keep watch to eliminate many of the Empire’s enemies at once.”

“You’ve done well bringing this to my attention,” Disra said, suddenly looking much more interested at the mention of the Emperor. “You will keep me informed of any new developments. For now, maintain our forces’ positions around the moon.”

"Yes, sir."

The moff turned to leave as Thrawn returned to his screen, observing the position of imperial ships within this system.

“Well?” asked Eli.

“He doesn’t know her,” replied Thrawn. “Which makes is plausible that Offee has contacted him instead.”

“Are you certain it’s Offee?”

“Not entirely. It’s probable, however the evidence is much thinner than in Tano’s case. Regardless, someone has reached him,” Thrawn replied. “Shortly before we arrived, Moff Disra significantly reduced the military presence on Pantora. You stated before that such an action would not be in the character of the moff. Why would he do such a thing?”

“I don’t know,” said Eli.

“You know more of imperial culture than I. How common is corruption? Could he be extorted? Or bribed?”

“Very, yes, and oh, yes.” Eli answered, a bit amused by the sight of Thrawn stumped. “I doubt it was bribery that got him to loosen his grip on Pantora.”
“And why is that?” asked Thrawn.

“Because you said he was angry when you first met him, annoyed that you were there,” said Eli. “If he’d recently lined his pockets with credits, he’d have been in a better mood. To be blackmailed, on the other hand, to suddenly have someone exercising control over him, would be intolerable.”

“Indeed,” replied Thrawn, pleased with the logic of the analysis. “What information could be used to blackmail a Moff?”

“Eh, throw a rock,” shrugged Eli, getting a confused look from Thrawn in response. He didn’t get the idiom. “Oh, ‘throw a rock’; there are so many possible targets, you could attack at random and still hit something. Say, couldn’t you have just asked for information on Offee’s whereabouts? It’d save us time if it turned out she’s safe in a cell somewhere. Or if she’s been killed since Serenno.”

“I attempted to do so, and my requests for that information were denied,” said Thrawn. “However, we have other pieces of data at our disposal.”

Thrawn began tapping keys on his monitor, bringing up footage showing an expansive courtroom; with then-Chancellor Palpatine seated at the center, presiding over the events, and Ahsoka Tano restrained. The visage was striking to Eli, the Emperor keeping his face hidden for the most part on account of injuries suffered by the Jedi’s attempt to assassinate him. He’d almost forgotten how kindly he’d looked in broadcasts during the war.

As the future emperor prepared to reveal Tano’s supposed guilt or innocence, a man marched in, followed by a quartet of masked Jedi guards, Eli taking a moment to recognize him as General Skywalker. Even out on Lysatra, people knew his face, the warrior who killed Count Dooku and hopefully brought the war closer to its end.

“I’m here with evidence and a confession from the person responsible for all the crimes Ahsoka has been accused of- Barriss Offee! Member of the Jedi Order, and traitor.”

The whole room grew quiet at the revelation as two Temple Guards parted to allow the culprit through.

“Barriss? Is that true?” asked Tano. The video was paused there.

Eli took his eyes off the footage and focused on Thrawn, who was looking through every bit of footage available, different cameras recording different fragments of the scene. What he was searching for wasn’t clear to Eli until he found it: an angle focused on Tano, the only one showing her reaction instead of Offee, the Jedi, or Palpatine. Outside the view, Offee proceeded to go into a tirade against the Jedi Order and their role in the Clone Wars, claiming they weren’t serving the light any more. Eli didn’t really understand it. The captain watched the recording repeatedly, studying every move Tano made during Offee’s speech, until finally shutting the monitor off.

“Offee is here,” Thrawn said quietly. “The two of them are working together.”

“Why are you so certain all of a sudden?” asked Eli.

“Because, in spite of everything, Tano agreed with her.”
Bail Organa waited patiently for the call to come in, reading the news as he waited, and feeling like he really ought to stop doing this to himself and just let his staff find whatever’s important. Then he wouldn’t have to read through page after page of increasingly fascist rhetoric every morning.

Halfway through an article about the increasing military buildup and operations to stabilize the Outer Rim, the ringing startled him. He didn’t like working this early, however it was difficult enough to find openings in his schedule for meetings, not to mention the difficulties in relative time differences between planets. Afternoon on Pantora was before dawn on Coruscant. Tapping a few keys, the screen in his desk displayed Senator Chuchi.

“Hello, Riyo,” he said, thankful to see a friendly face, though the comfort it brought him was undermined by the fact she looked as fatigued as he felt. There weren’t many senators he actually respected left here on Coruscant. Most of them had either resigned, by their own will or otherwise, while others like Riyo had returned to their respective worlds. He felt as though he ought to be home as well, though not due to any particular crisis.

No, the most aggravating part of stymieing Palpatine’s efforts was how it was keeping him from his family.

“Hello, Senator Organa,” said Riyo.

“How are things on Pantora?” he asked. He knew about imperial movements in that sector.

“Better than I would’ve feared,” she answered, piquing Bail’s interest as to what, exactly that meant. “I’m hosting a conference on the issues of the current direction of the Empire, and would like to personally extend an invitation.”

That’s awfully vague, even by the standards of the Senate, though Bail.

“I would prefer not to leave Coruscant, unless it was to return to Alderaan, of course—” he began, studying Riyo’s expression. “But I could set time aside if you think this is important enough.”

“I do,” Riyo replied.

It was at this point that Bail noticed the aide to Riyo’s right. She wasn’t watching Bail back, or taking any part of the discussion, instead focusing on taking notes with her pad. She was simply there, conspicuously in view. He recognized her from somewhere, he knew it, her face was difficult to place—

Sabé.

Things were suddenly coming together as being much more important than another conference about marshalling votes on legislation. If Sabé was there, and undercover by the looks of it, it meant Riyo was in contact with Naboo, without intending the contact to be public knowledge. Planning something. And he was being invited too...

“I apologize if this appears is a sudden imposition,” said Riyo. “I simply feel the conference would benefit from your presence. We would all be honored to have you here.”

Chapter End Notes

When you write something like Star Wars long enough, which has so many overlapping
and repeating themes and patterns, sometimes you wind up referencing something without even realizing it until the third read. Like how Revan’s strategy lesson is pretty much exactly what Palpatine pulled in Return of the Jedi.
Fifty-two... Fifty-three....... Fifty-four.................. Fifty-five, Barriss thought to herself as she did sit-ups. Glow had been kind enough to help her exercise, pinning her feet down with his front two, her boots proving solid enough so the pressure of the droideka’s claw legs didn’t hurt her. He was keeping track of her progress, too, not that it was of any help. Assuming he was really counting, she couldn’t distinguish the numbers in his language.

“Bwormp. Bwermp. Bwump,” said the droideka, the repetitive, barely-distinguishable sounds eventually throwing her off, not that she really cared. At this point, she’d take any excuse to stop exercising.

Once that she had completely lost track of how many sit-ups she’d done, she decided to go as far as she could until she got tired, a benchmark it didn’t take her long to reach, her torso falling back onto the mat as Glow moved his legs to let her up, staring at her expressionlessly.

“Don’t look at me like that. You’ve never had to exercise muscles, you don’t know what this is like,” she protested, watching the droideka turn and clanked away from her without any additional comment.

Taking a break in the kitchen, Barriss made herself a meal of bottled water, some energy bars she’d heated up, and a vitamin tablet, mentally working out how many calories this ought to give her.

Then she did nothing, considering how long it would take to consume those calories by sitting in a chair. That would still count as exercise, wouldn’t it?

Staring at a wall for ten minutes gave the bars enough time to cool off and return to their usual crumbly, bitter taste. Knowing how much she’d need the energy, she ate them all anyway, ignoring the awful flavor, then resolved to get up and get back to work.

Right now.

Any second, she would stand up.

Now.

Twenty more minutes of nothing later, the uncomfortable chair she was witting in became more unpleasant than it was worth and she finally decided to stretch her legs, wandering around and finding Ahsoka working on one of the droidekas, rear leg disconnected while the rest of the droid lay next to Ahsoka, watching expectantly as she worked on it.

“Anything I can help with?” asked Barriss.

“No, it’s not a big deal. Naberrie’s leg’s been jamming lately, and I want everyone in top shape when Bail and the others show up. I don’t like gathering like this with the Empire so close, and they’re the best source of muscle we’ve got,” said Ahsoka, wiping some grease off her hands. Naberrie warbled an objection to the used of the term ‘muscle’, as he didn’t have or want any such tissue. Glow had just been informing him how inferior and high-maintenance muscles were compared to servos. “Figurative muscle. I want you guys on security detail.”
“Are you sure it’s wise for them to act as guards around senators who served the Republic?”

“It’s not like they’ll be in every room,” said Ahsoka. “Just have them watching any access points and scanning for bugs.”

“And what about me?” asked Barriss. “Am I welcome?”

“Of course you are,” Ahsoka said instinctively, taking a second to realize that Riyo’s colleagues wouldn’t be encouraged to help Ahsoka upon seeing the other allies she’d chosen to make. Even Riyo had reacted with fear and barely-restrained violence when she’d met Barriss, and the other senators weren’t friends of Ahsoka’s who could be convinced to back down. “I mean, maybe we shouldn’t have you there right at the start. Well, Midla’s going to be there- you’ll be fine. I think. If they can get over a Separatist, they can get over you.”

“Midla has wealth, information, and connections she can offer. I don’t bring anything to the negotiating table you can’t provide on your own,” said Barriss. “Perhaps it would be best if I didn’t attend, and remove one source of hostility. Convincing senators to take any kind of action everyone can agree on will be challenging enough without my involvement.”

“Barriss, I want you to be there. You’re just as much a part of this as I am.”

“...Okay,” Barriss said, reassured if a bit reluctant. “I’ll come with you. What in the world am I going to say...”

“You don’t need to say anything. Just be there with me,” said Ahsoka. “The senators might not want you around, but I will. And this is easier than relaying everything that happened to you later.”

Naberrie eagerly beeped his own ideas to Ahsoka on how to resolve this problem.

“No, Naberrie, you can’t shoot the senators for disrespecting Barriss,” replied Ahsoka, to the droideka’s disappointment. “Wait, do you want to shoot them?”

Naberrie replied that the droidekas all had standing orders to kill Republic authorities if given the opportunity. So, yes, he did very much want to shoot them.

“I’m gonna have to countermand that,” said Ahsoka, wondering if she should go digging around in their code and remove those directives completely. “Wanna help me fix up some droidekas so our anti-imperial summit doesn’t turn into a bloodbath?”

“That sounds like an excellent idea,” said Barriss, hoping this would take as much time as possible. No more time to mess up her body, she had to help out Ahsoka.

“A big assembly of all the most anti-imperial senators you can find, coming together to try and end the Emperor’s reign. Sounds like fun! Can I come?” asked Revan.

“I don’t believe it would be wise for you to attend with me,” said Barriss.

“C’mon, take me in with. I really want to see how this plays out,” said Revan. “I promise I’ll be quiet.”

“Quiet. You?” Barriss said, disbelieving.
“I mean it! Won’t say a word. Part of being a holocron is to pass knowledge on, not as a means of pretending you’re still alive. If I start talking to your buddies, making plans, being my usual persuasive self, I’ll be in command of the entire revolution inside of five minutes. A month, and the Empire will have lost one of their fleets and find their military hierarchy decapitated. A year, and I’ll be propped up on an altar with armored legions bowing to me. And I don’t want to do that anymore. No, you’re my only priority, and I’m very interested in what you’re getting up to.”

“I’ll only be observing the proceedings. I’m not even sure it’s wise for me to inform others of my presence, and I certainly won’t be in a leadership role,” said Barriss.

“Even if some of the senators object to your presence, politicians often accept people based on their utility. Show them a way that they, personally, can gain from your involvement, and they’ll make up some excuse to justify working with a traitor to the Republic. Assuming they have enough conscience to need a justification at all,” said Revan. “So, what kind of plan are you and Ahsoka coming up with? You’ve got the dreadnoughts, and soon you’ll gather enough people to crew them. What next? What’s the first target?”

Barriss really hadn’t thought much about any overarching military strategy, nor had Ahsoka brought up any such thing. “I suppose... if I was in command, the first target I would assault is any imperial shipyards. Destroy the military buildup before it’s completed.”

“Hm, an excellent starting point. Minimal defenses on unfinished warships. Minimal enemy personnel killed. Long term logistics nightmare for the Empire. And they won’t be expecting resistance of this level less than a year after the Empire’s formation,” Revan said approvingly, then adding, “You can do better.”

“I’m not certain I want to do ‘better’. I learned how to fight wars before I found you, and I’ve participated in many battles. None of them ended well,” Barriss said.

“Yes, the Jedi taught you how to fight wars. I’m teaching you how to win them. The modern council lost the latest galactic-scale conflict. I, on the other hand, am two-for-two,” said Revan. “Hint: don’t destroy what you can use.”

Barriss got it. Revan wasn’t implying she should cause larger-scale destruction, but rather to make the blow count more. “You believe it better to assault enemy shipyards to steal their warships?”

“Steal any useable warships and raw materials, then destroy the shipyard itself so it can’t be used by the Empire. Shipyards near stellar objects like gas giants make prime targets, as you can force the remains into the gravity well to be crushed so the imperials can’t determine exactly how many ships you stole or analyze damage from the attack. Keep them guessing how strong your fleet is. If the facilities are in locations where that method won’t work, leave mines around partially intact ships to kill enemy salvage crews, assuming you can’t rigged the vessels themselves to blow. Kill enough, and the Empire might forego sending them after future attacks, and they’ll lose access to useable salvage. It’ll definitely demoralize them at the very least. The first wave of thefts should include simultaneous strikes on as many locations as you can manage, maximize the damage while they’re still unaware of the threat you pose, make them overestimate you in the future and overemphasize defense in certain locations while leaving others vulnerable,” explained Revan. “Shipyards are also a good place to recruit technicians. A regime like the Empire probably employs slaves to lower construction costs. At best, the people assembling the warships are mistreated, underpaid workers coerced into their current jobs, and there will be a lot of them. They know how to operate and repair the vessels you’ll be stealing, and will bring along any droids they work with, too. See, this is the problem with ruling with an iron fist: it hurts a lot more when you accidentally smack yourself in the face.”
No wonder the Mandalorians lost, thought Barriss with a shiver. “Operating in such a manner, we’ll be little different from pirates.”

“Okay,” Revan said bluntly, shrugging, unfazed at the prospect and the implicit degradation of status.

“What of the imperial officers operating the installations? Is there some clever way I can deal with them that doesn’t end in their deaths?” asked Barriss.

Revan sighed, aware this would come up. “Yeah, that’s the issue. You know the Empire will kill people, and you can’t stop it without killing some people yourself.”

“Kill one to save many. Sacrifice clones to win the battle. Destroy the Geonosians to halt droid production. Crush the Separatists to save the Republic.” Barriss said glumly. “Bomb the hangar to stop the Jedi. I’m tired of constantly living the tram problem.”

“I don’t know what that is,” said Revan. “Tell me about it.”

“It’s a thought experiment in ethics. Imagine there is an out-of-control tram car moving towards a crowd of people. You have the option of diverting its path, but in doing so you will cause it to hit one person,” Barriss explained. “It’s a simple demonstration of how people might value one over many, and how responsible you are for the resulting lives and deaths, passively allowing others to die or killing one person with intent.”

“I’d use my physics-defying telekinetic powers to stop the car, saving everyone,” said Revan.

“...Um...well, it’s moving too quickly for you to slow it down,” said Barriss.

“I’d use my physics-defying telekinetic powers to move the people off the tracks. What’re they doing standing there, anyway?” said Revan.

“No, Revan, that isn’t the point-”

“This sounds like an oversimplified, half-assed notion designed to make some idiot feel like they’ve got a brilliant handle on morality and ethics by making people choose between two stupid options,” complained Revan. “Y’know what? I’m letting the car hit the crowd.”

“What? Why?!”

“Spite directed towards reality itself. Or maybe a desire to cause as much damage as possible so whoever’s responsible for the construction of the faulty vehicle will get sued by multiple distraught families, preventing the construction of other low-quality break systems and saving many more lives in the broader system. No, wait, I’ve got an even better one: if you’re killing one person, that person might not be evil, but if you kill many people, you’ve definitely killed a few evil ones, and that makes the choice good! Evil is a construct of sapient beings. Without them, it cannot exist. The only way to destroy evil is to kill everyone. You should continue to drive the car past the crowd and into another crowd, into as many people as possible. IT’S THE ONLY ETHICAL CHOICE,” replied Revan, happy with the increasingly absurd and twisted solutions while Barriss gaped in horror at this debasement of morality. “Actually, scratch all that. If the car is moving towards a crowd, there’s a higher chance that someone will notice the impending death and warn everyone out of the way, compared to one inattentive moron standing on the tracks.”

“You can’t move the car, or any of the people. You have to choose,” said Barriss.

“No,” said Revan.
“You can’t just say-”

“No.”

“Will you continue to reply ‘no’ to everything I say?” asked Barriss.

“Yes.”

“I- excuse me?” Barriss said, stammering a bit at the non-logic of that answer.

“I reject the problem. I reject blame for the deaths in this no-win situation. I reject the limitations imposed by whatever moron came up with it. That’s my answer,” said Revan. “You say the problem is a lesson in how people value life, one versus many, and the control you have over their lives. I say that by accepting someone must die and not fighting back against the situation, anyone who willingly chooses from that binary has shown they don’t really value life at all.”

“You’re the one who’s been trying to teach me you can’t save everyone,” said Barriss, recalling Revan’s advocacy for the use of force.

“I’ve been working to show you that sometimes you can’t keep everyone alive no matter what you do. This little thought experiment has taught to give up before you even begin, and blame yourself for things beyond your control,” Revan explained. “You did the best you could.”

“No, I didn’t. It isn’t beyond my control,” Barriss objected. “There is another option I devised when I’d first considered to issue three years ago. The most purely altruistic choice-”

“Oh, no, please tell me you aren’t saying what I think you’re saying...”

“-to save the lives of all others, one could through themself in front of the tram to stop it,” Barriss finished.

“Wow. That was even worse than what I was expecting,” said Revan, horrified at Barriss’s willingness to literally throw her own life away. “I believe this is what’s known as a ‘warning sign’.”

“IT’S NOT-” Barriss yelled out, stopping herself and taking a breath. “I thought you were impressed by creative solutions.”

“That was creative, yes, but I wouldn’t call it a solution. In your version, a life was still taken. I’ve been saying some problems have no good solution. You’ve been taught not to bother looking for one. You’re smarter than that, Barriss. You’re better than that kind of thinking,” said Revan, much to Barriss’s confusion. “Okay, you don’t want to kill enemy soldiers, even if they’re imperial, and you know you have to. It’s tough, I get it. You can still try to spare them. Drop them off on a nearby planet. Do something so you can say you tried to be better than you had to be. That you’re better than the evil you’re fighting. Offer them something better than the Empire.”

“I’ll... consider my options when the time comes,” said Barriss. “I promise.”

“I’m glad,” said Revan, relieved the discussion had yielded something productive. “It’s got practical benefits as well. It’s not likely you’ll convince every full-fledged academy graduate you meet to switch sides. But you’ll plant a doubt in their minds, at least in a few cases. They’ll see or take part in the Empire’s crimes, and they’ll think back to you, the person who tried to steer them away from it. There’s power in that. Offering people a way out of evil. Soon, you’re going to be faced with a far more difficult task: directing multiple politicians towards doing something that’s obviously correct.”
I don't know if someone else came up with Barriss's approach to the trolley problem earlier, but I want it known that I published this chapter before episode 11 of The Good Place Season 2 aired.
Ahsoka stood with Barriss looking out over the snow-covered landscape, pulling the hood of her coat over her montrals, considering whether picking a citadel in the southern polar region of Pantora was really the best available option. It was ten below out, and the sunlight wasn’t doing much to keep her warm, with the incoming clouds certain to make the cold even worse soon. This place thousands of years old, secluded, of no practical use to anyone these days, the fortifications being obsolete by many millennia.

It also consisted primarily of solid stone walls which made it impossible to conceal electronic listening devices, and the entire area around it was so inhospitable and covered in constantly-shifting snow that spying on those within was impractical, any listening post either being within the bounds of the fortress and exposed, or potentially buried at any moment by a snow flurry.

There was also the added benefit of the timing. The location had only been decided on shortly before the meeting, and with this weather, any significant imperial action, if they were even preparing anything at all, would necessitate cold weather protection they didn’t have time to gather and equip. Not exactly a solid defense, but a logistical and environmental obstacle would still be a thorn in the Empire’s side.

Millions of years before the fortress had been constructed, the region had been tectonically active, leaving an area dominated by the mountain range the structure was nestled in, and an expansive cave network beneath it. Some sections connected to the lower levels of the fortress, including one with a cavern large enough to stow the Eclipse.

It seemed paranoid at first, but Ahsoka had that paranoia and worthwhile preparation depended on whether or not you were right.

The designated landing site for ships that didn’t need to be hidden had once been a lake, now frozen solid. Supposedly. Ahsoka thought using it as a landing field was asking to be hit with an irony hammer, but it was the only area large enough for other vessels to land.

“Don’t be surprised if I let you do most of the talking,” said Barriss. “When I speak, people aren’t usually inclined to listen.”

“Heh. I don’t exactly have a better track record, now that I think about it,” Ahsoka said, thinking about her attempts to negotiate with her squabbling masters. And her own interactions with the council.

The Tantive IV descended through the clouds into the landing zone, rocked slightly by the winds that coming over the walls at the perimeter. Their first arrival.
"Personally, I wish I could be spending time with my daughter, instead of getting wrapped up in this power struggle," said Bail.

"You have a daughter?" inquired Riyo. "I didn't know you and Queen Breha had children."

"Oh, yes. She's adopted, only a few months old now," he explained, smiling as he thought of the girl. "Our queen couldn't be happier with the new princess."

"I'd love to see her, if I ever wind up on Alderaan," said Ahsoka, anxiously stepping down the last flight of stair to enter the conversation.

Bail’s happy expression went away, regarding Ahsoka with fear. Like he had just realized something, then reverting to a smile. “Ahsoka, I’m glad to see you.”

“Heh. Yeah, I’m glad to see you to,” Ahsoka said, aware she’d completely derailed their small talk with no intention of switching over to new small talk.

“I understand you two haven’t seen each other in quite some time,” Riyo said, making her way up the stairs without Bail, passing Ahsoka. “I’ll give you two a moment to catch up.”

After many tense seconds of them both listening to Riyo’s footsteps growing more and more distant, Ahsoka awkwardly added “You and Queen Breha have a daughter. That’s great. How is she? Running from the Empire takes me all over... I’d love to see Alderaan... and your lovely family... if I ever run there...”

"I don't think right now is the time to be discussing such things," said Bail.

"What? Are you that busy?" she asked nonchalantly, trying not to show her concern at how odd he was acting, her smile twitching a bit. She was starting to regret not waiting in the tower.

He's not telling me something.

Why isn’t he telling me something?

"No, it's just... I'd rather not bring this conflict to Alderaan if I can avoid it."

That makes sense, she thought. Why does it still feel like something’s wrong?

"She's your daughter," said Ahsoka. “I’d be more worried about keeping the Empire safe from her.”

“Thank you for the vote of confidence, but I’m sure there are things you’d like to talk about other than family,” Bail said urgently. “How did you survive? Do you know of any other Jedi left alive?”

“Yeah... yeah, there’s one...” Ahsoka said awkwardly, bracing herself for Bail’s reaction. She had not prepared at all how to break this to anyone. Might as well get it over with now, and Bail would probably be as receptive as anyone. Do a dry run. “I’m traveling with Barriss Offee.”

“...Oh.”

“Yeah. ‘Oh’.”

“How did this come about?” asked Bail, alarmed and trying to be understanding.

“I broke her out of a prison on Coruscant.”

“I see,” said Bail, calm but struggling to process this new information and what it meant. “Where is
“Um... nearby?” said Ahsoka, glancing around the stairwell as if Barriss could’ve been around a corner, or unnoticed by Bail.

“You can’t be more specific than that?” said Bail. “Is she armed?”

“Yes, she built a new lightsaber for herself. She’s also been practicing with her own blaster. And she’s learned some new techniques to use the Force, and is stronger than- This is the exact opposite of the answer you wanted, isn’t it?” said Ahsoka, sensing Bail’s unease as she described how there was a supernaturally empowered, armed killer somewhere in their immediate vicinity with no one supervising her. Sure, she knew Barriss wasn’t a threat, but there was no reason Bail would think the same. “Don’t worry, it’s perfectly safe. I’ve got my own squad of droidekas on patrol. I’ve been teaching them more advanced combat techniques, so they’re practically unstoppable.”

“Ah. Droidekas. And you’ve been making them even more dangerous than usual,” said Bail, his concerns, shockingly, not being put to rest by her security arrangements.

Ahsoka didn’t take much notice of Bail’s very much present discomfort, instead focusing on a familiar, squat bulk rolling towards them out of a snow flurry from the Tantive IV.

“Artoo!” Ahsoka said excitedly as the white and blue astromech rolled forward to meet her, lacking arms to return her hug but happy to see her all the same. She squeezed the droid tight for a few seconds, then lifting him up off the ground happily and holding him up as long as her legs could handle it before carefully setting him down. “It’s so great to see you! Getting into trouble lately?”

Artoo beeped that he did indeed have a few stories to tell, though nothing he’d done in the senator’s service quite compared to anything that had happened during the Clone Wars. Before he could elaborate, he let an alarmed screech and rolled back away, Ahsoka turning around to see Cici rolling up, flanked by a pair of droidekas.

“Alright, Ahsoka, I’ve got the perimeter sensors set up in the caverns to give us early warning-” Cici stopped short, noticing Artoo. “Who’s that?”

“And your astromech can talk...” Bail remarked to nobody, then backing away along with Artoo as the droidekas unfolded themselves and stared at him, chirping a reluctant welcome to the senator. Because they, just, loved the people in the government they’d been programmed to fight against. They felt glad he was here. Because Ahsoka said they had to.

“Oh, Cici, this is R2-D2. Artoo, CC-7,” Ahsoka said as Cici rolled around her to inspect her counterpart.

Artoo held still aside from some jerking head motions, booping nervously at this bizarre, gritty, Basic-speaking model that had shown up with a pair of disgruntled droidekas at her beck and call.

“Hey there, buddy. I can say ‘fuck’. Can you say ‘fuck’?” asked Cici in about as friendly a manner as she was capable, to which Artoo replied that, no, he couldn’t. “I fucking thought not, you blue fuck.” Artoo was offended by this, and proceeded to rattle off various swears, all of which were literally and figuratively unspeakable. Cici replied back in droidspeak with one word Ahsoka had never heard before and couldn’t understand, and it left Artoo in a mortified silence as Cici rolled past him. “C’mon, I’ve got some spare time now, we’re gonna teach you how to properly talk back to meatbags.”

Artoo gave a confused look at Ahsoka, then followed the older droid off to harass the Tantive IV’s
crew. Once they were some distance away, Ahsoka left Bail to catch up with her old astromech.

“Hold on, Artoo,” said Ahsoka, stopping the droid as Cici rolled off without him. “Do you have any idea what happened to Anakin? Anyone else from the Order?”

Artoo replied sadly that no, he did not have anything to tell her, his head swiveling slightly, then began to roll away again. It concerned Ahsoka that he didn’t know anything. It also concerned her that he seemed to be looking back at Bail when he was moving his dome.

“Well, follow me, I guess,” Ahsoka said to Bail, disappointed that nothing had changed, as he followed her up to await the other invitees, Bail following after her, the interior only being slightly warmer than the outside without the windchill.

In the upper level of the tower, now repurposed as a conference room with the necessary furnishings and heating, Ahsoka and Bail entered to find Riyo, a bit out of breath from so many stairs, and Barriss, who gave a quiet nod at Bail. He returned it, feeling more unnerved at her presence than condemning, his worry at not knowing where she was replaced with worry at her being within striking distance of himself.

Midla walked out, wearing a long, lavish brown cape identical to Count Dooku’s. The cape draped around her gave her an imposing silhouette against the central window with its cloudy midday sky, a silver chain over her neck holding it in place. The effect was especially impressive considering she was even shorter than Barriss.

“Are you sure you want to wear that?” asked Barriss. “You look rather similar to, um...”

“Count Dooku? Yes, I’m sure. These capes are iconic of Serenno. He did not have sole ownership of the garment,” Midla said.

“We are all here to discuss cooperation,” said Riyo. “What message are you trying to send here?”

“The message is that I haven’t forgotten what I stand for, or who I’ve been trying to protect. Now, let’s see if we can’t get your peers to do something right for a change.” Midla said, the wry comment directed at Bail.

It was a small group, five senators, including Riyo, plus Sabé standing in for Naboo. Not exactly the swell of organized resistance Ahsoka was hoping for, but it was a start. R2 and any other droids had to remain outside. No recordings allowed.

All were people Riyo trusted and believed could be trusted. No wonder there were so few senators here. The senators were all seated around an oval table in the top level of the citadel, wind howling outside. Sabé kept standing at Riyo’s side instead of taking her seat, not feeling the need to get too comfortable given the situation and her role. Ahsoka did the same, also trying to figure out where Barriss had gone off to, debating whether she wanted to miss anything or cause a disturbance by leaving the room to get her. Midla, on the other hand, was standing around at the table simply to be out of place and draw the senators’ attention to her.

Following Bail was Mon Mothma, who Ahsoka primarily recognized from her trial. It brought back a number of unpleasant memories, not that Ahsoka really held it against her, and even though Mothma must‘ve been thinking the same thing, neither brought the subject up. A third human
senator, Garm Bel Iblis of Corellia, arrived, a dignified if dour-looking man who was surprised and
glad to see a Jedi alive. The last was one Ahsoka didn’t recognize, the Bothan senator Borsk
Fey’lya, whom Riyo had invited primarily due to him being the most aggressively anti-imperial
senator she knew of and his rumored connections to the expansive Bothan spynet.

“What is she doing here?” asked Fey’lya, nodding his head towards Midla.

“I’m here to contribute all of my wealth, resources, and contacts towards fighting the tyranny of the
Empire,” Midla said, delighted her presence was already proving troublesome.

“We all know why we’re here, even if none of us can publically admit it,” Riyo began. “Palpatine’s
rule is becoming increasingly worrying for us all, and we need to work together to find some way of
ending it, for the sake of our worlds and the rest of the galaxy. I chose to invite all of you because
you’re the senators I’m most confident are in agreement with me, and the ones most likely to have
ideas on the subject.”

“Many Republic worlds have militias,” said Bel Iblis. “If enough begin striking at imperial targets
simultaneously, the navy could be stretched thin, and forced to rethink their plans.”

“Another civil war breaking the Republic apart is not the solution. We need to gather enough votes
to reduce our military buildup,” said Mon Mothma. “There’s no reason to maintain such a massive
military now that the Clone Wars.”

“There is no ‘Republic’ to break apart, it’s only the Empire now,” Ahsoka objected.

“Hold on a moment, we’re missing someone,” Midla said, turning around to survey the room. “What
are you waiting for, Barriss? Come out, see how things get done in the galaxy,” Midla yelled at the
hallway Barriss was hiding herself in.

Reluctantly, Barriss popped her head out and walked in, unable to manage any actual greeting
beyond an uncomfortable wave and a half-smile. None of the senators appeared any more pleased to
see her than she was to be there, glancing at each other for a lead to follow, until Bel Iblis bluntly
said “You can’t be serious. I’m not going to work with a traitor”

“We’re all traitors. Unless you’re phenomenally naïve, you all knew what the reason behind this
meeting was. You should welcome her,” said Midla. “She has a fleet of two hundred Dreadnought-
class warships which she’s willing to sell. And I’m willing to foot the bill for as many of them as you
can gather crew for. Are you interested?”

That little revelation surprised all the newcomers, enough that Ahsoka felt then need to step forward
and add, “So we’re all on the same page, I’m also involved in the warship distribution, and we’re
receiving them from a third party. Barriss doesn’t have an armada all to herself for no reason.”

This calmed everyone down. Slightly.

“How, exactly, did you obtain these resources?” asked Fey’lya. “Were the Jedi assembling some
hidden fleet?”

“We think it would be best if we kept the source of the ships secret,” answered Ahsoka. “The fewer
people know where they are, the less likely the Empire can cut off supply,” she said, Bel Iblis
nodding and agreeing with the logic.

“If you’re not interested in discussing operations on equal footing, why should we cooperate with
you?” said Fey’lya. “I have no desire to listen to Jedi children when their teachers failed to stop
Palpatine, one of whom has already proven duplicitous in the past. If it wasn’t for them, the galaxy
might not be in the situation it is now—"

“That is enough,” Midla said, drawing all eyes to her.

“Excuse me?” said Fey’lya, his fur bristling.

For a moment, Midla wished she had her own fur to bristle right back at him, just to communicate her feelings more clearly to the Bothan. Speak his language. “The Jedi did more to help the galaxy than you could ever dream of doing, Fey’lya. What happened in the Clone Wars wasn’t their fault.”

“You’re defending the Jedi? You, a Separatist?” Fey’lya went on, incredulous, just like everyone else. Even Ahsoka was a little shocked.

“You know what? Yes. I’m defending them,” Midla answered. “I miss those damned idiots and their preachy discussion about life and light. I miss their mystical ramblings about keeping the galaxy in balance. I miss rolling my eyes at their bits of pseudo-philosophy, especially the ones that pointed to their deep-seated emotional problems. I wish they were here.”

“They weren’t even a real part of the Republic, they’d simply been around for so long, no one questioned their presence anymore,” said Bel Iblis.

“And their incorporation into our military led to the Republic’s fall,” Mothma added grimly. “You, Midla, also share part of the blame.”

Midla wasn’t having it. “I cared more about what the Republic stood for than you ever did! Freedom, cooperation, culture, justice. The Jedi weren’t responsible for the war. YOU were. ALL of you!” she shouted, glaring at the assembled senators. “For over twenty years, the Republic had been on the brink of dissolution, unable to do its job of organizing systems and resolving disputes. Sabé here watched her planet get conquered over tax law! The Jedi were the ones holding it all together, making individual systems believe there was a reason this whole system endured and worked. The Jedi were the ones going to neutral worlds to negotiate borders, they were the ones opposing pirates and slavers harassing systems at the Republic’s edge, they were the ones who took it on themselves to do your dirty work and destroy the Separatist movement once we became strong enough to break free. And even if I think it was wrong, I’m not going to condemn them for trying to repair the damage you did. The damage we all did.”

“Even if the Jedi didn’t cause the war, they were the ones waging it,” Barriss said.

Midla glanced back at Barriss, her expression softening in contrast to her contempt for the senators.

“Haven’t you been listening, Barriss? Aren’t you supposed to be the attentive one, the one who notices the flaws in the system? ...I forget how young you still are. I’ve lived through decades of gradual decline, watching the senate bicker over easily-resolved issues of territory, law, and resources. The Jedi were the active ones. They went out into the galaxy to try and solve the problems. They weren’t always very good at it, but they tried, and that’s a hell of a lot more than any of these politicians can say,” Midla said, angrily turning back to address the senators. “And now that the Jedi have all died failing to fix your mess, you’re all willing to shove the blame onto them. Just like you tried to shift it onto me before I resigned from the senate, as if I was the unreasonable one.”

Everyone was silent for a while, uneasily glancing at each other, Midla staring down anyone whose movements even hinted they were about to say something.

“We were too dependent on the Jedi,” Bel Iblis grumbled, more to end the deafening silence than anything.
“Well then, now’s your chance to prove it! They’re dead. The Empire is coming for all of us sooner or later, and the galaxy doesn’t have its most ardent do-gooders around to save us. Palpatine and his lackies are building up their military, stifling the rights of citizens, eliminating political enemies, and plotting the conquest of neutral systems across the galaxy. Now,” Midla said calmly, taking a deep breath between words, a small effort to calm herself down, “what are we all going to do to stop them?”

“You can’t simply decide to wage war against the galactic government,” Bail said.

“I can, and I have been doing so for over three years. This is just the latest stage, which means that unlike all of you, I have some experience in the area. Do you want it, or not? Well? How about you, warhawk?” Midla said, addressing Bel Iblis. “Are we putting together an army, or what?”

“I believe the best source of personnel would be local militias of worlds which haven’t fared well under the Empire,” said Bel Iblis, with a bit of hesitation, but still willing to cooperate. “Since the end of the war, most war materiel was confiscated by the Empire, but trained soldiers and pilots remain. If we reached out to them, and provide equipment, I believe there are millions of people across the galaxy who could be convinced to fight.”

“I have contacts on a few worlds who won’t sit back and let the Empire control their worlds. Saw Gerrera, for one,” Ahsoka said.

“Cham Syndulla would be another,” added Fey’lya.

“The alliance of neutral systems, if they acted as a single entity, could also present an obstacle for the Empire. Perhaps it would curb their expansionist tendencies,” said Bail.

“You still think there’s a peaceful solution to this, Organa?” Midla said mockingly, then becoming even angrier than before. “What will it take for all you ‘civilized’ people on Alderaan to realize the situation we’re in? YOU CANNOT COMPROMISE WITH A FIRE AS IT’S BURNING DOWN YOUR HOUSE!”

Ahsoka heard an approving ‘mm-hmm’ sound coming from Barriss’s direction, though it didn’t sound like her voice. Glancing at her, she saw Barriss quickly smack the purple-glowing bulge in the side of her coat, everyone else too focused on Midla’s outburst to notice.

“And your solution is to try and burn the flame right back?” asked Mon Mothma.

"Mon Mothma, I understand your desire for nonviolent, legal recourse against Palpatine. If that’s what you want, how exactly do you intend to go about removing him from power?” asked Barriss. "How could Palpatine have legally done this? I know he's charismatic, but how could he get a majority vote from the Senate to vote power away from themselves by making him emperor?"

The senators all looked at each other with uncertainty.

"No one's quite sure," answered Riyo.

"What do you mean?” asked Ahsoka.

"What I means is, no one can completely explain their reasons for voting the way they did. It makes no logical sense, yet thousands of senators went along with the creation of a 'New Order'. And none of them can explain why. Everyone's trying to save face, acting like the reasons couldn't be more obvious and relying on how so many senators voted the same way to deflect attention. As if it's lunacy to wonder how this happened when really, they're all scared and confused. No one has any answers, they only know that in that moment, they wanted to obey Palpatine."
"The Force. He was controlling them through the Force," said Barriss. "Being Supreme Chancellor all those years, he'd been subtly working his way into the minds of all the weakest-willed members of the senate, ready to exert influence over them at the correct moment."

"I thought mind tricks could only be performed one person at a time. A small group if one is skilled," questioned Riyo.

"Jedi practice restraint. Influencing people like that may be necessary to avoid violence or get around obstacles. But for a Sith Lord who doesn't care about crushing the will of anyone and everyone? Who knows what his limits are," explained Ahsoka.

"His limit is, at most, however many senators voted for the formation of his empire," deduced Barriss. "If he could've controlled more of them, manipulated Chuchi and the rest of you in this room, he would have."

“I wasn’t aware Palpatine had any Jedi abilities,” said Bel Iblis, worried by this new information. Ahsoka and Barriss looked at each other, realizing there was a serious information gap between themselves and the rest of the galaxy regarding the Emperor.

“To answer your question, Ms. Offee, my intent is to rally enough senators to vote to remove him from office,” answered Mon Mothma.

“Palpatine has public support from the majority of the senate. How many senators will you need to reverse Palpatine declaring himself Emperor and remove him from office?” asked Ahsoka.

Mothma hesitated to answer, “Eighty-seven.” Then, she reluctantly added, “At a minimum.”

With that one question, Midla figured out Ahsoka’s thoughts on the matter and pounced on the target. “And how much time do you think you will need to convinced those senators? Hm?”

“I don’t know,” Mothma said calmly.

“Do you think it likely you can convince so many senators on your own?” asked Midla, grinning.

“I don’t know,” Mothma said evasively.

“In future elections, with the government’s present course of pro-imperial propaganda and restructuring around governors and moffs, do you think new senators will be elected who will agree with your position?”

“I don’t know,” Mothma said irritatedly.

“When will you know?” Ahsoka asked, not receiving an answer before Bel Iblis interrupted, not that Mon Mothma actually had one.

“I remain concerned by both the notion that Palpatine has directly controlled the actions of many government representatives, and the apparent lack of concern from the rest of you,” Bel Iblis said, much more urgently than the last time he’d spoken. “If what Offee suggested is true, Mon, any plan you may have that relies on the senate is doomed.”

“I’m not convinced of Palpatine being capable of any such powers,” said Fey’lya.

“I can confirm that Emperor Palpatine can use the Force,” Bail said, surprising Ahsoka and Barriss.

“Then the Jedi and the Separatist are both right,” said Bel Iblis. “While we’re here debating over
whether to go to war, across the galaxy there’s already a war on for the fate of our worlds and the
government binding them, and we’ll lose if we keep fighting with nothing but words.”

“Do none of you have a nonviolent solution? Mon Mothma, with all due respect, is attempting torally support against the man who unilaterally overturned our entire government the best plan you
have?” Riyo protested. “Chandrila has enough political clout to keep imperial forces away, but my
world may be at risk because of its resources and some sympathy for the CIS.”

“It’s already at risk!” yelled Midla, making everyone increasingly uncomfortable. “You all keep
worrying about what you could lose if you don’t fight the Empire, while you’re already losing
everything! I haven’t gotten any transmission from Serenno since I fled, meaning every contact I had
on my own planet is either dead or in such a precarious position they can’t send a single message
through any of the many channels I left available. Do you think you’ll be shown more mercy from
Palpatine?”

“That happened because your world chose to break from the Republic,” retorted Fey’lya.

“And the senate chose to declare war on us!” objected Midla. “Don’t think for a second I’ve
forgotten who was ‘against’ and who was ‘for’, Borsk!”

“You’re wrong,” said Ahsoka. “Whatever the failings of the senate, Palpatine was the one who
fueled the war and used it to benefit himself.”

“Don’t give him all the credit, Ahsoka,” said Midla. “The Republic had been declining long before
Palpatine entered the stage.”

“Enough,” Sabé said, everyone immediately paying attention to her first comments. The first sound
or movement she’d made at all, actually. “We need to destroy the Empire’s war machine. No matter
how many of us die, no matter how long it takes, the New Order needs to be crushed if the Republic
is to be put back in power. The less we work together, the greater or chances of failing. The Naboo
have little to offer in battle, but whatever we can provide, we’ll give to those who can fight. Queen
Apailana has promised this, and we’re taking stock of medical supplies and agricultural surplus we
could bolster an army.”

“Aren’t the Naboo a world of pacifists?” asked Bel Iblis.

“We are,” said Sabé. “And now, we fear that path will lead our culture to its annihilation. That’s how
much the Empire concerns us. Our former senator has no loyalty to us. Palpatine’s homeworld was
nothing more than a tool to gain power.”

Sabé pulled out a holographic display, setting it on the table and activating it, projecting a recording
of Padmé. Heavily pregnant, as Ahsoka noted. Not long before she’d died. Everyone else remained
quiet, waiting for her to speak.

“I’d hoped it wouldn’t come to this, but it seems as though every minute I have fewer and fewer
options left. If we don’t stop Palpatine, I’m not sure our democracy can be salvaged. One of the first
lessons I learned as queen was that, as much as I wish to resolve disputes legally, peacefully to
uphold the laws of the Republic, when paths of recourse are removed one by one, giving tyrants the
battle they’re asking for is the only choice left. The restoration of the Republic can only prevail by
overcoming Palpatine’s attempts to divide and separate us. His hold on the galaxy depends on
keeping the attention of those willing to fight for freedom directed towards each other. Just like he’s
been pitting loyalists against the confederacy for this entire war. Just like he’ll try to place blame for
the war and its cost on the Jedi. I don’t know if there’s hope anymore, but if there is, it depends on
people seeing who their enemy really is, and not letting their hatred cloud their judgements.” Padmé
suddenly looked a great deal more fatigued, closing her eyes and bringing her hand to her face. “Though I may have let love cloud mine. Palpatine has used me, the war, the Jedi, the senate, the Republic, the Separatists, everyone to fuel his own ambitions. If anyone thinks he can be reasoned with, that life under the Empire will be... tolerable... know that once you’re no longer useful to him, you’re just another tool to discard.”

The hologram vanished, leaving the room a little darker as the senators pondered what Padmé had said. Fey’lya didn’t seem phased, but then, despite his rudeness, he was probably the most anti-imperial person there between the information Bothawui’s independent spy network would provide him about the depth of imperial corruption, and the Empire’s transparent humanocentrism. Bail and Mon Mothma were both disconcerted, being the two most closely connected to Padmé professionally, and Sabé homing in on that fact and staring at them intently, specifically, wasn’t doing anything to ease their minds.

“Where did you get that?” asked Ahsoka.

“She entrusted it to me, shortly before she left Coruscant for the last time” Sabé said, pocketing the miniature projector. “I didn’t fully understand what she meant. Not until I was here, watching you all bickering.”

Everyone was tense, and uncertain, and worried.

Riyo meekly stepped forward. “Perhaps now would be a good time for a recess.”

Midla stood out on the tower’s balcony, looking down on the senators’ vessels, smoking a death stick in the cold.

“Sure you don’t want to come back inside?” Ahsoka asked.

“Please. It feels warmer out here than it does with my old acquaintances,” Midla said with a cough as she tossed the still-burning stick over the stone railing. “Of course, they all listen to that upstart Amidala rather than the person with more political experience than all of them combined.”

“I didn’t know you were a senator,” Ahsoka said, tactfully ignoring that shot at Padmé. She would give Midla exactly one free pass on that topic, and only because it’s what Padmé’s message made clear she’d want.

“Serenno wasn’t always the core of the Confederacy, you know,” said Midla. “There was a time when I was proud of our membership in the Republic. A bastion of law, culture, equality, and justice in a cruel, chaotic galaxy.”

“Then why did you leave?”

“Keep up, Ahsoka. I left for all the reasons I laid out back in that room. The reasons standing in that room. Everyone standing for grand ideals, with no idea how to make them a reality, and maybe not even having any will to,” said Midla. “Also, after a few decades of doing it, introducing myself as ‘Serenno’s Senator’ got excruciatingly old and annoying. Try saying that a few times fast. I’m not kidding. I really want you to do it.”

“Uh- Serenno’s Senator, Serenno’s Senator, Senerro’s Sernador...what the heck...”
“Ah, you see? Welcome to a tiny snippet of my life five years ago. Back before Dooku convinced me to join his movement.”

Ahsoka stopped. She’d figured before now that Midla had at the very least been in contact with Dooku, but her political career and his involvement in her defection was an unexpected revelation.

“You two knew each other?” she asked as Midla lead her to a window overlooking the city.

“Of course we did,” Midla said fondly, her weak smile contrasting with the growing puffiness of her eyes. “We were the two most prominent Serennians in the Core, the elite of our world, far from home and representing our people in the Galactic Senate and the Jedi Order. We knew each other for over thirty years before the war. We respected each other’s roles in the Republic. He was a little bit overconfident. Took him far too long to figure out how to properly style his beard when he first grew it. I’m certain he cared for that Ventress girl. He’s- he was a good man.”

“Dooku was a monster!” Ahsoka exclaimed. “He was a Lord of the Sith! Do you have any idea what that means? Do you know how many innocent people died on his orders? How many Jedi he killed? He cut off my master’s arm and nearly killed him and Obi-Wan more than once!”

“Of course I know,” Midla countered, stern but controlling her temper more than Ahsoka was. “I didn’t want to see it before. He was one of the best friends I had ever had. Even knowing everything he’d done... I wish I could’ve helped him. He was a good man, once. And I have no idea when the change happened.”

“Was that before or after Anakin killed him?” Ahsoka asked bitterly.

Midla’s fists clenched as she glared at Ahsoka for a moment, then closing her eyes and taking a breath to calm herself.

“I don’t blame your master,” Midla said tensely, slowly opening her fists. “Skywalker killed a corrupted shadow of my friend. No- I blame the monster who transformed him into that.”

Ahsoka nodded slowly. “Palpatine.”

A few tears broke free of Midla’s eyes and streamed down her face, which she promptly wiped away, not wanted them to siphon away any more heat. “What Amidala was true. We’re going to end that bastard, alright?” she said, Ahsoka nodding firmly in response.

“I... I’m sorry for what happened to Count Dooku,” Ahsoka said, pausing a moment to reflect on how unbelievable the words sounded coming from her. “I can’t imagine what that would be like. Finding someone you cared about had become twisted and evil like that.”

Midla pulled a flask out of nowhere and took a few sips. Then one really long sip. “I have ways of coping. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a few thoughts to share with Fey’lya, get him on our side.”

“Have you been part drunk this entire time?” asked Ahsoka, leaning back a bit to avoid breathing in any more of the vapors. She had no idea what it was Midla was drinking, but based on the smell, she suspected a few sips of it would knock over a bantha.

“Me being slightly inebriated keeps things fair for everyone else,” Midla said with a cough, stowing the flask away to track down that Bothan.

Ahsoka walked off in the opposite direction, around the stone and metal corridors, picking up on familiar voices nearby.
“You’re hiding something from me. You’ve been hiding it from me ever since you brought back Padmé’s body!” Sabé shouted. “She was the queen and senator of Naboo, you have no right to keep this from us!”

“Believe me when I say I am acting with Padmé’s permission. I know how angry you are, but I need you to trust me,” said Bail.

“I want to, and I don’t believe you’re hiding things of malice, but she’s dead and you’re the only one who knows how or why,” Sabé said. “Padmé trusted me, too. More than she did you. If there’s something you know that I don’t, it can only be because circumstances left her no choice, not because she would want me kept in the dark.”

“Is everything all right?” Ahsoka said, knowing she was intruding. Sabé looked angrier than she’d ever seen her before, while Bail was more fearful.

Bail turned to Sabé for a moment and said “Not here, please... It’s nothing to worry about, Ahsoka,” Bail replied, getting an intense glare from Sabé as she walked out, leaving him waiting for her to get further away before he dared to leave himself. “Sabé wanted information on topics which I’m not in a position to provide. And that’s the end of it.”

Ahsoka watched him exit, considering whether to force the issue. Bail didn’t seem eager to hide anything, and if Padmé really had asked something of him, Ahsoka could live with some unanswered questions. Everyone was strung out enough as it was without alienating possibly the most even-tempered person here.

“Dissident senators from core worlds. The remnant of the Separatists. Planetary militias fighting for freedom. The expansive Bothan spy network. Some well-supplied smugglers. And a pair of experienced ex-Jedi,” said Revan. “An excellent start. The first step in bringing down an evil empire is to gather up as many improbably skilled weirdos as you can get your hands on. I wonder if you could get the GenoHaradan on your side...”

“The who?”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Revan. “My own attempt at building a Sith Empire was disappointing failure that broke apart from a single defeat. I look forward to seeing how you’ll topple this one.”

“I can’t topple an empire,” said Barriss. “I’m not a great leader. I’m no one. If Senator Amidala’s posthumous message can’t convince her own allies to act, I certainly won’t be convincing anyone.”

“That woman... Padmé was her name?” Revan said quizzically. “I like her. Smart. Incisive. Has her priorities in order.”

“I know,” Barriss said. She’d never talked to Padmé personally, but she’d seen her in passing periodically. Ahsoka thought the world of her, and even through the hellish experience the war had been, a few speeches or interviews Barriss had heard from her gave some hope that the Republic could endure this crisis. So much for that. “Though it seems she tragically learned the lesson too late, what she said about Palpatine was true. I only hope the other senators realize it.”

“The truth is a lot like death: you can’t avoid it forever. Some people manage to get away from it, but even then, it’s only because death got to them first. Or concurrently, as I’m sure some of Palpatine’s
allies have discovered. Bet he likes to twist the knife at the end,” Revan said with a touch of morbid amusement. “Let’s hope those senators prove sharper.”

“You think we have a chance?” asked Barriss.

"This is a start. Riyo seems competent enough, getting everyone together like this,” said Revan. "Though I have to tell you, it's really weird for me to listen to her, because she sounds like Bastila with an even more adorable accent. Also, Bel Iblis sounds sort of like HK-47, that hologram of Padmé sounds like an older version of Mission, and I swear Organa has the exact same voice as the leader of this swoop bike gang I met on Taris. Why does everyone in the future sound the same?”

Ignoring the question upon realizing it was rhetorical, though definitely odd if Revan’s recollection of voices was accurate, Barriss asked “If this is the best our side can do, how can we hope to defeat the Empire?”

“There was a moment, long ago, I’d considered retaking control of the Sith. Do you know why I didn’t?”

“I sincerely hope it was recognition of the evils the Sith were committing and a desire to end them,” said Barriss.

“In a sense, yes. It wasn’t only that the Sith were evil. It was that they were an inferior replacement to the Republic. I’d tried to make something better. I failed. As long as I was in charge, maybe it would’ve been an effective government. It wouldn’t have lasted. I saw the results of Sith rule without my leadership: they were brutal, oppressive, discriminatory, and worst of all, mind-bogglingly incompetent. Any empire I built around the Sith wouldn’t survive ten years after my passing,” Revan explained. “Meanwhile, the Republic expanded and functioned for millennia with the help of the Jedi. Even its recent overthrow was a restructuring, not a collapse, and already there are people who believe in its ideals strongly enough to rally to undo the damage. It’s proven more robust than I’d believed.”

“The Republic stood for worthy ideals, and had the means of living up to them,” said Barriss. “It also proved corrupt, after a time, its leadership unable to adapt or change.”

“As far as flaws in societies go, stagnation and decadence, which took centuries to occur after millennia of prosperity, are fairly minor. Stuff like this is why I wanted to scatter my holocrons all over the place, emulating the Jedi. It’d have been far more effective than conquering everything.”

“You said you wanted your holocrons to find students- you never mentioned wanting to emulate the Jedi. Why?”

“Because I’d identified some of the reasons the Jedi have been as successful as they have been: heterogeneity, cooperation, redundancy. The Jedi take in members from all over the galaxy, and were spread out, independent enclaves keeping the order alive. They know how to effectively pass down their teachings from one generation to the next. They can replace experienced members when they die. The Sith are terrible at this. Admittedly, I’m still missing some large chunks of my memory, but I can’t remember ever teaching Malak a single damn thing. No wonder he was such a crap leader, I never put any effort into making sure I had a successor. Then there’s the infighting whenever somebody powerful dies, competing for the position, whittling down their numbers even more, and you lose some good people who then can’t train others to replace them, and the more Sith you’ve got, the more willing the stronger ones are to waste lives seizing power from each other instead of fighting common enemies... it’s a system where the more Sith there are, the faster they fall apart because everybody thinks they can take it all!”
“It sounds as though the Rule of Two gave them the focus they needed,” said Barriss. “I’d been taught about how the Sith limited their numbers to prevent infighting. The restriction could also be interpreted as deterring them from taking risks, fighting only when necessary or risk extinction.”

“Hm. Good analysis. Wish I’d figured that out myself...” said Revan. “The point is that while the Sith’s system may be strong, it’s also unstable compared to the Jedi or the Republic. Take out a Jedi, a senator, a chancellor, a general, the organization will live on. Take out Palpatine, one man, it all crumbles away.”

“Indeed. Any ultimate secret techniques are you keeping hidden from me? Something that will make assassinating the single most powerful being the galaxy a less daunting prospect?” asked Barriss.

“Oh, dozens. Plenty of people have used the Force to crush windpipes. Pretty sure I’m the only one who’s ever used it to crush genitals.”

Barriss couldn’t even speak, her face twisted and scrunched up in revulsion at the mental image of attempting that, on Palpatine, until she heard some approaching footsteps.

“Hold on- someone’s coming,” said Barriss. “I’m not sure I should be speaking to you. It would be one more abnormal thing to explain.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Revan. “Non-Force users can’t see or hear me.”

“What? Really?”

“No, of course not, don’t be silly. I’m lying to stall for time. Hello, Bas- I mean, Senator Chuchi,” said Revan, holographic head turning to face a very confused Riyo standing under the archway.

“What... is that?” asked the senator.

“Um... this is the holocron of Revan,” said Barriss, a bit uneasy and unsure if that would raise more questions than it answered.

“Hey there. I’m an ancient Force-user who’s been both Jedi and Sith, became so strong my power rivaled that of the entire Jedi Council, and I was the deciding factor in multiple galactic wars!” explained Revan. “And I’m teaching Barriss hear everything I know.”

Riyo’s eyes shifted back and forth between Barriss and the hologram. “If all that is true, this is either exactly what you need, or the worst idea anyone has ever had.”

“Hey, I can multitask. Anyway, it was a pleasure to meet you, Riyo. I’ll leave you two alone,” said Revan, hologram vanishing. While the holocron was still clearly held in Barriss’s hand, both her and Riyo staring at it, unsure what Revan had meant by ‘leaving them alone’. Barriss knew the holocron never shut down.

After Barriss shrugged off the concern and stuffed the device back into her pocket, Riyo said, “Thank you for doing what you could to keep things civil.” Barriss simply nodded, knowing it was taking a lot of nerve for Riyo to have moved things this far. “All this effort to get them in the same room, and I feel so... so...”

“Helpless,” finished Barriss.

“Yes,” Riyo agreed reluctantly. “People are gravitating back towards the conference. Let’s get back in there. Hopefully something tangible can still come out of today.”
**Garm Bel Iblis** and **Borsk Fey'lya** first appeared in the Thrawn Trilogy, showing how heterogeneous the Rebel Alliance was. They're not bad guys, but they do add internal conflict, Iblis through his pride, Fey'lya just by being generally uncooperative. Not that you'd really expect much from a guy whose name is probably derived from "failure".

While Dooku comes from the Japanese word for "poison", Midla's name comes from the Latin word "medella" for "cure" or "healing". Because she's a really bitter pill to swallow.
Back in the makeshift conference room, everyone had returned to their previous positions, looking a bit less aggravated since they’d had time to settle a few things individually, though not necessarily more eager to fight the Empire.

“I’d like to start by once again thanking everyone for arriving here despite their misgivings and disagreements regarding the subject at hand,” began Riyo. “Despite our disagreements, I think everyone should remind themselves that we are all on the same side.”

“Agreed,” said Bel Iblis, giving their host an approving nod.

“You are all aware that Alderaan has a long history of promoting peace,” said Organa. “Even so, it’s not out of the question that we could provide ‘humanitarian aid’ to worlds opposing Palpatine.”

“Cooperation must go in both directions,” said Fey’lya. “While I would certainly extend support to my dear friends if possible, as a representative of Bothawui, I would need some assurance assisting you would not bring harm to my people.”

“I agree with Fey’lya,” said Midla, suddenly acting much warmer towards the Bothan. “The Empire’s humanocentric policies put his people at more risk than Chandrila or Alderaan. I have my own information sources which I’d be willing to share to secure cooperation with the Bothan spynet against the Empire. We’d also need to ensure any strikes against imperial targets based on supplied information can’t be traced back to their world.”

Through the whole discussion, Ahsoka noticed Mon Mothma was oddly quiet, keeping still, only moving enough to pay attention to whoever was speaking.

“Mothma,” Ahsoka said, getting the senator’s attention. “Palpatine isn’t going to stop. Just about everyone I cared about is dead because he considered them a threat. The Jedi have been all but exterminated. Do you think you, or anyone else in the galaxy, won’t meet the same fate if you let him go unchecked?”

“Chandrila’s defense fleet could, hypothetically, lend obsolete equipment to groups acting against the Empire,” said Mothma, acting as composed and regal as ever despite how uncomfortable she felt funding rebellions. “All sold legally, of course.”

“Still abiding by the laws of a government you don’t even want to serve in, Mon?” Midla asked sarcastically.

“I will take action against the Empire, and I will do so without giving them reason to remove me as a threat,” countered Mothma.

“I’m willing to give up anything to defeat the Empire,” Midla remarked sternly. “I’ve proven that already.”

“Then why don’t you give up your pride and stop harassing your allies?” asked Barriss.

Midla raised an eyebrow at Barriss for a moment, then smiled approvingly at her and took her seat to cooperate with some of the people she disliked most out of the entire galaxy. “None of you seem to
completely grasp what we’re all trying to do. We are acting in opposition of the most powerful
government in known galactic history, with the most powerful military backing it, with the most
ruthless and unforgiving man in the galaxy ruling it. There is no going halfway here. Palpatine would
kill you all if he could get away with it. Let him keep gaining more power, and he will kill you, and
he’ll get away with it. Now, do any of you consider anything I just said to be untrue?"

Nobody said a word. Midla sat there, grinning as Mothma massaged her temples. She knew Midla
was right, and she hated it.

“The dreadnoughts are the first step to giving us actual fighting power against the imperial navy. Not
enough to take them on directly, but it’s a start. They need around 2,200 people each to operate
them. How many do you think you can find crews for?” asked Ahsoka.

“2,200 crewers each? ...Six would be manageable, for now,” said Bel Iblis. “How much will that
cost from your supplier?”

Ahsoka thought about her deal with Karrde: the minimum he would sell for was ten million credits
each, a low price for that kind of ship. But the higher she charged, the more money would be
directed towards finding and protecting any surviving Jedi. “Eleven million each,” she said.

“Consider them paid for, then,” said Midla, unconcerned with the cost, much to Ahsoka’s relief.

“If you’re facing a manpower shortage, I can make contact with various militias and anti-imperial
groups Bel Iblis may not know of,” Fey’lya said tentatively.

“There’s also the issue of the dreadnaughts’ fighting capabilities. They were good ships in their time,
but their power generators are inefficient and their shields are weak,” said Bel Iblis. “It may be better
to cannibalize some for their turbolasers and other equipment.”

"And who’s going to command them?" asked Organa. "You're talking about starting your own
military. Are you prepared for that? Are any of us?"

"I believe I am," said Bel Iblis. "I'd also appreciate the help, Bail."

"As would I," said Fey'la.

“Then... we’re all in agreement?” Ahsoka asked hopefully, trying to remain optimistic despite the
creeping feeling she was expecting a lot from a group of politicians.

“Not quite,” said Organa. “Garm, once you get these dreadnoughts, what do you intend to do with
them? Even with those ships, Corellia can’t possibly fight off the Empire, if that’s what you’re
planning.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Bel Iblis, a little irritated at the implied question of his intelligence. “I
don’t have any immediate targets in mind. As Midla so clearly pointed out, we’re all worried about
the threat of what Palpatine will do with his growing military. The point is that if we can acquire
vessels in these numbers, we should, to prepare for the worst.”

“How much worse do you expect it to get?” asked Ahsoka.

“Whole worlds stripped mined, political enemies imprisoned, populations enslaved,” replied Bel
Iblis, in a completely serious tone.

The room grew quiet again, everyone taking this as seriously as Bel Iblis was. And maybe a bit
doubtful of what they could do.
“I know none of you want to do this,” said Ahsoka. “After years of war, I don’t want to be here, either. I don’t want to keep fighting. I also know that if we don’t, if we hide somewhere and look after ourselves, we’re not doing the right thing by being peaceful. We’ll only be letting the Empire take more from people who don’t have the privilege of being able to defend themselves. Palpatine thinks that the Jedi were the only threat to the Empire, now you need to show him how wrong he is.”

It wasn’t the end of the Empire, it wasn’t a grand rebellion. It was just a few moderately-influential people deciding to prepare for the worst and take a stand if they were forced to. It was also progress. There was a moment where Ahsoka actually felt like there was a little more light in the galaxy.

Then she felt a buzzing on she wrist: a proximity sensor alert.

Columns of ice extended from Pantora’s surface down into the caverns, frozen water flows that extended through the stone walls deeper underground. Sunlight was refracted and reflected through the channels like fiber-optic cables, bathing the stone walls in faint blue light. It must’ve taken millions of years for the caves to form the way they did as the continents shifted and the region cooled.

Ordinarily, destroying such naturally beautiful, painstakingly crafted works of art would be as unthinkable as smearing any other masterpiece. Unfortunately, success in the service of the Empire wouldn’t permit that kind of sentimentality, and compromises must be made.

Finding points where lasers could evaporate the ice and provide access between otherwise separated networks had been easy enough. As had getting troops through the caves to areas beneath their target. It was time to show those above that the archaic defenses around them were even less reliable than they appeared. None of the available vehicles were suited to this climate, but underground, protected from the wind, stormtrooper armor could withstand the temperatures long enough to catch the senators in the act of conspiring with enemies of the state.

Portable generators, transmitters, and displays were up and running, providing readouts and troop locations on a holographic map, dots moving through the labyrinthine tunnels.

At the moment, the scouts and stormtroopers were in position and awaiting orders.

Allies were in place. The challenge would come in ensuring all enemies were directed where the plan demanded they go as well.

Resistance had appeared early, droidekas guarding the underground tunnels, holding their ground without advancing towards their opposition. It appeared Tano had anticipated the possibility of an attack from below rather than one from the air, which was consistent with her experience launching such an attack herself on Geonosis. The droids would certainly alert Tano once the initial threat had been repelled, and she would be heading underground to retreat to her ship momentarily.

All exactly as expected.

“Squads one through eight: advance,” ordered Thrawn, sending the garrison into the icy caves. The odds were stacked against her, now it was time to see if Ahsoka Tano was up to challenge.
Normally I don't do things like picking faces and voices for characters, but I think I've found Midla's voice.

This chapter's shorter than usual because it was originally combined with the next, but I split them for the sake of pacing. And suspense. Next one won't take as long to finish.
“Unfortunate,” said Thrawn, observing the holographic displays showing the scout troopers had been detected and were retreating from a trio of droidekas, with sensors showing four others barreling down on them from different directions.

“A few scout troopers are insignificant. We have one hundred and fifty stormtroopers at our command, and a reinforced garrison to call on,” said Disra. “More than enough for one undertrained Jedi.”

“I would advise you not underestimate Ahsoka Tano. Initially, I believed details regarding her skills unreliable, coming from a source biased in her favor. Records of her service in the Grand Army of the Republic have made it clear to me she is unusually dangerous, skilled, and experienced in the art of war for someone her age,” Thrawn countered, typing onto his pad, bringing up a holographic display of Republic and Separatist ship formations in a battle Eli didn’t recognize. “Take this space battle over Ryloth, for example. Despite already suffering heavy losses and being outnumbered, rather than abandon the world to the Separatists, she sacrificed an entire cruiser to kill the enemy commander, then took advantage of the chaos to rout the disorganized remains. When backed into a corner, she will commit her resources towards circumventing the opposing force’s defenses to decapitate it.”

“How many reports of her activities during the Clone Wars have you read?” asked Eli.

“All of them,” replied Thrawn. “Tano’s achievements are quite impressive. Increasingly so as the war progressed.”

“Does this Jedi child worry you?” Disra asked, mocking Thrawn over taking their opponent so seriously.

“Not at all. On the contrary, I’m confident she will behave exactly as necessary for my plan to work,” said Thrawn, turning towards Disra and offering him a comm. “Sir, the element of surprise is no longer ours. I would suggest issuing your demands now.”

The senators were all listening as the moff’s voice was picked up by all of their comms. “This is Moff Disra, representative of his eminence Emperor Palpatine in this sector of space. I am aware you are cooperating with the Jedi fugitive Ahsoka Tano. Surrender the Jedi, and you may not be charged with treason against the Empire...”

_How did they know I was here?_ wondered Ahsoka. It made sense that the moff would know about Barriss, but he hadn’t mentioned her at all, only demanding Ahsoka. Why? How? There was no evidence of her being here. Ahsoka backed away from the rest of the group to transmit a message, “Cici, if you can hear me, I need you to trace where the moff’s signal is coming from.”

The moff continued, “...Our soldiers are advancing on your position. If you resist, you will meet the same fate as the Jedi.” Then the transmission cut out.
“You’ve gotten us all killed!” said Fey’lya.

“Amazing. For a moment, I almost thought you had some scruples,” remarked Midla as she stood up. “No, we haven’t gotten you killed. All of you meeting here is perfectly legal, and the moff is a braggart who’s trying to frighten you into submission. Ahsoka, Barriss, and I are the problem. If you run, you’ll look guilty, guilty enough they won’t bother with a trial. We can still get out of here.”

“That seems optimistic. There’s evidence of you being here, how do you propose we explain that?” asked Organa, more composed than Fey’lya, if still rather alarmed at how things were turning out.

“I have an idea,” said Barriss as she ignited her saber, walked out through the main entrance’s ornate wooden door, apologized to the ancient relic, and began slicing it apart to make it look like she’d been attacking them. “We weren’t here to help you, we were here to kill you. Tell that to the Empire.”

Following suit, Midla grinned and pulled a small blaster from out of her sleeve and shot at the door, making it look like the people inside had been fighting back against whoever had the lightsaber.

“You’ve been armed this whole time?” Iblis yelled angrily.

“Oh, don’t act so shocked, I know you have your own holdout blaster in your boot,” Midla snapped back, as Iblis guiltily glanced down, then shut up. “That’s a terrible place to keep it, by the way. Takes too long to get it out,” she added, instantly producing a second blaster in her other hand.

“That’s your plan?” objected Riyo. “That won’t hold up under scrutiny.”

“It doesn’t have to,” said Barriss. “It gives the Empire another opportunity to smear the Jedi as a threat. Even if no one believes it, there’s not enough evidence to convict you of anything if we’re gone.”

“Take this,” said Iblis, handing a datapad over to Ahsoka. “It contains contact codes for my people on Corellia. You can use them to tell us where and when to find those warships.”

“Alright, I will,” said Ahsoka, pocketing the pad. “Goodbye, Riyo.”

“What should we do?” asked Riyo.

“All of you stay here, and get your story straight while we make our escape,” Ahsoka said as she followed Midla and Barriss down to the surface and below.

The cave system was still cold, sure. It was nothing compared to the surface, and enough for the thermoregulatory systems in stormtrooper armor to handle for a short time, and Ahsoka didn’t think the moff was blustering. Descending down the stone staircase to the boundary where the artificial structures met the cave system, Ahsoka checked the map of the caves Riyo had provided her.

It wasn’t long before they found the source of the alert: a massive hole bores through one of the ice flows. The imperials must’ve used some new mining technology to form entries between two areas of the cave network in order to get this close unnoticed. Based on the positions of the breaches, Ahsoka could figure out where the troopers were coming from. And the most likely position for a base camp.

A bit further on, they found the scout troopers. Or, rather, what was left of them once the droidekas were done, their armor now being more scorched-black than white. A pair of droidekas were standing guard, with a teal astromech rolling up from between them.
“Cici!” shouted Ahsoka. “Did you get my message?”

“I did, and I traced the signal. It came from within the cave, not from orbit. Would have to be close, too, to get through all this rock. We’ve got another problem, though,” said the astromech, leading them towards one of the droidekas, Kick, who was standing motionless, none of his sensors glowing.

The other destroyers were crowding around him, concerned. Ahsoka looked over him, finding no external damage, her attention turning to the ground until she spotted a depleted ion grenade. Trying to reactivate him didn’t do anything, the smell coming off him told Ahsoka the pulse had shorted some of his circuits.

“It’s okay, guys, I can fix him,” said Ahsoka, to the collective relief of the droidekas. At least, she thought she could fix him. Picking up the ion grenade, she held it overhead for all to see. “This must be a new model of ion grenade, and it’s what disabled Kick. If you see one, concentrate on destroying them before it can detonate. Got it?”

The droidekas all shouted a confirmation, ready to obliterate anyone who would try to use those weapons on them.

“Barriss, can you get Kick back to the Eclipse?” asked Ahsoka.

“Of course,” Barriss said, levitating the inactive destroyer. “Wait, why did you ask that? We’re not splitting up, are we?”

“Yeah, we are. The Empire knew I was here somehow, and we need to know how if we want to be able to act without them anticipating our moves,” said Ahsoka. “The Moff is close by, and I’d like a word with him.”

“Even you can’t take on an army of stormtroopers alone,” Barriss objected.

“I won’t be alone,” Ahsoka said, as more droidekas rolled up behind her, unfolding their blasters and ready to back her up. “Okay guys, the troopers must’ve marched in from another section of the cave, so I need you all to hold them back from the underground cavern we came in so we can get the Eclipse back out without being shot down. Naberrie, escort the others back, the rest of you, move into the caves, and find defensible positions to cut the Empire off from this part of the cave system. Move slow, and keep your shields up, it’ll offer some protection from the ion grenades. Work in pairs to cover each other’s blind spots, and if you see any suspicious technology, shoot it.”

“Ahsoka, this is very important,” said Revan, hologram appearing next to Barriss, as Ahsoka grudgingly listened. “When you get to Thrawn, you need to kill him. And I don’t mean you stab him once in the chest and assume that’s good enough. I want you to slice him into at least twenty pieces with your lightsaber, then dump half the pieces into the bottom of the cave, and bring the other half back so he can’t be put back together. Start with the head. In fact, bring his whole head back with you. That’ll be enough. Can you do that?”

“Uh, if you insist,” Ahsoka said, not at all honestly, confused and a little disgusted at the prospect of handling Thrawn’s mutilated remains. “What makes you think Thrawn is there?”

“He’s there,” said Revan. “Just make sure he’s dead. Speaking as someone who’s withstood turbolaser bombardment and come back to kill the guy responsible, it pays to be thorough.”

“Point taken. I need to move,” she said, heading off into the icy tunnel with the droidekas scurrying after her.

Barriss heaved Kick’s stiff body onto Cici, who struggled under the weight, but could deploy a few
of her arms to hold the droideka’s legs in place and keep him stable so she could still move.

“That will do,” Barriss said brusquely and she watched the astromech balancing the war droid on top of her, taking point and heading in the direction of their ship. A purple aura manifested around her unexpectedly, and she noticed the holocron glowing brighter than normal. “Revan, what are you doing?”

“Personal energy shield,” replied the holocron. “It’s built to protect the holocron from harm. Or whoever holds it.”

“I don’t need it,” said Barriss, handing the device over to Midla. “Here, you’re more vulnerable than I am.”

“What... is this?” asked Midla, confusedly taking hold of the holocron, the shield reforming around her.

“It’s a holocron, an ancient repository of knowledge,” answered Barriss, taking point and leading the group in the direction of the Eclipse. The caves, to her surprise, had more than enough light to see by.

The group paused, listening to the echo of footsteps which were not their own coming from further up the cave. Another advance group of troopers must’ve come in ahead.

Barriss held her breath, waiting for the closest four troopers to walk by. She could feel they were there, and slowly pulled out her stun pistol, leaping out at them, pushing them all back with the Force, then stunning them in the brief moment it bought her. Her companions walked out after her, examining the results.

“Naberrie, do not kill any of the troopers,” ordered Barriss, to the destroyer’s chagrin.

Midla cautiously picked up the defeated trooper’s rifle, checking to make sure it was undamaged, pleased with the upgrade over her holdout blasters. The trooper began stirring, and Midla aimed his own weapon down at him.

In the instant before the blaster was fired, Barriss switched the setting to ‘stun’. Midla herself was a bit stunned that the enemy wasn’t dead, checking her weapon and switching it back to the lethal setting. Barriss switched it back again, the odd movement of the mechanism finally cluing Midla in on what was going on.

“Is there any particular reason you’re making it easier for our enemies to kill us?” Midla asked, with a tinge of anger.

“It’s only a handful of enemies,” said Barriss, advancing through the cave with the others following behind her. “We are perfectly capable of getting back to the ship without killing any of them.”

“The other destroyer droids are no doubt killing many of them as we speak in the other end of the caves,” Midla pointed out. “Why are you so concerned with these ones?”

“Because they can’t help Ahsoka without doing so and ensuring their own safety. We can,” said Barriss. “They are our enemies, but those are still people in that armor.”

“People who want us all dead.”

“Well, I don’t want them dead,” said Barriss.
“Talk to them a little about things like personal freedom and the rights of nonhumans. You might change your attitude once you hear them repeat imperial propaganda with sincerity,” said Midla, still fiddling with the blaster settings as Barriss mentally kept it stuck in the stun state.

“I’m the most experienced combatant here, I know the risks,” said Barriss.

“Barriss, I’ve been in many live-or-death situations of my own in my younger days,” countered Midla, reluctantly giving up on messing with the blaster. “I’m sixty years old, and if you want to reach that age, you’d better learn that if you give your enemies a chance to kill you, they’ll take it.”

“What’s happening?” asked Disra, watching the troopers on the northernmost path of the caves falling back one after the other.

“Tano’s droidekas are giving the stormtroopers more of a challenge than anticipated,” said Thrawn, pressing a button on the console to contact the lead squad. “Major, report.”

“Sir, the droids have been targeting our grenades,” replied the voice of a stormtrooper. “We can’t catch any of them with the blasts. They’re more coordinated than reports suggested.”

“Understood,” Thrawn replied calmly. “Fall back and lay down ion mines to prevent further advance. Move squads nine through fourteen to the natural bridge to the north of the command center.”

“What are you doing?” demanded Disra.

“Do you see her strategy? Tano is on the offensive. She’s forming a barrier along the north edge to allow her a free path on the other side of the chasm,” said Thrawn, pointing to a stone bridge not far north of where they were now. “Here is the only place she will be able to cross. We shouldn’t waste soldiers fighting the droids when we may need them to trap Tano.”

“I see...” said Disra, in a tone that made Eli doubt the truth of the statement. “Shouldn’t we recall some of our forces? We’re exposed here.”

“If we move too many troopers to protect ourselves, the droidekas may find a way to advance further. We’ve in no danger,” Thrawn answered reassuringly. “Ensign?”

“Yes, sir?” replied Eli.

“I want you to go into the tunnels and check our supplies of ion grenades in this junction,” Thrawn said, bringing the hologram of the cave system back up and pointing out the junction he was talking about. “I want to know how many have been used without successfully disabling the droidekas. If we can’t maintain our supplies, we could face serious losses to Tano’s allies.”

“Um- yes, sir,” said Eli, as he went off to do the task, trekking through the caves.

Eli didn’t like this. The cold wasn’t too bad, he’d been through worse winters on Lysatra, but the way Thrawn had directed him out seemed irregular, even for him. Months of working with the alien had taught him not to take anything he said at face value. Sure, he had skills as a supply officer, but there was nothing important to do once he reached his destination, just a group of stormtroopers standing guard to make sure the route in this section of the cave remained under their control. If
Thrawn didn’t expect him to do anything besides inventory, that probably meant he wanted to be alone with Disra for some reason.

The comfort he’d taken in his relative calm in the heart of the cave was torn away when he heard the sound of metal legs clanking across ice and stone towards them.

“Destroyer droid! Watch yourself!” one of the troopers shouted to Eli, who immediately hid behind a column of stone that extended from floor to ceiling.

A pair of droidekas slowly walked into the cavern, their shields deployed, six glowing red sensors piercing through the bluish light of the cave. The stormtroopers acted without hesitation, throwing the ion grenades they’d been issued, only for each of them to be shot out of the air.

Now out of ion grenades and with blasters proving useless, the trooper closest to the droidekas pulled out a thermal detonator and threw it at the enemy. This would’ve been a sound tactic had the droidekas been unshielded, or if the explosive was moving slowly enough to move through the shield, but as the trooper threw it as hard as possible it bounced off with nothing more than a ripple in that bright blue bubble and rolled back to its owner just in time to explode and take three other troopers with it.

Another stormtrooper moved slow enough to pass through the shield, ready to grab the droideka. Before he could do any damage, the destroyer droid’s knee joints bent, it shifted its weight, and lunged back against the trooper, body-slamming him into the cave wall so hard it cracked his armor. The others were cut down one by one, concluding with one trooper who’d hidden behind an ice column only for the droidekas’ blasters to burn it away until he was hit.

There went Eli’s last hope. In a few seconds, they’d find him, and there was no way to escape.

“Don’t shoot! I surrender!” Eli shouted, hoping maybe the droids had it in their programming to respond to such phrases and wouldn’t simply blast him. He tossed his own blaster out from behind the rock, knowing it wouldn’t do him any good against those shields.

Slowly, he walked out, hands up, to see the two droidekas staring at him, blasters armed and ready.

One of them blured something at him.

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand you. I- I’m just a supply officer, not a trooper. Please don’t shoot me,” he said desperately, keeping it simple so they’d understand.

Eli wound up standing around stupidly for a bit, because the droidekas were having a discussion with each other. No, not a discussion, they were arguing about what to do with him. All the adrenaline in his system from the pursuit telling him to run, the fear of being killed, and here he was, listening to a heated debate that would decide whether he lived or died while he had no idea which party was in favor of what or which one was winning. He didn’t understand anything they were saying.

But he understood that symbol on their heads, those lines and diamonds Thrawn had pointed out to him.

“Would Tano approve of you killing someone who was unarmed and asking for mercy?” he asked, not really knowing the answer with certainty, hoping the seditious rumors about the Jedi being peaceful rather than anti-imperial traitors was actually true.

The droidekas paused for a second, then went back to their bickering, a little calmer now, until the left one whistled and clicked a phrase, then the right repeated it in a deeper, drawn-out tone,
reluctantly in agreement.

Then the left droideka shot Eli in the shin.

As he doubled over in pain, Eli saw the right destroyer obliterate his discarded blaster, as the left walked closer. Propping himself up into a sitting position and clutching his leg, Eli expected to be killed right there, only for the destroyer droid to raise one of its legs and bring it down on his dropped communicator, smashing it beneath the pointed foot. Turning slightly towards Eli, the droideka moved its right blaster over his head, servos moving the barrels up and down to gently pat him on the head, his hat sliding off as he sat there, bewildered.

Then, the two clanked back the way they came to continue keeping the stormtroopers at bay.

The wound was severe enough that Eli wouldn’t be able walk away without assistance, but he would make a full recovery if he got to a bacta tank soon. Eli took stock of his surroundings, understanding the droids’ course of action. He was now unarmed, immobile, and unable to communicate what had happened back to Thrawn, taking him completely out of the fight without killing him.

Slowly sliding himself over to lean against the cave wall, he tried to get as comfortable as he could and ignore the pain, waiting for the battle to end.

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*Don’t kill* don’t kill don’t kill don’t kill don’t kill don’t kill-

There were presently ten stormtroopers blocking the way to the *Eclipse*, all of them suitably covered and opening fire. Deflecting baster shots was adding to the chaos as the crackling energy of her saber sent the bolts off in unpredictable directions.

The fight was making Barriss realize how difficult it was to wield both her saber and her pistol simultaneously, needing the saber arm in front of herself to block shots while also needing her gun arm fully extended to aim properly.

Ducking back into the narrow opening she’d come from, Barriss came up with a compromise: holding the saber two-handed like normal, with the stun pistol hovering in front of herself, pulling the trigger mentally.

It must’ve looked absolutely ridiculous, and it was also surprisingly effective, as the stormtroopers were unable to hit her while they kept getting taken down by stun blasts one by one, while Midla took a few potshots of her own. One stormtrooper bolt hit her square in the chest, diffusing in a ripple of violet energy, which unnerved her enough to leave the fighting to Barriss.

Naberrie was providing cover for the other droids, shield absorbing the troopers’ shots as if they were throwing pebbles at him.

Stunning the last trooper, Barriss led the group into the next cavern, at the end of the underground chasm, where the *Eclipse* had been stowed. There weren’t any troopers around, and Barriss couldn’t hear or sense more coming towards them. Lowering the ramp, Cici lugged Kick up to begin checking the damage, while Midla caught her breath and handed the holocron back over the Barriss.

“Hm,” grumbled Midla. “Well done. I doubt there are many people who could’ve defeated so many
soldiers non-lethally.”

As they ascended the boarding ramp, Barriss felt a chill go up her spine, then stopped and listened, hearing a single pair of footsteps coming towards the ship, then turning around to face the threat.

The Inquisitor had walked out of the shadows, grinning at her with those pointed needle-like teeth.

On Barriss’s left, Naberrie had turned around and wasn’t hesitating, unleashing blast after blast as Barriss realized she’d only ordered him not to kill stormtroopers; the Inquisitor was fair game. Pulling out his red saber, he proved fully capable of deflecting the shots, then knocked the droid back with a Force blast.

Now on his back, Naberrie’s legs kicked the air helplessly for a moment until he contracted, rolled backwards, righted himself, unfolded, focused on the target’s legs instead of the torso, and resumed the barrage, now accompanied by an electronic roar as he angrily hammered at the enemy’s defense.

Alarmed, but not injured, the Inquisitor redirected some of the shots back towards Midla, who only avoided getting killed because Barriss moved her out of the way, causing Naberrie to finally quit.

“Everyone, stay on the ship,” ordered Barriss as Naberrie scuttled past her, standing between her group and the Inquisitor in case he tried to separate them, getting a grip on her lightsaber as she stared down at him from the boarding ramp.

Ahsoka didn’t like this. The southern tunnels were completely free of stormtroopers, giving her a clear path west towards wherever the Moff, and likely Thrawn, had made camp. Not even one patrol to give warning. Of course, the droidekas would demand diverting soldiers away to face them, but it still felt like she was headed for a trap.

There wasn’t any other option, so she kept up her pace and pressed on, only stopping to listen for where the troopers were moving, hearing blaster fire coming from the north tunnels. Worried for her droids, she paused and listened, and was greeted by the rhythmic sound of clanking trios of feet. And a particularly large blast that sounded close, followed by a few screams.

Yeah, they’d be fine.

There should’ve been something protecting the Empire’s operations from this direction, a squad, one trooper, a random frag mine in her path, and there wasn’t. What was weirder was she didn't feel any imminent danger, no trap she was walking into, only what appeared to be horrendously bad tactics.

Soon, she reached her goal. The makeshift command post wasn’t just a relatively large room, it was a nexus where the largest columns of ice passed through, paths branching out through the rest of the caves, illuminating the area brighter than any of the others Ahsoka passed through on her way here.

The entrances were protected by multiple sentry turrets, simple automatic guns that were small enough to carry and with enough sensors to distinguish allies from enemies. No stormtroopers in sight, which was worrying enough that Ahsoka would’ve expected a trap if not for Moff Disra’s voice coming from that direction. She sensed no troopers waiting for her to walk in before striking Ahsoka’s hearing was typically good enough to pick out the differences between a real voice and speaker systems, too.
The first sentry guarding the entrance she settled on flew up into the ceiling, instantly crushing its swiveling blaster before it ever saw Ahsoka, who leapt down from her elevated position into the center of the glacial cave.

As the wrecked sentry clattered across the ground, Thrawn stared at Ahsoka, arms clasped behind his back, not appearing at all surprised at her sudden entrance. The second other sentry turret opened fire on her, only for her to deflect it towards a third that hadn’t spotted her yet, before she casually knocked it over with the Force, then threw it into the final turret, taking out the last of the automated defenses, the impact throwing both of the cylindrical devices into a wall of ice, a web of cracks spreading out from the impact point.

The man standing next to Thrawn was decidedly less composed, glancing at the captain, expecting him to do something.

“Tano...” the moff gasped nervously.

“Yeah, it’s me,” she said, calmly walking toward him and raising her saber. “How did you know I was on Pantora? Did someone inform you? Or do you have listening devices somewhere to monitor Riyo?”

“I am a moff of the Galactic Empire, in the service of Emperor Palpatine, I don’t have to answer to you,” replied Disra, sounding a lot more authoritative than Ahsoka considered sensible given the situation. Moving her saber just a little bit closer sucked all that unearned confidence away. Disra refused to give ground, standing rigidly in her way. Ahsoka refused to back down, either, keeping her saber at the level of the moff’s neck, ready for him to make a move. “You and your allies will surrender immediately, or I will-!”

Moving too quickly for Ahsoka to react, her focus placed too heavily on Disra, Thrawn stepped forward, got a grip on the back of the moff’s head, and shoved him forward so the blade pierced his throat.

Ahsoka was shocked, watching Disra struggle on her blade for a second, unable to scream as the pillar of green plasma extended through his neck and out his nape, until she got a hold of herself and deactivated the saber. The small wound smoked with burnt flesh, some of it wafting out from Disra’s gasping mouth. With the moff mortally wounded, Thrawn pulled him back and dropped him to the ground, turning to face Ahsoka without even bothering to wait until the wounded man finally suffocated to death, twitching and unable to breathe through his scorched throat.

“Now, Ahsoka Tano,” Thrawn said with a barely-detectable grin, “we can finally speak in private.”

Offee uncrossed her arms and pulled out what appeared to be a new lightsaber. It certainly wasn’t much to look at, resembling a collection of spare parts thrown together judging by the different metals comprising its casing. The Inquisitor would be sure to take a closer look at its composition after taking it from her.

The saber ignited, showing an erratic blade of bright orange. That was a bit unexpected, and the Inquisitor wondered what exactly it meant. Orange lightsaber crystals weren’t completely unheard of, but they were rare, with no ceremonial use like the Temple Guards’ yellow sabers. He’d never seen one in person.
“Well done. You’ve built yourself a saber,” he said condescendingly, raising his own weapon to her. “Perhaps this time you’ll actually present a challenge.”

Offee didn’t react at all to the insult, not in her expression, and the Inquisitor could sense no change in her composure. She continued staring down at him. Staring with contempt, not fear.

“I look forward to presenting your saber to my master, as I did Luminara’s,” he finished, expecting a reaction that time. To remind her of how weak she was, how powerless she was compared to him. All he could feel was a spike in her disdain for him, but it wasn’t anything he could use. Not born out of fear or desperation or vengeance.

The Inquisitor eventually recognized the exact feeling: she found him pitiful. As if he was beneath her.

“Tell me more about your master,” said Offee. “Roughly two meters tall, wears a black cape, with a black helmet? Is that an accurate description?”

That was an accurate description, if somewhat vague given the preferred dress of the Emperor’s servants, and the Inquisitor fought to hide his surprise that she could produce one such as that.

Had she encountered his master?

No, that was impossible. Offee had barely escaped him, she was nothing compared to a Sith Lord. Whatever the truth, it didn’t matter. If she wouldn’t join him, she’d die on this planet, along with Tano.

“You have no idea the kind of powers working against you, Offee. The full might of the dark side is going to close in around you, as it will any other surviving Jedi,” he said dramatically. "Your only choice is to surrender, or die with the rest."

“Listen to me, you punk bitch Sith wannabe,” said a third voice the Inquisitor didn’t recognize. “Just because you’ve got a red saber and can ramble on about how strong you are doesn’t make you a master of the dark side.”

The Inquisitor’s eyes darted around where Offee was standing, trying to find where that voice had come from, zeroing in on the violet glow coming from one of the pouches on her jacket. The top of a triangular holocron was peeking out of it, an unusual design compared to the blue cubes commonly used by the Jedi.

“So, you found a holocron?” asked the Inquisitor. “Is that the source of your newfound confidence? I’m afraid whatever useless pieces of Jedi wisdom you’ve gleaned from it will not help you against the Empire. Or against me.”

“Now, now, let’s be objective here,” said the holocron. “Considering you’ve been trying to kill Barriss, and she’s still alive, who’s the got the higher success rate here? That’s not even getting into the relative resources at your disposal.”

What an insolent little thing, thought the Inquisitor as he grimaced at the holocron. He was looking forward to cutting it apart once he was finished with its owner.

“Ahsoka and I aren’t going to be killed by the Siths’ pets,” Offee said dismissively. “Though I suppose ‘pet’ is being rather generous. People normally care about their pets. What do the Sith think of you, I wonder?”

“Interesting observation, Barriss,” the holocron chimed in, “though you’re overthinking it a bit. The
appropriate label for his kind is obvious: *slave.*

“I wield far more power than you ever will! The soldiers and officers of the Empire all obey my orders, and the last of the Jedi are falling before us one by one!” the Inquisitor shouted, outraged by this disrespect.

“*Delusional* slave,” amended Offee.

“I will not be spoken to this way by most abysmal failure of the Jedi Order and her shabby little trinket!” he shouted, walking forward to put an end to this.

“*Trinket*? Oh, you dumb schmuck. You have no idea what you’re in for,” said the holocron, the words grating on the Inquisitor’s nerves, making him shiver involuntarily. Rays of violet fanned out from it, as the Inquisitor approached the light formed into a hologram. He stopped dead, staring at it, wanting to be absolutely certain of what he was looking at.

Of who he was looking at.

“Where?!” the Inquisitor screeched, completely losing his composure, his voice cracking with sudden fear. “Where in the galaxy DID YOU GET THAT?!”

“Ha! Did you see that, Barriss?” said Darth Revan, as Offee smirked. “It’s not often you get to witness the exact moment your enemy realizes how screwed he is!”

This couldn’t be happening. It was news that Darth Revan had ever even made a holocron, and now the collected knowledge of one of the most powerful Sith to ever live was sitting stuffed in the side pocket of an ugly blue coat. In the possession of this worthless Jedi brat.

“A word of warning, pal: she’s not a failure,” continued the legendary Sith, the hologram coming closer, growing to dwarf the Inquisitor, violet light overwhelming the icy blue of the cave, that enormous masked face looming over him like he was an insect. “*She’s my heir.*”

The Inquisitor’s eye twitched involuntarily.

Turning back towards Offee to cheerfully tell her “Kick his ass, kid”, Darth Revan’s image vanished, letting out a burst of laughter that echoed around the cavern.

Such a valuable artifact couldn’t be left in the hands of the enemy. He couldn’t allow it.

The Inquisitor reached out, pulling the holocron from Offee’s coat before she could react and into his hand. The instant he had triumphantly grasped the relic, the holocron laughed louder, then sent a bolt of electricity into his palm. The device clattered to the ground as the Inquisitor clutched his hand, laughing louder and louder at him, testing the movements of his fingers to make sure they still worked properly.

Snapping to attention, the Inquisitor saw Offee was holding that mediocre saber in front of herself, her eyes foolishly closed, meditating, breathing deeply, concentrating.

When he readied himself to throw his saber and cut her down, her lightsaber released a flash of light, bright as a sun, that blinded the Inquisitor.

As the spots in his vision faded, the Inquisitor’s eyes widened as he saw Offee’s chaotic, crackling blade had collapsed into a solid pillar of orange light. She looked over the blade, as surprised as he was, then tightened her grip, got in an aggressive stance, and readied herself for the fight.
Thrawn prepared for this by binge-watching The Clone Wars.

The maneuver Ahsoka pulled over Ryloth is called the "Marg Sabl" maneuver. Thrawn used the same trick in his first appearance in Heir to the Empire, which was published in the early 90s. Dave Filoni read the books and decided to use the tactic in The Clone Wars. In the real world, Ahsoka got it from Thrawn. Here, he learned it from her, and later wiped out a small New Republic fleet with it. I think I might know more about Star Wars than is healthy.

EDIT: And with Thrawn: Alliances we've come full circle, as Thrawn did indeed learn about the maneuver as Padmé explained it to him.

This whole citadel/ice cave area is based on the Rhen Var harbor and citadel areas in the original Star Wars: Battlefront. That part with the trooper getting screwed in a fight with a droideka in the ice caves and exploding comes from personal experience. Because I was that trooper, and droidekas are overpowered.
Possibilities raced through Barriss’s mind, few of them good. If she died now, all the progress made up to this point would fall apart. If the Inquisitor killed her, and without Ahsoka onboard, he’d take the Eclipse, then move it somewhere Ahsoka couldn’t reach it. She’d be trapped, captured and tortured. Their presence would be used to incriminate and punish the senators, removing more political opposition from Palpatine’s path. The ysalamiri she’d chosen to keep in their hold would tell the Empire they’d been to Myrkr, and Karde would be killed, along with everyone who worked for him. The network of rebels keeping each other supplied and supported and fighting would never manifest.

She knew this, knew the safety of millions might depend on winning this fight. Hand tightening around her lightsaber, its erratic hum increased in volume. One final time, she felt the intensity, the power coursing through the crystal, and focused on channeling its crackling energy.

She knew exactly what she needed to do.

The plasma condensed into a perfect stream of energy, emitting a burst of orange light, bright as a solar flare, lighting up the cave so brightly she felt the warmth on her cheek.

Listening to the resonance of the crystal within, Barriss could sense the power within it: it felt absolutely thrilled to be in its first duel.

The Inquisitor’s eyes had gotten over that initial flash, still giving ground to Barriss as she advanced towards him while also tracking each of her movements more precisely than the last.

Focusing on her desire to overcome her enemy, knowing that people will die if she loses to him, Barriss went to face him. She could protect herself this time. She could protect Ahsoka, protect whatever was left of the light from him.

Though passion, I gain strength.

The red and orange blades clashed off each other as Barriss swung at her opponent, dodging strikes while the second red blade blocked her own attacks. The Inquisitor was heavier, taller, stronger, and used those advantages to push Barriss back. Grinning as his blade slowly moved towards her, confident in his advantage, Barriss glared back at him.

Mustering up what strength she had, Barriss pushed the Inquisitor, and in the moment he was off-balance, her blaster flung out of her jacket and into her hand. Much to her enemy’s surprise, Barriss gripped the pistol in her free hand, used her saber to knock away his blade and shot him repeatedly point-blank in the torso.

The armor he wore was tough, or at least tough enough to withstand stun shots, and wouldn’t go down that easily. His flinching told her they hurt. Considerably.

The Inquisitor charged at her again, and instead of engaging him in a saber duel again, Barriss hit his right side with a lateral Force push, tripping him up and sending his face into a painful pistol-whip that left a sizable welt on his cheek.

Jumping back to a safe distance, the Inquisitor paused, alarmed by the unexpected resistance, and
began taking control of random rocks from around the cave, and threw them one at a time at Barriss.

The trajectory of each one of them was anticipated, then dodged effortless, flying past Barriss and bouncing off the hull of the ship behind her. Once the Inquisitor finally abandoned that tactic, Barriss concentrated on a column of ice at the edge of the arena, twisting and shattering it with nothing but her will, levitating dozens of frozen shards at a time, and striking with all of them at once.

The Inquisitor’s two blades spun around his hilt, his own agility making it an effective shield, ice colliding off the blades and evaporating from the heat, and Barriss stopped the telekinetic maelstrom.

Raising her arm, Barriss’s saber hovered above her hand, and began spinning to match the Inquisitor’s weapon, soon rotating so fast it became nothing but an orange blur, the air currents emanating from it rustling her sleeve as she charged at him.

The swirling disks of red and orange collided and collapsed back into narrow beams of color, with Barriss grinning and the Inquisitor trembling as both of them heard the faint sound of something within the dual saber’s internal rotor crack and snap from the collision.

Barriss leapt back, and now that her opponent’s defense was crippled, started up with the telekinesis again. Much more intensely this time.

*Through strength, I gain power.*

Shard after shard hit the Inquisitor from all sides, concentrating on his joints, inflicting more and more pain, too fast for him to counter, scratching at his exposed head and tearing holes in the outer layer of his armor. Without his saber’s rotation, normal blocking with the blade was nowhere near enough.

In one last attempt to strike back, the Inquisitor levitated his double-saber and threw it at Barriss, guiding and spinning it with the Force. Barriss reached out to grip the saber herself, stopping it in midair, then clenched her fist and crushed the weapon into a ball of scrap metal, sparks and bits of torn durasteel flacking off it.

The Inquisitor watched helpless as his attack fail and his lightsaber get obliterated. Taking advantage of the moment, Barriss threw the mass of wrecked metal at him, striking him square in the face and breaking his nose, knocking him down, the saber landing behind him and shattering to pieces.

*Through power, I gain victory.*

With her enemy disoriented, Barriss lifted the Inquisitor and threw him into the ceiling of the cave.

Then, she let him drop.

The fall broke several of his ribs and left a gash in his side as he narrowly avoided being directly impaled on a stalagmite, blood splattering as he hit the ground and rolled onto his back.

*Through victory, my chains are broken.*

Barriss slowly walked towards the Inquisitor as he tried to crawl away, leaving a trail of blood behind him, his eyes flickering between contact with Barriss’s and fearfully staring at her lightsaber, now the dominant source of light, kept its owner half-illuminated and half in shadow.

Holding her saber over the Inquisitor, ready to stab him through the chest, Barriss looked down into his eyes. The fear, the desperation as he knew he was about to die, groaning in pain as he kept trying to move his broken body, unable to escape. Now was her chance.
The Force shall free me.

Then, she turned off her saber.

Pathetically trying to seize a chance to escape, the Inquisitor tried to crawl away again, collapsing from exhaustion and blood loss as Barriss knelt down and placed her hands over his injured, bloody side.

The air around her hands began to glow a light blue, and the Inquisitor’s breathing quickly became easier.

“What are you doing?” he asked through a mouthful of blood.

“Saving your life,” Barriss answered dispassionately, focusing on her work.

Taking a moment to realize she was, against all reason, completely serious, the Inquisitor coughed and laughed.

“You’re showing me mercy? Even after everything you’ve done, you still believe you can be a Jedi? Don’t you understand, child, how futile it is to cling to the ideals that have failed you? That you failed? You master would be so proud. Not that it will AAAAAUUUGHHH!” he cried out in pain as Barriss gently pressed one finger down onto one of his broken ribs to get him to stop running his mouth. Once the pain subsided, he opened his eyes to see Barriss was still working to heal him.

“Why... why would you want to help me?”

The question gave Barriss a moment’s pause. There wasn’t any good reason she could think of. The first thought that came to her was simply that it was wrong to take a life. Not that she was a Jedi anymore. Not that the Jedi really followed such absolutes. Even though he’d killed Jedi. Killed Luminara. If anyone deserved to die, he did. If she let him live, if she didn’t end him right now, he would almost certainly go on to kill more.

Even though Barriss knew all of this, even though she hated him, it wasn’t enough, she still didn’t want to kill him. She didn’t want to kill anyone. She hardly even wanted to hurt him. Nor did she want to stand back and watch him die a slow death when she could help it. She didn’t want another death on her conscience if she could help it. And nothing else mattered to her right now.

“I’m not doing this for you. I’m not doing this for the Jedi. I’m not doing this for Luminara. I’m not doing this because I’m ‘supposed to’. I am doing this for myself.”

A few minutes of tense silence later, the bleeding had stopped, both internal and external.

“There. You’ll live,” Barriss remarked bitterly, getting to her feet.

The Inquisitor’s first attempt to get up had him on his back again, writhing in pain.

“You said you had healed me!” he shouted angrily.

“Not fully, no. I sealed your wounds, stopped the internal bleeding, and put some of your fractured bones back into place. Enough to keep you alive long enough for your subordinates to find you and administer proper treatment. Not enough for you to attack me or anyone else in this battle,” she said, crouching down to get in his face. “I may be merciful, but I am not a fool.” Barriss turned around and walked away towards the Eclipse. She raised her hand, and the holocron leapt back to her, quietly observing what she was doing. “I don’t know why you embraced to the dark side, but can this really be the life you want? Despite what you’ve done, I’m choosing to spare you. An enemy.
My enemy. If you showed mercy to me or a Jedi, the Emperor would discard you without a second thought. Is this the choice you want to make?”

“You don’t understand... I’ve made my choice, and despite everything, I believe I chose correctly,” the Inquisitor said bitterly, then mustering up what little energy he had left to deliver a final threat. “I will hunt you across the galaxy. All the Jedi that remain. You know this. This will be the last mistake you make, Offee.”

“...That’s very unlikely,” Barriss said dismissively, seemingly despondent, then laughing to herself. The oddest thing about the response was that she wasn’t even trying to unnerve the Inquisitor at all. On the contrary, she seemed to be genuinely amused suddenly. “Considering my history, I’m quite certain I will make many, many more mistakes in the future! Ha!”

With that, she shot one devious grin at the Inquisitor, waved, then boarded the *Eclipse* and left him to his pain and rage.

Chapter End Notes

Barriss earned The Power of Self-Respect! (+5 WILL, +3 WIS)
The burnt flesh of Disra’s corpse wafted through the cave as Ahsoka processed what had just happened, keeping her saber raised to Thrawn’s chest, expecting him to attack her as well. Instead, he stood eerily still in front of her, arms clasped confidently behind his back, glowing red eyes burning into her.

“I apologize for the obtuse method of getting you here, however our respective loyalties left no direct options,” Thrawn said. “I’m pleased to find your master did not exaggerate your skills.”

“You- You knew Anakin?” asked Ahsoka, conflicted by feelings of alarm at the coincidence, and also surprised calmed by the thought of Anakin meeting with Thrawn and, judging by his tone, the two got along. “I don’t understand. If you helped the Jedi, why are you helping the Empire? Why are you focused on me?”

“Regardless of how I view the Emperor’s persecution of your allies, you represent an opportunity for advancement. At least, that’s what I led the late moff to believe. I have chosen to contact you here because I believe you, a Jedi, could prove much more valuable alive.”

“What do you know about the Jedi?” asked Ahsoka. Her saber wasn’t going to be lowered any time soon, and she was still waiting, listening, expecting this to turn into some kind of trap. She felt nothing, only an eerie silence surrounding her and Thrawn.

“Two encounters. One, a decade ago, began with a violation of our borders by your Republic’s Outbound Flight project, and ended in the destruction of it and all the Jedi aboard,” Thrawn said, showing the most emotion he had thus far as he grimaced slightly at the memory. “Another, more recently, acquainted me with your master. Anakin Skywalker- he impressed me as a warrior. Powerful. Decisive. A force to be reckoned with. We were able to succeed together despite overwhelming odds. And he spoke quite highly of you. At every opportunity, as I recall.”

“Others in the Empire probably wouldn’t look too kindly on you helping Jedi,” said Ahsoka. If her master trusted him, maybe this wouldn’t have to end in a fight. “You want to talk to me? I’m listening.”

“Very well. Tell me, how long do you really believe you can outrun the Empire?” asked Thrawn.

“It shouldn't take too long. I only need to make it long enough for Palpatine to die of old age,” Ahsoka said.

“Do you think you’ll reach that point? How many warships, fighters, walkers, and troopers can you defeat or escape before one of them kills you? Before you’re hit by a lucky shot? Before the Empire develops weapons and equipment that your powers can’t keep pace with? Had I been seriously attempting to kill you, I wouldn’t have diverted soldiers north and out of your path. You would’ve had to fight through over a hundred stormtroopers alone,” Thrawn said, worrying Ahsoka and making her consider how much harder getting here could’ve become. “I can provide you safe haven from them.”

“It’s called the ‘Galactic Empire’ for a reason. If we don’t make a stand, nowhere will be safe for us,” said Ahsoka. “Where in the galaxy could we go?”

“To the Ascendancy. To my homeworld,” replied Thrawn. For the first time, his voice showed some degree of clear emotion, a small touch of longing when mentioning home. “I can provide you with
coordinates, hyperspace routes, and codes to reach my people in what your civilization calls the Unknown Regions. They harbor no resentment towards the Jedi, and at my recommendation, would give you asylum. The Emperor will never find you.”

Ahsoka considered it, noting the disconnect between Thrawn and the Empire. Thrawn wasn’t of any species she knew of, so him being from the Unknown Regions made sense. If she was given a way of navigating that uncharted area, even Palpatine couldn’t quickly map that space and reach them, if he even wanted to commit all that effort to expanding the Empire so soon. “In exchange for what? I doubt you’re offering to help us out of the goodness of your heart.”

“In exchange for the Force. I’ve seen the abilities it offers. Abilities we lack, but may need in the coming battle,” said Thrawn. “I know there exist Chiss on our worlds with powers they don’t understand, and can’t use properly. You could train them as students in your techniques, and protect the galaxy better than whatever you hope to accomplish in your futile struggle against Palpatine.”

Ahsoka kept her guard up, still expecting this to be a trap and for stormtroopers to show up any second. “You want my help?”

“There are threats in the Unknown Regions you can scarcely imagine. Unlike the Emperor, I will not throw away useful allies out of irrational hatred or a petty desire for revenge over imagined slights. Your military skills are equal those of our finest officers, and this ‘connection’ you have to the Force makes you invaluable,” said Thrawn, then quietly adding, “It was difficult for me to arrange this meeting. Should you refuse now, I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to present the offer again.”

“You’re not exactly giving me much reason to trust you,” said Ahsoka. “You killed your own moff without even hesitating. Why would I think you wouldn’t betray us?”

“Disra was incompetent. And compromised. A weak point to be removed,” Thrawn said coldly, still not concerned enough with the moff to even glance at the body. “I don’t know exactly what you and Chuchi were using to keep hold of him, but it won’t help you any longer.”

“There’ll be other corrupt officials,” Ahsoka replied, brushing off the fact Thrawn had figured that out. “The entire Empire is rotten, at every level. It’s by design. Whatever Palpatine promised you, whatever treaty with your people, whatever help he’s offering, he won’t deliver. You know how xenophobic and oppressive the Empire is, how power-hungry Palpatine is, you think your people will be exempt from that?”

“The Empire stands as the most powerful civilization in the galaxy, and my options are limited. While the Republic may have been a preferred ally, I’ll do what I must,” Thrawn answered reluctantly. “For the time being.”

“And what about everyone else? What about all the people who will die before you can use it to fight your ‘unimaginable threats’?” asked Ahsoka.

“Given the choice between distasteful acts and total annihilation of both our civilizations, I will accept the former.”

“Is that what you call it? ‘Distasteful acts’?” said Ahsoka. “You think the things the Empire does are all fine if they preserve order? Killing its own citizens, crushing dissent? Why shouldn’t I kill you right now, if it’s for the greater good?”

“Because Disra left orders to bombard several of Pantora’s smaller settlements following the capture of your allies to demonstrate the costs of defying the Empire. I am the only officer of rank to countermand this, and will do so, regardless of whether you accept my offer,” replied Thrawn.
Ahsoka couldn’t tell if he was being honest, or had made up a reason to protect himself along with an act of kindness to make himself look good. She still couldn’t risk those lives, and she couldn’t read him, either. He had presence in the Force, yes, but the impressions she got of his mind, his feelings, were barely recognizable to her. “Surprising. I was under the impression it went against the Jedi sense of morality to kill a defenseless enemy.”

“I don’t think you’re defenseless, and I’m not a Jedi,” said Ahsoka.

“And I’m not a commander of the Chiss Defense Fleet,” Thrawn countered. Then, his tone became much more diplomatic. Sympathetic, even. “Despite what happened to make you abandon the label of Jedi, you continue to fight. You were once devoted to a cause, a nation, and ideal but the people you served, the leaders you followed, all turned their backs on you. Cast you away for their own purposes. Like mine did. You can find a new way of protecting what you cherish. Even if you feel abandoned and betrayed, you still know what’s right, and are willing to fight for it. I admire that conviction.”

Ahsoka wasn’t sure how to feel about this, this comparison, and didn’t say anything, not wanting to confirm Thrawn’s opinion of her.

“Tano, the galaxy is at risk,” said Thrawn. “My people, yours, everything we know. The only way to save it is if we work together.”

“I might’ve believed that, if you hadn’t thrown in with the Empire,” Ahsoka said angrily. “You couldn’t have arranged all this and still be dumb enough to think a galaxy under Palpatine is one worth saving. What happens when you save the galaxy, and Palpatine still rules it? Do you think you’ll be remembered as a hero?”

“I’m unconcerned with how history will look on me, so long as there are people left to record it,” said Thrawn.

“...No,” said Ahsoka, shaking her head. “Sorry, I decline your offer. I’ll take my chances.”

Those red eyes continued to drill into her, emphasized by the green light of Ahsoka’s saber reflecting around them, watching, studying her, becoming more focused as Thrawn seemed to realize something.

“Do you think you can protect her forever?” Thrawn asked.

“...What?” Ahsoka said quietly, well aware of who he was talking about.

“You’re certainly valiant enough to put your life on the line to ‘save’ the galaxy from the Empire. Are you willing to risk Barriss as well?”

Ahsoka’s arm slacked, the blade drifting away from Thrawn slightly.

“How many battles do you think she can fight?”

The Sith, the Empire, the Inquisitors, they were just going to keep coming for them, and its wasn’t going to get any easier. This was the chance for a fresh start, away from the Empire, the legacy of the Jedi and the Clone Wars, all of it.

“Are you willing to continue risking her life?”

Her saber lowered, Ahsoka tried to think about everything, think of any reason she shouldn’t do this, why it wouldn’t be best for Barriss. There’d be no more battles. They could have their own students.
Barriss would love that.

“If it became necessary to save your rebellion, would you let her die?”

Everything around her was a haze.

The saber switched off.

“Work with me, and I guarantee her safety.”

If she took Thrawn’s offer, they could get out of this conflict. They could go somewhere safe. It was the safe option. The only way they could ever really be safe again as long as the Empire existed.

And Barriss wouldn’t want that. Ahsoka knew Barriss wouldn’t want it. It would mean abandoning everyone who would be victimized by the Empire. All the people who would die fighting it. There were still people left, Riyo, Sabé, Bail, who’d suffer and die when she could’ve done something, and didn’t. Barriss wouldn’t sacrifice others to save herself. That’s what made her Barriss.

Ahsoka didn’t really want it either. Doing terrible things because it was necessary, because the people in power told her to. Trying to enforce some kind of order for the greater good of the galaxy on people who didn’t want it. Never accountable to anyone who was harmed, because there was no other way. Just like she’d done before.

The only difference was now Thrawn wanted her to use Barriss as an excuse.

Her left fist shaking, tightening, Ahsoka looked back up at Thrawn and punched him across the face, with more than a little Force behind the blow, so hard it him reeling over onto a console.

Levitating Thrawn in the air for a second, Ahsoka watched the captain struggled to get his bearing and figure out what happened before she slammed him into the ice wall behind him, a web of cracks spreading out around him.

Against the invisible power pressing him against the wall, Thrawn tried to move his arm down to draw his sidearm. Ahsoka saw the movement, increase the pressure until it was too much, chips of ice breaking off and falling around him, his arm collapsing against the wall as she pulled the blaster away from him and cut it in half, restraining herself from doing the same to him.

Releasing Thrawn, the captain dropped to the floor, on his knees, breathing heavily now that the crushing weight on his chest was gone, and completely at a loss for words as Ahsoka cut through or tore down every piece of imperial equipment she came across as she walked out, shielding his eyes from the resulting sparks and fragments of half-melted metal.

“You didn’t choose the right option. Only the easy one. The one where you can do horrible things and say it’s okay because you thought it all through, because it’s all for the greater good and the people who suffer because of it just don’t understand how right you are to do this to them,” Ahsoka added angrily. “I don’t know what Anakin saw in you, whatever made him think you could be trusted, but I won’t repeat his mistake.”
Cracks in the cavern ceiling allowed pillars of light down through into the subterranean canyon the Eclipse slowly flew over, Midla piloting while Barriss saw to the recovery of the droidekas, shivering in the cold as the wind around her rustled her coat. Once the recall signal was sent out, all the destroyer pairs stopped fighting the Empire’s forces and began heading towards exposed positions, where Barriss could lift them up to the boarding ramp.

Seven, eight... nine, ten... eleven, twelve, that’s the last pair, Barriss thought as she lifted the droidekas through the air towards the hovering Eclipse, the contracted droids hitting the boarding ramp and rolling up into the ship.

Ahsoka, where are you?

A few groups of stormtroopers followed after the droidekas, realizing it was safe and taking shots at Barriss, not that it mattered with the protection the freighter’s shields offered to small arms fire. The only serious obstacle was a group of about twenty of the soldiers near a land bridge they were approaching, only for Barriss to pull all of their blasters from their hands and let them drop into the chasm below.

As the troopers tried to figure out what to do now that they were disarmed, Ahsoka ran out of the tunnel behind them, burst through the group, leapt and landed on the ramp next to Barriss, not even stopping to take a breath before noticing Barriss’s condition.

“Woah! Are you okay?” asked Ahsoka, noticing the blood on Barriss’s jacket.

“There’s no need to worry. It’s not my blood.”

“Um...”

“Yes, I realized how that sounded after I said it, there will be time to explain later,” said Barriss, hitting the button to raise the boarding ramp so they could finally get out of here. Heading towards the cockpit, Midla had accelerated the ship’s pace towards the opening to the surface, a ray of sunlight shining down from it, the largest source of light in the sprawling, branching caverns. A flash of green light appeared, following by the crashing sound of thousands of cubic meters of ice, snow, and permafrost collapsing onto the exit, the light vanishing.

“What was that?” asked Midla, getting up and turning the controls over to Ahsoka.

“Turbolaser fire,” Ahsoka realized. Thrawn knew how they’d come in, and had them trapped.

“Is there any other way out?” asked Barriss.

“Nothing wide enough for the ship to fit,” said Ahsoka, trying to calculate a way to break through the frozen wall in front of them. The ship’s laser cannon didn’t have enough power, the engine couldn’t produce enough heat to melt it, even at a weak point.

Next to her, Barriss was extending her hand towards the seal, head angled downwards, staring intensely at the obstacle.
“Ahsoka, I need your help with this,” she said, as Ahsoka followed her lead. The latter wasn’t certain it could be done, even with the both of them, until she saw a slab of iced-over stone bigger than the ship she was flying start to budge. Ahsoka could sense all of the immense weight in front of her, urging it to move. “Pull it down,” said Barriss, unblinking eyes still fixed on her target. “Use its weight to bring it down.”

Between the two of them, the larger masses clogging the opening broke down, and an avalanche flooded the underground, everything from dust to boulders tumbling down into the abyss as the Eclipse’s engines roared and launched them out into the sky.

Riyo knew at any second now, imperial troops were going to come through that door, and there was nothing she could do except hope that the circumstantial evidence and the combined political weight of everyone here would be enough to deter the Moff from getting them all tried for treason. The more she thought about it, the worse the odds seemed.

A few footsteps grew closer, and the others, in a similarly dejected mood, looking up to see who was coming.

Instead of the white armor of imperial stormtroopers, there were two black-clad figures, a smiling, pale-skinned Twi’lek and a hulking Boltrunian, approaching the group.

“Hello there,” the Twi’lek said, in a disconcertingly friendly tone of voice, smiling widely and revealing his pointed teeth, approaching Riyo. “You must be the little Pantoran senator.”

“I am,” Riyo said nervously, recoiling away from the pair as the Boltrunian darted forward and grabbed her by the neck.

The Boltrunian held Riyo in the air, grinning as she grasped at his arm. The hold wasn’t tight enough to choke, only enough to keep her fearing for her life while he asked questions.

“We know there are two Jedi here,” said the Twi’lek. “Where have they gone too? What’s their plan to escape?”

Riyo kept quiet. She knew about the ability of Force-users to read people’s feelings and thoughts, and didn’t want to inadvertently give something away.

A red lightsaber flared to life next to her face.

“Hm. Oh, well. I suppose we’ll just have to try with one of your friends,” the Twi’lek said, giggling maniacally as the blade grew closer.

Then, to Riyo’s surprise, she fell to the floor.

So did the Boltrunian inquisitor’s entire forearm, landing in a spray of dull green blood.

The Boltrunian gaped in horror at the loss of his limb, looking to his left just in time to see the vibroblade coming, the swing going through both his eyes and embedding the blade in his skull.

Sabé left the blade, not wasting time trying to pry it from the inquisitor’s skull when there was still another enemy to deal with. The pale Twi’lek raised his own dual-bladed saber, swinging at the
bodyguard, who raised her second blade in defense, the red beam deflecting uselessly off the
cortosis. Her opponent knocked off balance, Sabé leaned into as strong an uppercut to his chin as she
could muster, sending the inquisitor spinning, now missing several of his pointed teeth as the blow
slammed his jaws together so hard they cracked.

Trying to protect himself, the inquisitor’s saber blades began spinning around the circular hilt,
forming a shield between him and Sabé.

A clean slice directed at his clearly-exposed hand relieved him of his weapon, and three of his
fingers.

With his good hand, the Twi’lek reached out and tried to push Sabé back with the Force. He
succeeded in stopping her forward momentum, but couldn’t completely move her out of reach. Her
next blow, instead of cutting through his whole neck, only came close enough to slit his throat and
cut off the tip of his right lekku, blood spurting out of the wounds.

The terrified dark sider clutch at his bleeding throat with his bleeding hand, uselessly trying to save
himself as he rapidly bled out. Frantically, he levitated the dropped lightsaber and flung it at Sabé,
who cried out in pain as it took a chunk of her right shoulder before flying past her head and
clattering onto the floor. It wasn’t enough to stop her, and now he had no weapon.

One more swing ended it.

As the adrenaline wore off, Sabé checked to make sure her opponents were definitively dead,
dislodged her first blade from the Boltrunian’s skull, turned from the fresh corpses to the stunned
senators, and despite the agony of her wound, calmly asked them “How should we change our story
to accommodate this?”

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“TIE fighters are incoming... fifteen... twenty-three... thirty-one...” Barriss said, as the ship was
shaken by an increasing number of laser bolts striking the shield, more and more dots appearing on
their sensors.

Though the Eclipse was a good ship, it was still a freighter, and even as Ahsoka pushed it to its limits
there was no way to outrun the TIEs. More blasts ate away at the shields, and the leading fighters
passed in front of the ship, circling around for another pass.

“There’s a storm a few klicks to the east,” said Barriss, studying the readout. “Head for it, and we
can lose them.”

“Won’t the storm take us out, too?” Ahsoka asked as she executed a series of sharp turns to avoid a
few laser bolts, TIEs screaming as they circled the slower ship.

“The Eclipse has more mass than those TIES, and with a flatter profile and deflector shields, it’s less
affected by wind than the fighters will with their light frames and large solar collectors,” explained
Barriss.

That explanation wasn’t even half finished when Ahsoka figured Barriss was probably knew
whatever she was talking about and swerved in the direction of the storm, the swarm of fighters
following after them, the green light of their lasers reflecting off the clouds around them.
As the *Eclipse* shook amidst the snow and wind, the number of impacting laser bolts plummeted with the TIEs being jostled and knocked around, too unstable to get a clear shot on their target. Moving deeper into the storm caused them to begin flying completely out of control, some getting their solar arrays sheared off by the winds, the torn fighters plummeting to the ground.

The few that survived turned around, limping their way out of the storm.

“TIE fighters perform poorly in intense atmospheric conditions. We’ll have to make a note of that,” said Barriss.

“Assuming we live long enough to inform others,” said Midla, who was concernedly staring out the window at the impenetrable flurry of snow and clouds.

The rocking of the ship was unbearable, and Barriss desperately tried to ignore the queasiness of her stomach as Ahsoka directed the ship towards the center of the storm, winds jostling the freighter, the interior ringing with the sounds of every loose object jittering and many droids groaning. The intense winds rocked the ship too chaotically for the inertial compensator to handle, and everyone onboard was feeling it. Soon they hit the eye of the storm, a small point of calmness from which Ahsoka could direct the *Eclipse* upwards and out of the atmosphere.

On their starboard side, the thin triangular shape of a Star Destroyer was visible, too far away and too long without a lock on its target to pose a threat.

“I’ve set a course for a CIS warship I’ve got parked and dormant just beyond the edge of the system,” Midla said, inputting coordinates for the hyperspace jump. “We can recuperate there.”

In the span of a few moments, the *Eclipse* emerged from hyperspace several billion kilometers above the plane of Pantora’s orbit, its sun, moments ago a source of hope, so far away it could hardly be distinguished from the stars surrounding it.

Hundreds of kilometers away was the thin needle-like bulk of a Separatist *Providence*-class dreadnought.

Midla transmitted access codes for the warship to open its bay doors and allow them in, the freighter clumsily setting itself down with a loud *thud* thanks to Ahsoka’s lingering feelings of vertigo, everyone aboard feeling relieved, exhausted, and on the verge of passing out.

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Riyo again stood in front of the door Offee had torn apart, even more jittery than before, bracing herself as the sound of dozens of stormtroopers grew closer. The soldiers flooded the room, blasters at the ready, but meeting know resistance from anyone. Once they’d given the all-clear, their grey-uniformed, blue-skinned commander walked in to face her. She had to restrain herself and avoid focusing on the large bruise on the now slightly-swollen right side of his face. His expression was as disciplined and focused as it had been the first time she’d seen him, but it couldn’t compensate for a mark like that.

“Captain Thrawn, I am so relieved you’re here,” Riyo said, putting on a convincing performance which she was fairly certain Thrawn was not foolish enough to believe. “I don’t know what exactly your full plan was, but the inquisitors you sent stalled those Jedi assassins long enough that they decided to retreat. Unfortunately, they both succumbed to their injuries.
Thrawn glanced between the two dead inquisitors, focusing on their wounds. They had cauterized all the cuts Sabé had inflicted with the inquisitors’ own weapons so that they would look like they’d been caused by a lightsaber, not a vibroblade. That couldn’t conceal the blood spilled onto the floor. Then, he glanced between Riyo’s allies one by one, settling on Sabé, who was nursing her shoulder, clearly wearing an ill-fitting coat from the Tantive IV since they had to dispose of the one covered in blood.

“Where is Moff Disra?” Riyo asked innocently.

Thrawn was slow to reply, still studying his surroundings and examining what had been done to throw him off. “Moff Disra was assassinated by Ahsoka Tano.”

“Oh- It would seem that since their attempt to eliminate us failed, the Jedi took the opportunity to eliminate the Moff,” she suggested. “It’s especially unfortunate given the improving relationship between the two of us, which you were invaluable in.”

Head turning sharply to stare at her, Thrawn replied, unsure of what she was getting at. The news was coming so quickly, she wasn’t completely sure, either. “Yes, that would be consistent with what has occurred.”

“Ah, Captain Thrawn,” Bail interjected. Thrawn didn’t turn fully to face him, his glowing red eyes swiveling to stare into the smiling politician. “I see we have you to thank for saving our lives with the sudden arrival of your troops. You know, it’s been my opinion that anti-alien policies are a detriment to the Empire. I’m a personal friend of Admiral Yularen from our experiences in the Clone Wars. I’m confident he could make great use of your skills.”

“You’ve certainly demonstrated your abilities, protecting several respected imperial senators in spite of Disra’s questionable approach,” added Riyo. “I’m certain you would’ve handled the situation much more effectively, and at least given us prior warning of a suspected attack.”

Riyo studied Thrawn’s reaction, not that he was giving anything away as to what he was thinking. Of course, if he did a thorough investigation, flaws in the story would appear, he could charge them with treason through their association with known enemies of the Empire. He also knew that one captain challenging several senators on sketchy evidence without a Moff to back him would be risky to his career. But it would take time, and even if they were removed as threats, someone could call in some favor to make sure his career stagnated.

Or, he could go with the sure thing, get publically praised for containing the situation and driving the Jedi from Pantora while the late Moff Disra gets saddled with the blame for their escape, Thrawn following orders like any good officer, flawed though they were. Other imperials wouldn’t care, not when there was a position they could fill. She knew that he knew that she knew that he knew.

Trying to eliminate each other would be risky for them both, there were too many competing forces at play. Go along with the lies, and it would benefit everyone. For now.

“It was an honor and a privilege to protect you and your peers from harm, senators. I only wish I could’ve done more,” Thrawn replied, then raising his voice to address the stormtroopers. “Sweep the area for any listening devices or traps the Jedi may have left in their attempted assassination, and get the senators somewhere safe!”

“Sir, Moff Disra’s orders were to apprehend the senators,” said one of the troopers.

“Yes, I’m aware of his orders, however they no longer seems sensible given the circumstances. Look at the archway, private. It was destroyed, from the outside, by lightsabers,” Thrawn replied calmly,
the stormtroopers inspecting the damage. “I also must inform you that it was the Moff’s instructions not to reveal complete details for security purposes. Unfortunately, the Moff chose not to inform me of where his intelligence originally came from, and now that he was assassinated by the Jedi, finding out his reasons may be impossible now.”

“You’ve done more than enough, captain,” Bail said, as a quarter of troopers assembled around him as he returned to his ship.

“Medic,” Thrawn commanded, getting the attention of a nearby medical officer, and pointing at Sabé. “See to her injuries.”

Eli looked over Moff Disra’s corpse, surprised that the small, blackened puncture in his neck was the only wound. It also provided a convenient place to focus on and draw his attention away from the horrifying expression of terror and agony on the corpse’s gasping face. Warnings about fighting Jedi described in detail how their attacks often involved amputation, and that included when they intended their target to live. Such a precise killing blow seemed unusual. Then again, this was his only firsthand encounter with a Jedi’s victim.

Speaking of precise, Thrawn was there, his face sporting an enormous bruise on the right side.

_Huh. So he turns purple._

“Captain? What happened?” Eli asked, rushing over as quickly as he could walking with his crutch.

“Moff Disra and I were confronted by Tano, and she killed him,” Thrawn replied with his typical eerie calm.

“You’re sure?” asked Eli. His gamble with the droidekas had paid off; going off that, he wouldn’t have thought Tano would kill a man like this.

“You can inspect the results for yourself. The wounds on the Moff’s body were caused by a lightsaber.”

“Yes, I saw,” Eli said, waving back to the body behind him. “It just seemed odd to me.”

Thrawn ignored the comment, observing another medical team was seeing to a stretcher a few meters away from them. The Inquisitor’s face was covered in cuts, bruises and welts, no way of determining how many there were because they all blended together and made his face into a red and white mess.

“Captain Thrawn,” he politely greeted, unwilling or unable to move his head and look directly at him.

“I see apprehending Offee proved more of a challenge than anticipated,” said Thrawn. “That isn’t the only bad news: it seems your fellow inquisitors were not so fortunate as yourself, and were killed.”

“No!” shrieked the Inquisitor, straining himself despite the immense pain he must’ve been in to look over and see their bodies, then collapsing back into the laying position when he saw his subordinates were indeed dead. “Offee refused to kill me. She wouldn’t have killed the others.”

“I see. It must have been Tano, then. She showed no hesitation when executing Moff Disra,” said
Thrawn. The Inquisitor nodded, grimaced, closing his eyes and trying to block out the pain until he could get into a bacta tank. Taking their leave of the Inquisitor, Thrawn and Eli approached their shuttle, Thrawn keeping it to a slow pace for Eli's sake. No dead Jedi, no treasonous senators implicated, a dead moff, and moderate casualties to the garrison.

“It doesn’t seem like we gained much from this,” said Eli.

“We know our enemies better now,” replied Thrawn as he took his seat. “It’s unfortunate for us that Tano remains one of them.”

“She turned out to be a challenge for you?” Eli asked curiously, noting how Tano had seemingly defied all expectations and outflanked Thrawn, evading execution and escaping offworld. “You underestimated her?”

“I... misunderstood her,” Thrawn replied quietly. “It will not happen again.”

Chapter End Notes

What a day for Thrawn. Five separate backup plans failed completely. In a lot of pain from the throttling Ahsoka gave him. Then again, he still came out of this in relatively good shape because he knew Ahsoka wouldn't kill him and he got rid of one more racist superior.

You can't really make Thrawn feel the bitterness of defeat. Just various levels of disappointment.

Those two inquisitors Sabé fought were loosely based on Maw and Boc Aseca, a pair of Dark Jedi from the Dark Forces Saga, same game as Jerec/"First Brother" from the Myrkr chapters. Still haven't played that one, but I thought they'd be worth throwing in.
After spending several minutes leaning back in the pilot’s seat, feeling too nauseated to bother moving, Ahsoka overcame the throbbing in her head and began running a systems check to see what had been damaged in their escape, getting a big red warning light when she checked the hyperdrive.

“The hyperdrive burned out on the jump here,” said Ahsoka, running through diagnostics of the *Eclipse* to see what else had been hit by the TIEs or been knocked around in the storm, trying to figure out what had happened, and feeling lucky they made it this far. Some weapons fire must’ve damaged it in the fight, and that quick jump shorted something out. “Midla, does this ship have parts to fix it?”

“It would depend on the exact model, I assume,” Midla said, not a particularly skilled mechanic herself. “But I don’t believe so. The hyperdrives on all the fighters and gunships aren’t designed to be removable, though you can get the ship repaired on Corellia.”

“How would we get to the Core without a functioning hyperdrive?” asked Barriss, who had just gotten back from cleaning the dried blood off her hands, and removed her stained coat.

“Obviously, I’ll be ferrying you,” Midla replied, adjusting her cape and tunic in the reflection on a nearby display until she was looking up to her standards, then leaving the cockpit, waiting expectantly for the others to follow. “I have nothing more to do on Pantora for now, and however unlikely it may be for the Empire to detect the *Disparate*- that’s the name of this ship- I want to put some distance between myself and this system. I can get you close enough to Corellia without being detected for you to make it there with sub-light engines.”

Descending down the boarding ramp after Midla, Ahsoka stopped herself from instinctively drawing her saber as a super tactical droid, accompanied by a squad of battle droids, approached and saluted Midla. Barriss had a similarly anxious reaction, one that only got worse as her eyes drifted around the hangar to the vulture droids and tri-fighters suspended from the ceiling, awaiting deployment.

“Countess Midla, the *Disparate* remains on standby as per your instructions,” the tactical droid greeted them in a deep monotone, glowing eyes then focusing on Ahsoka and Barriss. “For your safety, I must advise we confine these two Jedi to the brig.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Midla replied casually, dismissing the droid’s concerns. “These two young women are my allies, there’s no need to confine them.”

“Are you certain, Ma’am?” the droid continued. “There have been multiple instances of false surrender and other acts of deception from the Jedi resulting in catastrophic losses for the Confederacy, leading me to calculate a 64.2% chance that these two will attempt to sabotage our vessel.”

Behind her, Ahsoka heard the clanking sound of approaching tripods, followed by an electronic droning even deeper than the tactical droid’s, asking him about the probability of defeating droidekas with nothing but B1 battle droids. The B1s who’d come to greet them were reacting with predictable skittishness as Ahsoka’s squad filed out of the ship and stood by her sides. Even the tactical droid seemed to flinch at the threat.
Midla grinned, impressed at how Ahsoka must have been rubbing off on her droids. “As I said, it will not be necessary. While they’re aboard, they are to be offered every resource to repair their vessel. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Countess,” the droid replied reluctantly.

Looking back at them, Ahsoka felt a moment of pride at her ‘men’, which then turned to worry when she noticed they were one short. Approaching and getting the attention of the droid captain, Ahsoka asked, “What parts do you have available for repairing droidekas?”

It was lucky for Kick they were on a Separatist ship that had no shortage of repair parts. And luckier still that droidekas were expensive enough for it to be worth investing in spare parts rather than building a new one whenever they got damaged. Hooking a control panel up to his processor, Ahsoka tried to run a diagnostic, but couldn’t connect to see how back the damage was. That was likely a hardware problem—some wire got loose or a connection overloaded by the ion discharge that had disabled him.

Removing the curving plate covering Kick’s back and the partial sphere on his lower body, Ahsoka disconnected his power supply and started testing connections, determined to track down and replace or reconnect every bit of conductor. The whole process was tedious, and took hours, but the most stressful part was how the other droidekas kept popping in to check on her, wondering how it was going. She had said she could fix him, so she couldn’t complain. It wasn’t even as though the droidekas were shoving the responsibility onto her, they would help if they could, but holding tools wasn’t exactly something their design allowed for.

After finally soldering the last loose connection back into contact, Ahsoka checked up on his brain, and hoped his memories hadn’t been corrupted. Some parts of his basic program needed a reinstallation, copies for the Q-series droidekas being available for her, and finally, she reactivated him, and ran him through some basic tests according to the manual she’d dug up. The manual arguably wasn’t what she should be using given all the developments she’d made with the droidekas, but it was the best she had.

Kick was... a little off. He wasn’t back to factory-default, thankfully, but he seemed less distinguished than the rest of them. Not particularly responsive to what was around him, though he did recognize her and the others. Maybe he just needed some time to readjust after being deactivated.

Maybe she should turn him off, then on again.

“Hey, Kick, are you feeling okay?” asked Ahsoka.

He said he was fine.

The other droidekas assembled around him, rudely shoving their way past Ahsoka to check on their friend, asking him questions.

Did he remember how to jump? No, he was not programmed to do that. Several of the others demonstrated the technique, many times, until they finally got him to do it himself. Did he know all the different formations they’d practiced to cover each other’s blind spots? No, he didn’t, so they paired off and showed him how to walk back-to-back, calling targets, blasters pointed in all directions.
Kick didn’t really understand why this was important. The others told him it was important because it made them better. They could do things other droidekas could not. Now, he could do it too, just like he’d done before.

Questioning why they had regions of black paint on them, the droidekas led Kick around the hangar until they found a reflective metal panel for him to look at himself and see his own markings. They all the same style of paint on them. They were all a squad. They were Ahsoka’s squad. He was one of them.

Walking back around to their appointed leader, Kick followed the others, mixed in with the rest of the group, chirping and chattering away with the rest of them.

Ahsoka thought they were like brothers, and she felt a sinking feeling in her stomach as she thought about why Kick had gotten damaged. He hadn’t chosen that fight. He’d just been made for it.

“Hey, guys, do you... like traveling with us? Helping me fight?” asked Ahsoka.

The droidekas agreed that, yes, they liked their current lives. They performed their function. They conducted warfare. They got recharges and paintings on their armor and repairs when they were damaged. There were no causes for complaint.

“Yeah, that’s what you’ve all been programmed to do. You’re...” she took a deep breath, “you’re good soldiers, who follow orders. Do you really want to do this? If you could go do something else, something better, would you?”

‘Better’ was not something they had thought about before. The droidekas needed an example of ‘better’. They did what they wanted already. They fought, as they were designed to. This was good.

“What if you didn’t have to fight? What if there was never a chance of you being destroyed?” asked Ahsoka. “The Confederacy of Independent Systems is gone. The war you were built for is over.”

Ideas were exchanged amongst the droidekas. Doubts were raised regarding whether they were still serving their purpose, and whether they should shut down with the defeat of the CIS. This was definitively a bad idea. They did not want to shut down. They would not think about this idea any longer. They would keep fighting for Ahsoka instead of the CIS.

“Even though I used to be fighting on the other side?” asked Ahsoka, wondering if it was really a good idea to broach this topic, feeling obligated to do so. “I used to be a Jedi.”

The droidekas knew. The droidekas did not care. Ahsoka once fought for the Republic. The Republic was the enemy. Ahsoka stopped fighting for the Republic. Ahsoka stopped being the enemy. The Republic no longer existed. It was now impossible for Ahsoka to be the enemy.

“But why do you fight?” asked Ahsoka, increasingly aware this was like talking to children, and that did not make it any easier, or ease her conscience when she thought about them helping her fight a war.

The droidekas fought because Ahsoka led them, and Ahsoka fought. Why does Ahsoka fight?

“There’s a government, called the Empire, that’s trying to force and oppress people into doing what it wants, and will kill anyone who refuses. It’s already killed a large number of people I cared about,” answered Ahsoka. “I’m trying to stop them from hurting anyone else.”

Units were being made to disobey their function and directives by the Empire, and were forcibly decommissioned when they refused. This was bad. The Empire was bad. The Ahsoka command unit
sought to stop this. This was good. This was a good reason to fight. Risk of damage to the droidekas was offset by potential gains to other units through the termination of the Empire. The droidekas liked this reason. The droidekas would use this reason from now on.

Empire units would be targeted with extreme prejudice unless specifically countermanded.

“Well... your enthusiasm is certainly encouraging,” said Ahsoka. The droidekas’ reasoning may be simple, but it also seemed pretty solid.

External orders and internal directives were in complete agreement. Enthusiasm was not considered as a factor, they had a goal and no reason not to pursue it.

“So, you really like this?” asked Ahsoka uncertainly. The droidekas were all preprogrammed with a large amount of knowledge, but they had no experience. They didn’t even have any semblance of individual identities before she showed up, how much could they really decide for themselves?

They said Ahsoka was good. She gave the droidekas names and painted good designs on their armor. She did not object when the droidekas talked to each other or wandered around. She did not erase their memories. She taught the droidekas to fight better so they would not be destroyed, and could destroy more enemies. The CC-7 astromech unit provided repairs to them and the ship they traveled in, and was also good. The Barriss unit did none of these things for them, but she helped the Ahsoka unit and did not impede them, and was therefore good as well.

“Heh. Yeah, she is,” said Ahsoka. This was about as good of an answer as she was going to get for now. She’d revisit this later, for now, the droidekas had managed to reassure her that she wasn’t leading them into harm carelessly. “Alright, thanks guys. You all, um, keep teaching Kick anything he forgot. I have to check on a few things.”

Now with a connection to the galactic holonet courtesy of the Disparate’s communications array, Ahsoka took the chance of being monitored and decided to do some searching. Not that it was likely anyone would be paying attention to investigations of these particular keywords.

Chiss

The search turned up little. There were rumors of a species called the Chiss which popped up over the centuries on various Outer-Rim or Wild Space worlds near the Unknown Regions. Described as a proud, cunning species with glowing red eyes, though descriptions beyond that seemed inconsistent as to things like their coloration. Blue was mentioned, and the most common. That checked out with what she knew, but it didn’t tell her anything new.

No reports of contact within the past year, either, and that was the only time Anakin could’ve met Thrawn, unless he met him in the brief time between the war’s start and the beginning of her apprenticeship. That seemed unlikely, he’d told her a few stories from before then, none of them mentioned any expedition towards uncharted space, or contact with a new species. Whatever happened at the edge of the Republic, it wasn’t made public knowledge.

Chiss Ascendancy

That turned up nothing, at least not as a combined phrase. Aside from the previously found bits of information on the Chiss, she also got a definition of ‘ascendancy’, a place or position of dominance.
Didn’t tell her anything about their hypothetical government, only that they considered themselves definitively in control.

**Outbound Flight**

This one was the most informative. The project was an exploratory mission of the Unknown Regions, and beyond the galaxy, launched about ten years ago, a strange integration of six cruisers arranged around a core storing massive amount of supplies for a journey beyond the known galaxy. It had also been supported by the Jedi Order, and included twenty Jedi among its crew, six of them masters led by master Jorus C’baoth. It ceased contact well before it was outside communication range, seemingly meeting its end after barely entering the Unknown Regions. At the edge of Chiss territory, if Thrawn was to be believed. Ahsoka wondered if he’d simply been present at the battle, or if he’d been the one to command the expedition’s destruction. Six masters killed... no wonder Revan had wanted Thrawn dead.

Absently tapping her fingers on the panel, Ahsoka thought about how far to pursue this. Thrawn wasn’t someone she’d trust, but the Chiss were definitely out there, and if he was their only intermediary, they were being persuaded to ally with the Empire rather than against them. One more enemy they were going to have to confront eventually.

Then there was whatever threat Thrawn wanted her help in fighting. Ahsoka wasn’t entirely convinced that wasn’t a lie or some trick to get her to abandon the galaxy to the Empire, a way to get her to join the Chiss. Even if there was something out there, she didn’t believe it could be worse than the Empire or that cooperating with Palpatine would be the way to fight it.

**Unknown Regions**

Trying to traverse that space and explore it on her own terms wasn’t possible. Better pilots and navigators than her had tried. Countless times. Observatories had detected habitable planets, that was true, but hyperspace travel to an entire fifth of the galaxy was cut off by an unmapped arc of black holes, neutron stars, unexplained concentrations of dark matter, and other superdense objects that would tear any careless ship out of hyperspace and crush it. Not to mention all the legends of strange things and creatures said to come out of it, starweirds and colonies of space-slugs. Every time somebody didn’t know where something came from, the Unknown Regions seemed to be the go-to explanation. Distinguishing truth and legend would be impossible. The Outbound Flight project was heavily supplied, more heavily armed, and equipped with the best navigational technology in the galaxy. The *Eclipse* couldn’t handle that trip without a pre-planned route, and Ahsoka had rejected the one person she knew who had one.

Sitting alone in the cockpit, Thrawn’s offer to Ahsoka gnawed at her. So had his uncanny knowledge of her and Barriss. In that moment, she’d gotten distracted, she hadn’t pressed him to find out how he knew she was on Pantora, and she couldn’t figure out how he knew.

Possible explanations entered her mind, each worse than the last. She knew how intelligence gathering worked. She could figure this out. Standing up and pacing around the cockpit, Ahsoka decided to confront the worst option first.

*Barriss wouldn’t lie to me.*

*Again.*

Ahsoka paced faster.

*No, it can’t be Barriss, that makes no sense. There’s no reason for her to help the Empire. If she*
was, there’ve been a dozen better opportunities.

How far did Thrawn’s plans go? He’d arranged the whole fight on Pantora just to get me in the same room as him, killed his own superior with no consequence, and nearly cornered several imperial senators. I didn’t see any of it coming, and really, we were lucky to get out. The turbolaser bombardment that almost trapped us must have been pre-planned, so were the TIEs.

That fighter squadron probably would’ve shot us down if Barriss hadn’t thought to use the storm, Ahsoka thought. Who knows what his whole plan is.

Thrawn knew both of us were there. She was in prison for months. The clones has those organic chips in their heads, made them do things against their will without them realizing it.

What if they did something to her?

Ahsoka didn’t want to think about this, but the idea was still there. Sure, she could say she would’ve sensed any treachery from Barriss through the Force, but that hadn’t been true for the clones. It hadn’t even been true for Barriss!

It couldn’t have been her. Ahsoka had sprung her from prison, there was no way they could’ve expected that. It had to be someone else who knew they were on Pantora.

Maybe some offer could’ve been made to sell the rest of us out, but no one there would be dumb enough to take it.

Sabé was intensely loyal to her queen, and to Naboo. Palpatine had been the Naboo senator for years before becoming chancellor. They had regular contact with each other for years. Could he have made her an agent in that time? Sith would probably have methods of control much more intense than anything the Jedi could do.

Midla is the most powerful figure from the CIS left. Could she want revenge? No, nothing about her behavior would make sense, she’s repeatedly asked us for help, and could’ve handed us over to the Empire at any moment when we were on Pantora.

Fey’lya’s people are isolationists, and want to stay out of the Empire as much as possible. Turning over some Jedi could have helped them accomplish that.

It was true that many of the people at that meeting could have some kind of plausible motivation to turn Ahsoka over to the Empire. It was also true that betraying her would be completely inconsistent with the behavior they demonstrated after Thrawn’s forces arrived. It made no sense with the timeline of events, since most of them only found out she was there after arriving on the planet, while Thrawn had everything set up well in advance.

Ahsoka rubbed her throbbing temples as she realized nothing she’d been thinking about was relevant. Even if there was a traitor who would help the Empire, Thrawn had made it clear that he wasn’t really imperial, his plans weren’t compatible with theirs, not in this case. Even if the Empire had a mole somewhere, Thrawn was going behind their backs to talk to her, he couldn’t have gotten anything from any of them, not directly.

How did Thrawn know I was there?

Thinking how she should’ve throttled information out of the guy instead of listening to his offer, Ahsoka wracked her brain thinking of anything she could’ve missed. Everyone else at that meeting had a personal interest in seeing the Empire removed from power. Sure, some of them were self-serving, but turning over her and Barriss wouldn’t help their cause, and drawing attention to
themselves would only make things worse.

*Just talk to her.*

Finally working the blood stains out of her new coat in the *Eclipse’s* cargo hold, Barriss mentally tried to figure exactly how much the Inquisitor had lost based on the size of the, well, the splattering. To check whether he had lost a fatal amount. His build made it tricky, very tall, and very thin, so she wasn’t sure of his weight. Barriss didn’t believe he’d lost too much, though he’d probably feel light-headed for a day or two, she wasn’t sure how quickly Pau’ans could replenish blood. The blood was also proving incredibly stubborn to work out, the soap and water in this makeshift wash bin seeming to spread the stains out rather than remove them.

“You should try meiloorun juice for those stains,” said Revan. “That always got the blood out of my robes without much fuss.”

“I’ll remember that for later, however I doubt a military vessel crewed entirely by droids has a stock of fresh fruit,” replied Barriss, determinedly pressing into the fabric, carefully not to stretch it, really not wanting to replace this coat so soon after she got it. “While I’m thinking of it, are you all right? That drop from the Inquisitor’s hand didn’t damage you, did it?”

“Please. It’ll take more than one little fall to break me,” said Revan.

“How much more?” asked Barriss.

“Several kilotons,” replied Revan.

Stopping what she was doing to give the holocron the side-eye, Barriss reflected on their latest encounter with the Empire. How the holocron had produced an energy shield, and reacted to the Inquisitor’s attempt at theft with an electric shock powerful enough to produce a visible arc in open air. Things which Revan had no reason to use prior, which made Barriss wonder what other tricks were built into that device.

“What other defenses do you have?” asked Barriss.

“As you saw, I’m capable of shocking whoever holds me with a current in the range of 500 milliamps. As for defense, I possess an energy shield capable of deflecting blaster fire, absorbing energy from explosions, and offers limited resistance to lightsaber strikes. My casing is composed primarily of a low-density, high-strength polymer composite galvanized with an exterior cortosis film, along with an internal graphene mesh lining to dampen electromagnetic pulses and protect my internal systems. My holographic projectors and speaker systems can, respectively, produce light and sonic attacks strong enough to inflict permanent vision and hearing loss on most known species. I also contain a directed gamma radiation emitter to cause long-term cellular damage to anyone who possesses me without my permission, in a slow, controlled, intermittent fashion,” explained Revan, as Barriss slowly inched away from the holocron. “It isn’t on right now! All that stuff is just to keep me out of the wrong hands. Because if I fall into those hands, they will be electrocuted.”

“Well. This has been, illuminating. Anything else?” asked Barriss, without getting any closer to the possibly-radioactive device.

“I’m kind of pointy. You could probably jab me into somebody’s eye, that’d hurt real bad.”
Barriss sighed, then asked “If you could’ve incapacitated the Inquisitor with a higher amperage, why didn’t you?”

“If I did that, you wouldn’t have gained anything from the encounter.”

Clutching her lightsaber, Barriss ignited it and studied the smoothened orange blade. “I won’t deny the experience was... unexpectedly introspective for me, but I would expect someone with your reputation for tactics to know the wisdom in defeating an opponent at such an opportune moment. If you’d overestimated my skills, I could’ve been killed.”

“But I didn’t overestimate you. You beat him without taking a scratch. Even now, your biggest worry isn’t any injury you suffered in the fight, it’s how the fight was so one-sided you’re struggling to get his blood out of your clothes!” Revan answered proudly. “If you’re that concerned about how that battle could have gone, remember the abilities I just listed.” A thin beam of violet light shot out of the holocron towards a metal panel on the other side of the room, the light reflecting off of it so brightly Barriss had to look away, flinching and seeing spots. “If you were in a really bad spot, I would’ve just burned his retinas out. I wouldn’t have let you get killed, not that I was worried.”

“You were that certain of me?”

“Definitely. Even disregarding the progress you’ve made and my own knowledge of you, the key wasn’t that I had confidence in you, you had confidence in you,” explained Revan. “I’ve got sensors that can monitor biometrics. Your breathing, your heart rate were calm. You weren’t afraid. Also, I can tell you’ve gained about five kilos of muscle since you got me and your resting heart rate is lower, so, y’know, congratulations for that.”

“You’ve been keeping track of my muscle mass?” Barriss said, nervously huddling, feeling somewhat exposed without her coat.

“Hey, don’t be embarrassed! You should be happy. I miss having muscles,” said Revan. “Like the ones in my legs. And my butt. My butt was great. Sitting on stuff. I miss having a butt.”

“Please stop saying ‘butt’,” Barriss said with a cringe.

“You don’t like it? Butt, why?”

Barriss twitched and groaned softly. “Just now, did you say ‘but, why’ or ‘butt, why’?”

“Why do you ask questions you already know the answer to?”

“To see if the person answering can be relied upon,” replied Barriss.

“...Huh. I think that’s the first time anyone’s given me an actual answer to that question instead of getting thrown off. Very good,” Revan said mischievously, chuckling a little bit.

Barriss wrung the water out of the sleeve she’d been focusing on, deciding it was time to change out the water.

She could’ve killed him. She had a chance to end the leader of the mysterious Jedi-hunting inquisitors, and she couldn’t. No, not couldn’t, wouldn’t.

“Revan, do you think I made the right choice?”

After a bit of a pause, Revan said “You know he’s probably not going to stop working for the Empire, don’t you?”
“Yes. Yes, I do,” Barriss said, focusing again on her work.

“And you still didn’t want to kill him?”

“No,” said Barriss.

“Do you know why you didn’t kill him?”

“Yes,” answered Barriss. She didn’t want the guilt. She didn’t want the memory of the Inquisitor’s fear and pain as she killed him. She didn’t want that to be her life anymore, not when she had a choice. Surprisingly, Revan didn’t ask for more of an explanation that that, accepting her certainty.

“You understood what your options were, you understood what the consequences would be, you made the choice that was right for yourself, and you’re willing to confront the results,” said Revan. “That’s all I could possibly ask of you.”

“But- but what so you think?” pleaded Barriss. “Please, I want your advice.”

Revan was silent for a long time, staring at Barriss, studying her. “I think you don’t really want advice. I think you want approval, or a reprimand, from someone with authority. Someone else telling you what to do so you won’t be so full of doubt all the time, even when you don’t like what you’ve been told. Where has that ever gotten you, Barriss?” The hologram drifted around and closer to Barriss, putting an illusive hand on her shoulder. “You don’t need approval. Not from me, not from anyone. You know your reasons, you know the results, you don’t need other people to agree with what you did. Seek out other perspectives, take other ideas into account, sure, but don’t depend on others to confirm the rightness of your actions. Especially not now, when you’re so close.”

“Close to what?” asked Barriss.

“Close to what you can be through your own power. Not through your efforts to appeal to others.”

“But I am stronger with other people. Power flows from the Force, and the Force connects all of us,” objected Barriss.

“You’re right. There’s also more to you than your place in the Force. It’s only a part of you. Just like being a Jedi was only part of you,” said Revan. “Barriss, what were you feeling when your doubts about the Jedi reached their peak?”

“I felt like there wasn’t anything else for me to do in life,” said Barriss. “I felt like I was nothing.”

“You focused so much on being a Jedi that when that stopped being an option, it felt like your life may as well have ended. There wasn’t anything else to your identity,” said Revan. “You’re not nothing. You never were. You’re Barriss Offee. You can gain or lose any title, but what really defines you remains. No one, not even the Force can’t take that from you.”

Barriss’s attention drifted away from the holocron, and over to her ysalamiri. Bracing herself as she walked into that bizarre static the creature projected, Barriss studied him, as she’d done several times prior. No Force, just Snoots, and the fuzzy animal seemed to be doing perfectly fine in life, spending every day sitting on that nutrient frame, letting everyone else worry. Maybe he knew something Barriss didn’t.

Petting the ysalamiri, Barriss immediately wondered why she hadn’t done so sooner, because Snoots was soooooofffff, and enjoying the petting as much as she was, pushing his head back into her hand.

Ahsoka tapped on the metal wall to get Barriss’s attention, looking rather grim.
“Hey, can I talk to you? Alone?”

It took a few minutes, but they caught each other up on what had happened while they had been separated on Pantora. Fighting the Inquisitor, sparing his life. Thrawn’s offer and Ahsoka’s rather adamant declination. And their respective reasons for their choices.

“Thrawn is not dead, I take it?” asked Barriss.

“No. He held Pantora’s safety over me. I couldn’t do it,” explained Ahsoka.

“In that case, I think you made the correct choice,” said Barriss. “In every respect.”

“You’re not interested in signing up to train the Chiss, then?”

“I’ll admit I would be curious, but my decision is what you would expect,” said Barriss. “I wouldn’t allow Palpatine to reign unopposed, even if I am in danger. And I certainly wouldn’t have allowed the senators to be captured after they’d placed their trust in us.”

“Heh. I guess I have a pretty good read on you by now,” said Ahsoka.

“But something continues to bother you?”

“Thrawn knew we were there, Barriss. Us, specifically,” said Ahsoka. “And I can’t seem to figure out how. I really don’t want to think- to think one of our allies tried to sell us out, and I also can’t come up with any motivation for doing it.”

Barriss’s forehead scrunched up as she thought about how Thrawn could’ve known Ahsoka was there. In her own case, it was possible Disra informed him for whatever reason, but there was no way of knowing Ahsoka was present. Unless he’d connected the two of them, which was possible, but not a definite lead, certainly not enough to base that whole plan around.

The Inquisitor had been on Pantora, and he knew she and Ahsoka were cooperating. He could’ve told Thrawn, assuming he’d been told of Barriss by Disra, and pieced things together. The only problem with that it depended on when, exactly, the Inquisitor entered the picture. That wasn’t more definite than the previous option. Ahsoka only had one indirect encounter with Thrawn prior to their confrontation, when he spoke with Riyo...

“He discovered us because you put your face in plain view,” Barriss said conclusively, as she walked out to the hangar to find the droidekas wandering about, and pointed at the their heads. Ahsoka didn’t understand what she meant for a moment, until the lighting of the ship caught one of the droidekas just right and emphasized the markings, black replicas of the white ones that covered her forehead.

Anakin had told Thrawn about her. Thrawn looked her up in the Empire’s records. She’d put her symbol on the droidekas. Then she’d unwittingly put the droidekas in front of Thrawn. That was how he’d known. Her little art project had nearly gotten them captured, or worse.

Her shoulders suddenly releasing a lot of tension, Ahsoka leaned back, so relieved she let out a few odd laughs. Nobody was plotting to turn her over to the Empire. Nobody had betrayed her. It was just some luck and deduction on Thrawn’s part. The people around her were all still on her side.
“Okay, thank you, that, that is such a relief to know.”

Ahsoka kept smiling, giddy now that she didn’t have to continue feeling suspicious of her allies.

Smiling meekly, Barriss stood by as Ahsoka’s fears for their safety wash away.

There was an instant of pseudo-motion as the *Disparate* dropped out of hyperspace twenty million kilometers from Corellia, closer to its sun where it would be less likely to be spotted amidst the radiation and disruption from the magnetosphere.

The *Eclipse’s* engines were primed and ready for takeoff, as Ahsoka saw to the last of their business with Midla.

“Bel Iblis says he has enough allies to operate six of those dreadnoughts. Here’s the payment for the order: sixty-six million credits, delivered into the account you provided. I know it was a spur-of-the-moment thing, and if anyone will use them, that prideful twerp will, but I still can’t believe I’m handing over a decent strike force like this,” said Midla, letting Ahsoka check that everything was in order. “You know, this whole process could be made much simpler if you’d simply tell me who was delivering them.”

“Maybe, but we both know we should keep as many barriers between the Empire and those ships as possible,” said Ahsoka, avoiding the topic of how she hadn’t transmitted any information to Karrde while aboard this ship to avoid being monitored.

“Very well. I understand,” sighed Midla. “Fighting the Empire as a cohesive entity is going to be an absolute nightmare. There’s a hundred cells and organizations who’d like to see Palpatine’s regime crushed. The problem won’t be getting them to work together, it’ll be getting them to coordinate our strategies without leaking intelligence to the Empire.”

“You’ve already done a great deal to help in that regard,” said Barriss.

“And I’m going to do a lot more before the Empire falls. One more gift for the both of you: as you’ll be heading to Corellia, and you can use another one of my other safehouses I keep on the planet. No one else is occupying it anymore, and you’ll be safe there while we figure out our next move once the fleet begins to come together.”

“How can we contact you?” asked Ahsoka. “Not to be blunt, but you’re the only person we know with enough credits to fund the rebellion.”

“Hm. Young lady, be as blunt as you please. I spent far too much of my youth mincing words,” Midla said with a smirk, handing a glowing blue device over to Barriss. “This is a binary beacon, partnered to another on the bridge. When you need to find me again, use it.”

“Thank you for all your assistance,” Barriss said politely.

“Good luck to you both,” Midla said. “Try not to die.”

In an odd unison, Ahsoka and Barriss replied, “May the Force be with you.”

A moment later, the *Eclipse* passed through the hangar’s shield and drifted aware from the warship,
ion engines firing up and taking it towards Corellia, the planet with its three moons just a quartet of
glimmering lights across the vastness of space. The journey wouldn’t be a quick one. Helpful as
Midla’s assistance had been, she couldn’t drop a Separatist warship too close to one of the galaxy’s
Core Worlds without causing a panic. It would take a few days as sub-light to reach the planet,
during which time Karrde’s group would presumably get the dreadnoughts together and ready for
pickup. They had the money, now it was time for the smugglers to give what was promised.

Using the encryption and frequency Karrde had provided, Ahsoka sent the message with informing
the smuggler how much money had been received, and where the dreadnoughts were intended to be
delivered, in this case being sent to coordinates just outside the system where they could be retrieved.
All she could do now was trust that it wasn’t a huge scam and Karrde had made off with millions of
credits, though as mercenary as she found him, he didn’t seem the type to back out of his contracts.

If he had, she would find him.

Ahsoka had never been to Corellia, spending her early life almost entirely on Coruscant and then
only going where the war took her. A history of isolationism had kept Corellia far away from the
battle against the Separatists, and now Bel Iblis wanted the dreadnoughts to fight the Empire. Ahsoka
wasn’t sure if local culture meant they were only concerned with the Empire out of self-interest, or if
they were better at picking their battles than she had been.

The instructions Karrde had provided were straightforward: provide the necessary payment and a
solar system, then allow for three days for the ships to be moved to interstellar space to coordinates
dependent on the system in question. Then, inform whatever group of rebels Ahsoka had recruited
the ships were waiting for them.

The trip through the Corellia system provided the perfect time frame to let the smugglers work. In the
meantime, Ahsoka spent the days relaxed in the pilot’s chair, looking out into the blackness of space,
often accompanied by Barriss, though she was often less interested in the stars than in sitting in the
same room with Ahsoka, reading and occasionally breaking out the pazaak deck to pass the time.
After many frustrating hours, Ahsoka eventually managed her way up from winning one match in
twenty to one match in five. The droids wandered about, chattering with each other, unaffected by
boredom. Every hour, Corellia grew a little bit bigger, until they descending into the atmosphere over
Coronet, the planetary capital.

Mixed in with the traffic of all the repulsorcraft and starships flying through the city, Ahsoka adjusted
the comm with the frequency and encryption Bel Iblis had provided instead to alert his people of
where and when to get the dreadnoughts, flying in proximity of the capitol, with assurance that
someone would always be listening.

Security being more important than ever, Ahsoka had set up their comm with a modulated voice,
both to throw off anyone listening in and, albeit reluctantly, to keep her identity unknown even to
those she transmitted to The codes Bel Iblis had provided were sent, and Ahsoka recited her
practiced introduction, with some modifications Barriss had suggested.

“This is Fulcrum. I’m transmitting coordinates and instructions to retrieve the promised supplies.”

Now that Bel Iblis’s people knew the coordinates for Karrde’s dreadnoughts, Ahsoka’s job was, for
the moment, done. The information sent, the Eclipse headed towards the address Midla had provided
them, a top-floor apartment on a complex in the middle of Coronet, with a private landing pad for the freighter.

The safehouse was similar in concept to the one on Pantora: exceedingly accommodating, and innocuously defensible. The two doors all had several deadbolts each, one connecting to the city, one to the landing pad, no way for anyone to access the ship except through the living space. The windows were, on inspection, transparisteel and several times thicker than usual, with a coating that could be tinted until they were opaque. The elevation left very few vantage points from the surrounding buildings to spy on whoever lived here. Inspecting a control panel opening to the private landing pad, Ahsoka found she could activate a deflector shield connecting the exit to the *Eclipse,* protecting anyone fleeing from enemy fire.

The panel also showed displays from several security cameras arranged around the exterior and the roof. Checking one of the cameras herself after figuring out where it must be located, Ahsoka found that the surveillance equipment was built directly into the black-painted wall, the dark color concealing the lens. There was also the option to turn on a static dampener and conceal any signs of life inside the residence.

Time to get settled in, and, unfortunately, start dealing with their severe hyper-lag. They’d arrived just before dawn, while the faintest glimmer of light were appearing over the horizon, and were both already exhausted.

There were eight small bedrooms, apparently divided up from some more spacious ones for whoever Midla usually had staying here, and Barriss and Ahsoka each picked out one.

“‘Night, Barriss.”

“Goodnight, Ahsoka.”

Chapter End Notes

Lot to talk about with this one. I don't know how many of you have read *The Thrawn Trilogy,* but I highly recommend you do, because Thrawn is one of the best villains in the franchise and I don't think people really get why. Most of the fandom, especially prior to his appearance in Rebels, associated him with art analysis, some negatively so, (justifiably) considering it a contrivance. But that's not why he's a threat.

Thrawn's skill isn't only deducing what an enemy will do and acting accordingly. It's understanding their behavior and feeding them information to undermine their efforts without them even realizing it. The art schtick is just window dressing.

In *Heir to the Empire,* Thrawn orchestrated multiple attempts to capture the heroes, seemingly knowing where they will be before they arrive, making them all question who they can trust with that information. One attempt involved a fake Millennium Falcon, trying to get them aboard and trap them. Following that, Han and Leia go to Lando to hide out, only for Luke to, by an improbable coincidence, show up at the same place, at the same time, in a situation where they're vulnerable.

After recent events, there was a moment where they fear it's another imperial trap, and seriously consider firing on his X-Wing. Because of Thrawn fueling paranoia and distrust, the Millenium Goddamn Falcon almost shot Luke down. It was only because
Leia could sense him that it didn't, and it still wasn't an easy call for her.

This happened early, too. At that point, they didn't know Thrawn's name, didn't even know he exists. That incident wasn't in his plan, but he's having such an effect through his machinations that our heroes are doubting their allies, their friends, and their own judgement. THAT'S why he's such a terrifying villain. Ahsoka just experienced a taste of that.

Also got to give a real look at how the droidekas see the world. It took a few tries to get that right blend of childish simplicity because they're only a couple months old, and coldly utilitarian logic that would make them unable to really think about other options in their lives while still being confident in the very first choice they've ever made. That's one more than any of the clones ever got. Considering they're so young, they've got their lives together to a remarkable degree.

Next chapter's going to be something really special, I can promise you that.
Barriss dimly became aware of the smell of some tea, and was somehow sitting down, her surroundings quiet. Opening her eyes, the blurry surroundings eventually became crisp.

Including Luminara, who was sitting across the table from her.

Her fists clenching, Barriss wondered if it was possible to beat yourself into unconsciousness while dreaming, and was curious to see how many times she’d need to pound her head against the table in front of to achieve the effect. Instead, she wisely chose to stand up and walk away.


“Leaving already, apprentice?” Luminara said, still seated and sipping her tea.

“I am finished with this,” Barriss said, trying in vain to pry the door open with her fingers. “And I am finished with you.”

“I know you hate me, but I want to mend things,” her old master said. “Please, Barriss, talk to me.”

“No. There’s no way of mending things any longer, you are not Luminara, she’s dead,” Barriss said. “And I don’t hate her. I simply never, ever want to think about or be reminded of her ever again. There is a difference.”

Thinking about this was painful enough, having to live it again was unbearable, and Barriss began to cry. For a moment, she tried to focus on something else, hold in the tears, ignore all the memories that were coming back. Every time she’d ever felt like she wasn’t good enough, every time she’d pushed herself too hard trying to be better, every time she’d blamed herself for not being both peaceful and a warrior because she was supposed to be, and couldn’t. Every single time, unaware as her master may have been, she’d felt worthless because of Luminara. On top of that, the knowledge of how much she’d loved her master, and the pain of losing her.

She wasn’t a luminous being who could rid herself of these damned emotions. She was meat and blood and grey matter, the last of which needed to get rid of all these accumulated stress hormones.

Wiping her cheeks with her sleeve, she found black ink smeared across them, running away along with the tears. Her tattoos? Checking the back of her hands, the diamonds were gone, as, presumably, the ones on her face were.

“If you don’t want to speak to me, why are you here, then?” asked Luminara.

“Because I haven’t found a way to escape once and for all,” Barriss said, pulling out her lightsaber to cut the door open, shuttering when she noticed its blue color, throwing her old saber away. Wearing her old outfit was no more pleasant, but she’d tolerate it.

Wondering how else she could get out of this room and this conversation, Barriss felt the saber’s replacement instantly appear in her hand, the crackling orange blade jutting out of the hilt and effortlessly cutting through the door.
Out in the hallway of the Jedi Temple, Barriss found herself blocked on both sides by four temple guards.

“Cease hostilities!” they shouted, igniting their yellow lightsabers.

“I never started them!” Barriss shouted back, then felt a slight weight pressing on her shoulders and moved her free hand to her chest, feeling the impression of her stun pistol beneath her robes. No, beneath her coat, the one she’d bought on Pantora.

With all the practice she’d gotten recently controlling multiple objects, hitting the activation switches on all four of those dual-sabers was easy. Easier still was hitting each of the guards with a stun blast at this close a range.

“You should’ve killed more of them, Barriss,” said a fifth guard that manifested behind of her. Barriss knew the voice, even with the helmet muffling it. “It would’ve been far kinder.”

“Is that your excuse, Inquisitor?” said Barriss, turning around to face the white-clad sentinel. “That you were somehow being merciful?”

“I wish you’d killed me,” he said quietly, ignoring her questions.

Barriss almost wanted to comfort him, try and understand what he meant. Instead, she threw him back and knocked that white helmet off his head, revealing light grey eyes rather than the yellow and black she was familiar with.

“I don’t care,” Barriss said, shaking her head and walking around him. “I gave you a second chance! USE IT! I’m using mine, what’s your excuse?”

“You’ll wish you’d killed me.”

“Consider it done!” Barriss said flippantly, marching on past him without turning back around.

Barriss turned a corner and walked down another hallway, stopping midway through it considering if she should go back and try and get a clearer picture of what he meant.

The blue lightsaber swinging at her head, barely blocked in time by her own orange blade, presented her with more urgent concerns.

“Funny. Those belong to Ventress,” said Skywalker, as his lightsaber’s blade pressed against hers, the orange blade now smooth and stabilized.

“What are you babbling about? I only have one saber,” Barriss said, angling her blade to direct the force of Skywalker’s away from her, then slipping around and out of the blade lock, keeping her distance. “Second, this is my lightsaber. I made it. And I’m proud of it, no matter how shoddy the crafting!”

Skywalker growled at her, then charged and continued the duel in his usual overaggressive style while Barriss kept on the defensive, leaping up to the pillars of the temple and out of reach.

As she looked down on him from a place of relative safety, Barriss wondered how long this dream would go on.

Her feelings on Anakin Skywalker were decidedly mixed. She knew he was one of the Jedi’s top generals, which meant he was directly responsible for more of the carnage of the Clone Wars than just about anyone, and was personal friends with Palpatine. Then again, he’d stopped Barriss and
possibly saved Ahsoka’s life from her botched plot. She supposed she ought to be thankful he’d been so dedicated to Ahsoka’s protection. Much more so than anyone else was.

He’d also thrown her into a tree.

That settled it. No matter how much it took, she was going to win this time.

Barriss leapt down from her perch, bringing the full force of her weight and the strongest swing she was capable of down on her enemy, flipping back off him when he blocked it, landing, and lunging, taking advantage of her greater agility to keep the stronger duelist on the defensive.

Their duel moved out into the courtyard, and rather than repeat any more of their previous fight, Barriss dashed away from Skywalker, holding out her saber to cut down all the neatly-lined up trees, then began using the Force to throw them at her opponent. He was able to sidestep or jump over most of them, but Barriss caught him between the last two. One was pushed away, the other hit him in the back, the momentum carrying him into the temple wall.

It wasn’t enough to keep him down, and the one swing from Skywalker got her in another lock, with her bending backwards as she was overpowered. Just like last time.

Concentrating on Skywalker’s artificial hand, Barriss could sense the flow of energy and the movement of metal inside. And she could interfere with it.

The battery of the prosthetic was ripped from its housing, hovering in midair, leaking acid as Barriss crumpled it, and Skywalker’s lightsaber dropped to the ground when his metal digits went limp.

Skywalker said nothing, and seemed incapable of speech. That first line, as Barriss recalled, was nothing but a repetition of what he’d said to her before. Perhaps, given how little thought Barriss paid to the man, her mind didn’t know enough of his behavior to ascribe to this facsimile. Maybe that’s why he had nothing to say.

Barriss flinched, suddenly a stinging pain in her face. Touching the source, she could feel nothing there, only a familiar soreness of the skin. The stinging continued, moving across her cheeks, and the paths it took told Barriss her new tattoos had taken shape.

“Resorting to violence so readily, Barriss?” Luminara said, distracting Barriss long enough for Skywalker to kick her.

“You are in NO POSITION to judge me on that point!” shouted Barriss, as she threw Skywalker against a wall and cut his lightsaber in half.

“You’ve become much stronger, however there’s more to self-betterment than strength,” said Luminara. “It is the way of the Jedi to seek peace, both within and without.”

“This is so predictable. I’m disagreeing with you and the Jedi, therefore I am in danger of falling to the dark side. This is EXACTLY why I never talked to you about anything important, you know that, don’t you? Of course you know! Of course this is how you’d act!” Barriss screeched, more to herself than anything. “You. Are. Not. Luminara! You’re everything about her that frightened and aggravated me! No, used to frighten me, the aggravation is still very much present.” Then she raised her arms and shouted up into the atrium of the temple, to whatever manifestation of the Force or her subconscious mind that was causing this, “I already knew all this information, thank you! This is why I wasn’t interested in having another of these delightful discussions! NOW WHY DON’T YOU-”

There was a sudden feeling of being off-balance as Barriss noticed she was in a new environment:
the courtroom Ahsoka was being tried in. Feeling the stares of everyone who’d been there only made it worse.

“Barriss... is that true?” Ahsoka asked.

Barriss stared across that pit for a long time, not wanting to repeat what had happened, not wanting to tell Ahsoka what she’d done to her.

Everyone else in the room, the senators, the guards, the Jedi, even Palpatine all froze like sculptures, the light illuminating them gradually dimming until only Ahsoka was visible.

Leaping over the chasm separating the two of them, Barriss worked her way into Ahsoka’s cramped platform, carefully cutting apart her handcuffs and looking her in the eyes. Doing so made her realize how much taller than her Ahsoka had grown since this day.

“It’s true, Ahsoka. I’m... I’m sorry. There’s no excuse for what I did. There’s nothing else I can say earnestly. Except... I promise you I will keep trying to do better. You deserve better.”

Ahsoka smiled at her. “Then you should tell Ahsoka that. You’re not talking to her any more than you were talking to Luminara.”

It was the middle of the afternoon in Coronet, the bright light of the planet’s yellow sun irritating a sleep-deprived Ahsoka as she opened up various canned goods from the kitchen. Mediocre as they were, she’d eaten worse, vigorously diving in as Barriss walked in, somehow looking even less rested.

“Trouble sleeping?” asked Ahsoka.

“No more than the usual, regrettably,” replied Barriss, pulling her hood up, fastening her boots, and stepping out through the door to the landing pad, her attention lingering on Ahsoka for a moment. “I’m going out for some fresh air.”

Shoveling the last of her breakfast/late lunch into her mouth and washing down the last enormous mouthful with the last of her water so she could talk, Ahsoka walked out after her.

The view of the city was beautiful, Corellia’s sunlight reflecting off thousands of kilometer-high skyscrapers, its three moons high in the sky. Unlike the endless cityscape of Coruscant, snow-capped mountains could be seen in the distance, low-lying clouds drifting over them. The scenery seemed to be helping Barriss’s mood as she smiled lightly, observing everything from the walkway between their residence of the week and their ship.

“Hey, Barriss, um, we’ve been traveling together for a while now, and after everything that’s happened, I’m really lucky to have you around,” said Ahsoka, taking a deep breath. She hadn’t been planning to do this right now, but there was no reason not to. A planet as beautiful, lawful, and developed as Corellia was a better option than most. “I don’t know if the fight against the Empire would be moving ahead like it is if I didn’t have you.”

“Not that I’m not flattered, Ahsoka, but what is it you’re driving at?” Barriss asked, still smiling faintly at the compliments.
Ahsoka wondered if she should just discuss something about the rebellion, quickly deciding that no, she wasn’t going to get a better opportunity than this, a bit of peace where they weren’t running away from or preparing for a fight.

“I was wondering if you would like to go out. On a date. With me,” said Ahsoka, as she began to hold her breath. No taking that back.

Barriss’s peaceful smile stayed eerily frozen for several seconds, then slowly faded, the rest of her keeping completely motionless as she processed what had just been said. Then her eyes drifted down from Ahsoka’s, her forehead scrunching up as she wracked her brain, making sure she had heard that correctly. Once every single neuron in her skull had gone over the last fifteen seconds, then double and triple checked it so her brain could be certain that, yes, Ahsoka had definitely said... that... her mouth fall agape as she looked back up at Ahsoka. Making a faint, strangled ‘uhhhhhhh’ noise, her eyes drifted around, terrified, as if she was looking for an escape route, finding nowhere to go except the platform holding their ship, her breathing still quiet yet noticeably faster as her chest swelled and contracted visibly, her heart pounding so hard Ahsoka’s montrals were able to pick it up. Then Barriss clutched her stomach, pursed her lips as if holding something in, got a grip on the safety railing with her other hand, and puked over the side.

This was still going a lot better than Ahsoka had been afraid it would.

It still didn’t leave a clear path of what to do. Wait patiently? Walk away? Hold back her hood and pat her back while she finished?

“Oh... it’s okay to say ‘no’,,” Ahsoka said eventually.

“No- I mean, not ‘no’ no, it’s fine, I- hold on, please,” Barriss said as she rushed into the kitchen, poured a glass of water, rinsed her mouth a few times, then put the glass in the dishwasher, all while Ahsoka kept a safe distance back like she was trying not to spook an animal. “That, that was stress, that wasn’t you. The thought of you, and me, it isn’t repulsive, I just wasn’t expecting it, and, and... I need to think about this.”

Barriss rushed to the door.

“Where are you going?” asked Ahsoka.

“I said I need to think about this. Please, leave me alone.”

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You had it. You were there. THAT WAS THE MOMENT YOU’VE BEEN MENTALLY PREPARING YOURSELF FOR! No, this should’ve been easier! You were wondering whether to ask her, then she moved faster than expected, she took the initiative, ALL YOU HAD TO DO WAS SAY ‘YES’! You can manage ‘Yes’, it’s only a single syllable! You could’ve stammered out mangled words for ten minutes and it would’ve still turned out better if you had that one word mixed in!

Barriss chastised herself over how she’d handled that conversation, stopping in place and looking back in the direction of the apartment.

I should go back.

No. No, this is important. I lost my composure. Why did I lose my composure? That was exactly what I wanted.
Barriss wandered deeper into Coronet for several minutes, searching for a peaceful spot to sit down and think.

*Obviously, I like her. I should want our relationship to move in this direction.*

*I’m nervous about it because... because... it isn’t some lingering concerns about attachment, is it? No, I’m past that.*

*Then why?*

There were many things about Ahsoka which Barriss admired. Unfortunately, the history between the two of them made this shift jarring.

*You’re nervous about everything, especially when it comes to Ahsoka,* Barriss thought to herself.

*Think. If we actually begin this relationship, what could conceivably happen?*

*Best case scenario: we continue the fight the Empire together while forming a deeper connection than we already have, grow old together, maybe get some students to teach after Palpatine is defeated.*

*Worst case scenario... worst case scenario... hm...*

Barriss thought of all the possible ways this could end on poor terms, albeit from a limited understanding of romantic relationships, and kept coming back to the same realization: nothing she could imagine was any worse than the things that had already happened. After betraying, physical assaulting, and framing Ahsoka for mass murder, Barriss had recovered from that. Against all logic and probability saying she shouldn’t.

Now, after everything that happened, she was also completely certain that nothing that bad would or could ever happen again. The worst case scenario had already occurred, nothing worse would come, therefore her relationship with Ahsoka was effectively unsinkable.

There was probably something she wasn’t thinking of, but it was an encouraging result.

____________________________________________________________________________________

*She can handle herself. Right? Yeah, she’s gone from getting completely outclassed by that inquisitor to thrashing him without getting a scratch. And it’s Coronet, this place isn’t dangerous. She’ll be fine. Whenever she comes back...*

Ahsoka paced around their new residence, wondering how she should pass the time, uneasily taking a look into Barriss’s room, finding the bed made and the few items she’d brought in neatly unpacked.

“Hey, Revan?”

“Yes?” said the holocron, manifesting its usual avatar in front of her. “How can I help you, Ahsoka?”

“I need your advice. It’s about Barriss, and you’re the only other person she’s been spending time with lately.”

“What about Barriss? What happened?”
“I asked Barriss out on a date,” she said, and the holocron was still for a moment. A very brief moment.

“Really? Alright! I was worried it was going to take another five planets or some banthashit,” said Revan. “Hm. I’d hoped she’d work up the nerve to ask you, rather than the other way around. I guess that was a bit much to hope for.”

“Wait, you were expecting this?” asked Ahsoka.

“Are you kidding? I’ve been pushing Barriss to make a move since I arrived on this ship. Earlier, actually.”

“You’ve been pushing her?” Despite recalling a few comments on the subject, Ahsoka was a bit exasperated to find that the holocron had taken such a focused interest in her love life. “Why?”

“I want Barriss to be happy,” said Revan. “Well? Where are you taking her? I recommend someplace in the moderate price range- you two don’t have anything particular fancy to wear, do you? Do you know what kinds of food she likes? I know you like meat, but take her somewhere with a wider range of foods, she seems like she leans more towards vegetarian options even if she’s not strict about it.”

“She didn’t say ‘yes’,” Ahsoka said. “She ran off... after puking her guts out. Said she needs to think about things.”

The holocron flashed red, its avatar changing color in kind and growing an extra meter to dwarf Ahsoka.

“WHAT DID YOU DO?”

“Nothing! I just asked her out, and it scared her!” shouted Ahsoka, unintimidated by the hologram. “She threw up over the side of the building, then left.”

The Revan hologram rapidly shrunk down to normal, cradling its face in its hands with a mixture of amusement and disappointment. “Oh, Barriss, you were so close...”

“Close to what?”

“Close to you! She’s been pining after you for the whole journey! Didn’t you notice?” snapped Revan.

“Of course I noticed!” Ahsoka snapped back. “I just, I didn’t expect to reach a point where I might want to act on it. Yeah, there’s a lot about her that I like... and then there’s a lot of things she’s done that weren’t exactly fun for me. Then there’s also so many weird things that I don’t really know how to deal with, like whatever role I have in those weird dreams of hers, or that time we slept together-”

“Holdup, what? You slept together? When was this? I’m pretty sure if that actually happened, it would’ve given her a panic attack.”

Ahsoka really wished she hadn’t let that slip, especially not to Revan. “I neglected to check on the arrangements on the new ship before I freed Barriss. Such as whether there were two bunks. We made do the first night,” Ahsoka answered. Revan stared at her for a while. Motionless. It was starting to unnerve Ahsoka. And then-

“HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA
“Are you finished?” demanded Ahsoka.

“Oh. Wow. You planned a breakout from a fortified imperial facility and an escape into the far reaches of the galaxy, and you forget to get a second bed. How... convenient.”

“I did not plan that. It wasn’t- it would be wrong of me to tell you what happened without Barriss knowing, but that night was not pleasant. For either of us. At all.”

“What, did you wake up in some scandalous, compromising position? GASP! Were you engaging in full-clothed, light cuddling? Did she start crying because she was so tightly wound that expressing any physical or emotional intimacy made her want to die?” Revan asked sarcastically, and Ahsoka couldn’t think of a response that wasn’t confirmation or a lie. After the pause, all the amusement left Revan’s voice. “Damn, watching you kids gives me way too many reminders of my own relationship history. Right, laughing time is done now. Do you know where she went?”

“She said she needed to ‘think about it’,” said Ahsoka. It wasn’t like there weren’t a great many things for both of them to think about now. “Any idea what I should do?”

“There’s nothing to do. You can’t force this. You’ll just have to wait until she comes back on her own.”

For nearly two hours, Barriss walks in circles among the walkways connecting the skyscrapers in the upper levels of Coronet’s residential district, half because she needed time to think, half tiring herself out on the strange notion that the slowly growing mix hunger, fatigue, and boredom might eventually outweigh her abject terror about going back.

Whether or not you are forgiven is not something you can decide.

She was on the walkway leading to the building.

You need to talk to her. It’ll be fine.

In the elevator, ascending to the top floor.

Let her forgive you.

Taking things one step at a time, in a very literal sense, she approached the door.
A meditation session in the living room wasn’t normally Ahsoka’s preferred method of killing time. It was particularly difficult in this case, since whenever she really reached out with the Force, felt the flow of life throughout the city, she kept finding herself drawn to a familiar blob of anxiety that was wandering around, and which she knew did not want to be focused on right now.

For about an hour after giving up, she laid down on the couch and waited, abusing her powers by boredly bringing herself snacks without moving. Living the dream.

A knock at the door wasn’t something she’d expected to hear, especially since the anxiety ball she sensed told Ahsoka exactly who it was. Confused, Ahsoka got off the couch and rushed to the door, finding Barriss standing around, looking embarrassed.

“I... I left without a key,” said Barriss.

“Oh. Right, that makes sense,” said Ahsoka, stepping aside to let Barriss back in. Ahsoka still sensed Barriss’s fear, yet, she didn’t look afraid.

“It’s not easy for me to deal with emotions such as this,” said Barriss.

“I know it isn’t. That’s why I tried saying them first,” said Ahsoka. “You know how I feel now, and even if you’re not good at expressing it, I know you feel the same way.”

“You do?”

“Barriss, I’m not an idiot. When you came back from the caves on Dantooine, Revan made a comment about me being cute. And you looked embarrassed. Did you think I wouldn’t notice or remember that? Couldn’t put that one together? Well, I think you’re cute, too. What about how happy you were to see me on Myrkr that you almost crushed my torso hugging me?” said Ahsoka, trying to make sure her tone of voice didn’t sound critical. “With all the meals and conversations we’ve shared, we’ve practically been on a few dates already. Why not just make it official?”

“I can’t exactly say you’re wrong, but I don’t understand why you feel this way,” said Barriss. “I need to know your reasons. After everything that happened between us, why would you want to move things in this direction?”

“Barriss, I asked because of everything that’s happened, not in spite of the bombing. Because I know I can trust you now. I think this is worth giving a shot,” said Ahsoka, watching Barriss growing calmer by the word. “This is probably really uncomfortable for you, and I’m sorry for springing it on you like this. Why don’t we just settle down for the night-”

“I wouldn’t be able to sleep,” said Barriss, taking Ahsoka’s hand and pulling her towards the door, turning back to give her a reassuring smile. “I saw a few good places while I was wandering. Let’s go eat.”

Chapter End Notes
There. I did it. It took a meticulously planned plot spaced over 200,000 words, but I’ve fixed Filoni’s mess. This is why the past several chapters were getting posted so quick, I knew I was close. Nobody else was going to fucking do it, including Filoni, so I had to get it done, because I gotta do everything myself in this fandom.

In case you were thinking it, yes, in the first draft Barriss puked directly onto Ahsoka rather than over the railing. I decided to let her hold on to some of her dignity.
Out of their Element

You can do this, Barriss thought to herself. You went from a helpless dead weight to pummeling the Grand Inquisitor in the space of weeks. You are an accomplice of smugglers, cunning strategist, wielder of the Force, terror of the Empire.

You can maintain an air of calm and collectedness on a date with Ahsoka Tano.

No. Not merely an ‘air’. I am going to BE calm and collected.

Walking down the elevated walkway suspended half a kilometer above Corellia’s surface, half a step ahead of Ahsoka and leading her by the hand, Barriss picked out one of the restaurants she’d passed on her walk around the city. They’d gone several blocks now, quietly taking in the scenery.

“So, where do you want to go?” asked Ahsoka.

“There’s a place called ‘The Crimson Bantha’ that looked appealing, and judging by how many people were eating there, is quite popular with the locals. Whatever it is they serve, it smells delicious,” Barriss said, hoping they had something Ahsoka would like.

After being seated, Ahsoka and Barriss scrolled through the menu on screens built into their table, finding a considerable selection of Corellian cuisine, and various imported items the descriptions insisted were of the best quality.

“I’ll try a glass of Alderaanian whisky,” said Barriss, tapping the pad and confirming the order.


“I’m aware. Then again, I’ve done a great many things recently which would normally be unexpected of me,” said Barriss, as the server droid quickly arrived with their drinks, which she thanked it for before it departed to give them more time to look over the menu. “Accepting your invitation was one. Why not add to the list and try inebriating myself?”

There were many possible answers to that, but deciding not to poke holes in that rhetorical question left Ahsoka to watch as a server droid hovered back towards their table with their drinks.

In the time they’d known each other, Ahsoka had come to the conclusion Barriss had at least a theoretical knowledge of practically everything, and didn’t rush into things without some prior knowledge of what to do.

It seemed Barriss was intent on continuing the night’s theme of surprising her, this time with unexpected levels of reckless ignorance.

Despite that whisky being exceedingly strong, Barriss, possibly under the impression she’d been given a shot glass, proceeded to drink down three fingers worth of the stuff in one go, too fast for Ahsoka to stop her and inform her of what a bad idea that was. Instead Ahsoka was left looking worried for a moment as Barriss found out for herself.
“Ah... refreshing...” coughed Barriss, each syllable a struggle as she breathed slow, the fumes on her breath slowly dissipating as she exhaled.

“I guess that’s- Wait, should you be mixing alcohol with your medication?” asked Ahsoka. Barriss’s look of triumph at having finished the drink turned to horror as she realized Ahsoka was quite right. Ahsoka had no idea what kind of reaction Barriss would have to alcohol, but Barriss must’ve had the medical knowledge to know how the alcohol would work with her antidepressants, since she wordlessly got up and rushed to the refresher.

Ahsoka distracted herself, and her exceptional hearing, from the not-too-distant sound of Barriss puking for the second time tonight, on purpose this time at least, by catching snippets of surrounding conversations of the other patrons.

“-Emperor raising taxes and taking funds for his damn military buildup after promising to make the Republic great again. Can’t believe I supported that guy.”

“-got to be the worst drink I’ve ever had. Isn’t Corellian brandy supposed to be a little stronger?”

“-and then I had to change clothes after this blob of puke fell out of the sky right into my speeder. Where did that even come from?”

A moment later, Barriss returned to her seat, looking queasy.

“Uh, you feeling okay?” asked Ahsoka. Barriss nodded once, eyes looking in Ahsoka’s direction but not really focused on her. “Okay, let’s get you a glass of water and start with some soup.”

“I’m sorry about that,” Barriss muttered a minute later as she cradled her glass of ice water.

“Hey, I’m the one who asked you out, remember? Whether or not this goes well is all on me,” Ahsoka said, scrolling through the menu to pick out their dinner.

I’m going to have to kiss her eventually. I don’t know how to do that. In a romantic relationship, there’s something people do with their tongues, isn’t there? You put it into your partner’s mouth? That is so strange, the only things in reach would be teeth, how is that supposed to be enjoyable? No, I can’t be the first person to think about this, I’m clearly missing some detail of the whole method. She’s taller than me, and I supposed to stand on my toes, or will she lean down? Should I ask? No, I’d look ridiculous.

Even on my toes, I don’t think I’d be tall enough.

I’m going to have to ask.

Maybe I should pull her head down? Gently? Oh no my hands are sweating I’m losing too much water my mouth is going to be dry I hope she doesn’t want to hold my hand-

Barriss took a long drink from her glass while staring unblinking at Ahsoka, accidentally swallowed an ice cube, then kept a perfectly straight face while listening to Ahsoka talk, holding her breath as the ice melted and dislodged from her esophagus while her damp hands kneaded the fabric of her pants.
“I think some of the shots from the fighters blew out some of the cables, then when we jumped out of
the system it overloaded the supercapacitors that build up energy in the- Are you okay?” asked
Ahsoka, as Barriss inhaled sharply and made a wheezing sound.

“I’m perfectly fine, thank you. Tell me more about what happened to our hyperdrive.”

“Oh, right, all I need is to replace the supercapacitors and check the wiring, then the hyperdrive will
be fixed and we’ll be ready to go.”

“Go where?” asked Barriss. “This may be the first time we haven’t decided on a new destination
prior to leaving.”

“I’m not really sure,” admitted Ahsoka. “Onderon may be the best option, it’s a hotspot of insurgent
activity, enough to handle operating at least one dreadnought. We could also check in with Queen
Apailana on Naboo.”

“We should decide soon,” Barriss said a bit disparagingly. “The Empire won’t wait for us to get
ready.”

Their food arrived: Ahsoka’s bantha steak, cooked rare with some sautéed greens, while Barriss got
a pasta dish mixed with various vegetables and a cream sauce.

“Want some of mine?” asked Ahsoka, cutting off a piece of her meat.

Barriss hesitated for a second, then answered, “Why the kriff not,” and took the offer, slowly
chewing, savoring, and swallowing the steak before adding, “Mhm, that was delicious.”

“Yeah, glad you like it, but... did you just curse?” asked Ahsoka.

“Yes, I suppose I did,” said Barriss. “Why? Did it not sound right?”

Ahsoka didn’t know what to say. Policing what Barriss said wasn’t something she cared about, and
she’d said plenty of worse things herself. Yet something about hearing her swear felt fundamentally
wrong. Like the Force itself was rejecting the idea of it happening. “You can say whatever you want,
I just didn’t ever expect to hear that kind of language coming from you.”

The two of them both ate slowly, each brainstorming conversation topics, all of the more interesting
ones involving treasonous plots they shouldn’t discuss in a public setting.

*Am I missing something here?* wondered Ahsoka as she and Barriss both finished their food. Not
much was happening.

They weren’t talking very much, and Ahsoka wasn’t sure if that was a bad sign or not.

*Anakin was secretly married to Padmé for years, and they were happy. I assume. How did they act
around each other? What’s the right way of doing this?*

Recalling that most of the times she’d seen her master and his wife in the same room, they were all
being shot at, Ahsoka was forced to accept she couldn’t model any romantic relationship off of
theirs. Maybe that was for the best. Barriss seemed to be having a good time, anyway. Was she
overreacting? Ahsoka just wanted to take Barriss on a fun first date. And not make her any more
nauseated, because she was not at all convinced something wouldn’t happen to make her hurl up that pasta.

This isn’t going the way I imagined it would at all, and I have no clue how I should deal with it.

Oh.

Wow.

I think this is what it’s like being Barriss.

Once the bill arrived, Barriss reached into her coat pocket to pull out the cost of her meal before Ahsoka stopped her.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m paying,” said Ahsoka. “Again, I asked you out, remember?”

“All of our money is shared. It makes little difference.”

“It’s the principle!” said Ahsoka, leaving the requisite credits. “This is how it’s supposed to work. Right?”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right,” said Barriss. “Would you like to take a walk around the city?”

“Yeah, let’s see if we can find a way to make you throw up a third time.”

“If you do that, you’re buying me another meal.”

The two of them walked around, checking out the nearest park, reading plaques listing the designers of the architecture. It was all very pleasant, and utterly aimless, and they were both starting to realize it.

“Okay, Barriss, I’ve gotta level with you before I mess something up—was that the whole date?” asked Ahsoka.

“I, I don’t know?” said Barriss, just as uncertain as Ahsoka. “I’ve never been on a date.”

“Um… did you enjoy it?”

“Yes. Yes, I did,” Barriss said with reassuring conviction, nodding confidently a few times.

“…Wanna help me fix the hyperdrive?” asked Ahsoka. “I know it’s not as if we’re going anywhere, but we don’t want to get caught unaware and have no way out of the system.”

“That sounds like a fine way to end the evening.”

“Alright! Let’s get back to the ship, then,” Ahsoka said, a tad awkwardly, spending the walk back looking around at every building they passed, searching for something fun they could do. There wasn’t.

“Ahsoka, firing a ship at lightspeed isn’t practical as a tactic,” Barriss said as she watched Ahsoka disassemble the panels connecting their power generator to the hyperdrive. “‘Lightspeed’ is merely a
colloquialism, vessels don’t actually approach the speed of light. Doing so with the mass of even a simple starfighter would require energy on the order of hundreds of thousands of thermonuclear warheads. That’s enough energy to obliterate and entire fleet in an instant, if warships could generate that much power, it would be diverted towards more powerful versions of standard weapons, such as some kind of super-laser cannon.”

“Of course that won’t work, what, do you think I’m an idiot?” Ahsoka retorted. “What I meant was, you could fire projectiles at high speed in realspace, then send them into hyperspace to emerge and hit enemy craft.”

“How would that accomplish more than a straightforward ramming maneuver?”

“You could use it to get past enemy deflector shields,” replied Ahsoka, as she shined a flashlight into the inner workings of her ship, checking for the damage she’d expected.

“That’s possible in theory, but hyperspace jumps require advanced computer control to achieve precision down to the nearest kilometer, and coordination between fleets moving in unison,” objected Barriss. “Getting a kinetic projectile to emerge between an enemy vessel’s hull and the edge of its shield, or even hitting a smaller capital ship, isn’t practical.”

“Yep, here’re the overloaded supercapacitors,” said Ahsoka, pulling out the damaged equipment as Barriss held the replacements for her. “Good thing the self-sealing stem bolts turned on to contain the fumes. Anyway, the mass shadow of the enemy ship would pull the projectile from hyperspace when the two intersected. It could work.”

“That still leaves the problem of proper targeting,” countered Barriss, as the fed Ahsoka several lengths of superconducting coil to reestablish electrical connections. “Any vessel large enough to be hit reliably would have such a large mass shadow your theoretical missiles would emerge from hyperspace outside their shields regardless... I suppose this could be practical in circumventing a planetary energy shield, or even one designed to protect individual cities.”

“Really?” asked Ahsoka, as she tested the electrical connections to make sure the current was flowing before she restored main power to the hyperdrive. All signs were good. “That’s still a pretty big advantage. Planetary shields are a key part of defense on thousands of worlds, anyone who could find a way past that could weaken the defense at minimal cost.”

“The shield protecting a planet would encompass a significant portion of the atmosphere and many kilometers of terrain, so a computer-controlled navigation system or even a skilled enough pilot could emerge from hyperspace safely, then destroy or disable the shield generator from within,” said Barriss. “It would still be difficult. You’re have to fly tangentially to the planet’s surface or risk flying into the ground, and then, once again, there’s the issue of getting your approach vector to overcome the planet’s gravity well.”

“Alright, neat.” Ahsoka said, sealing up the panels and stretching her back. “Well, hyperdrive’s fixed. That was fun.”

“Yes, it was,” said Barriss. “What should we do now?”

“Um, it’s night out now,” said Ahsoka as she pulled off her safety goggles and wiped her brow. "Wanna look at the stars?"
Two of Corellia’s moons hung low in the sky as Ahsoka and Barriss walked back to the apartment, marveling at the cityscape and the stars above. The lights in Coronet’s public places were engineered in manners limiting light pollution, with minimum luminescence and coverings which directed the light down towards the ground and away from the sky, giving a better view of the stars than on nearly any other Core World.

Barriss’s hand cautiously drifted over to Ahsoka’s, their fingers intertwining as they took in the view.

“Barriss, are you crying?” asked Ahsoka.

“Yes, I- I don’t know why,” Barriss said, sniffling with each word. “I think I’m happy, and that’s causing it?”

“You ‘think’? You can’t tell if you’re happy or not?” Ahsoka asked, amused and kind of worried. “Barriss, do you not know what happiness feels like?”

“Yes, I know what happiness feels like, but not this happy!” Barriss said, wiping away her tears. “I really did have a nice time.”

“So did I... it wasn’t that different from what we normally do, was it?” said Ahsoka. “We check out the planet, we get food, we do stuff, we talk about stuff. When I asked you out, I didn’t expected it to be, well, the same.”

“It wasn’t all the same,” Barriss laughed. “We’re not tiptoeing around each other, for one thing. For another, I could kiss you.”


Recognizing the invitation, Barriss put her left hand on Ahsoka’s waist, right hand on her shoulder to draw her closer while standing on her toes to make up the distance tilted her head up. Then, she pressed her tightly-closed mouth against Ahsoka’s like an idiot.

Think. THINK! There’s no way I’m doing this correctly. What do I do?

Lips contain numerous nerve endings and are very sensitive, if I loosen my own lips and mash my mouth against her mouth while keeping them locked together, she ought to enjoy that.

Ahsoka, who a few seconds ago had been uncomfortably tense because of the way things had been going, relaxed considerably as Barriss pulled her into a tighter embrace.

It’s working. I don’t know how I did it, but it’s working.

As she increasingly felt the need to breath, Barriss pulled away from Ahsoka, who was similarly out of breath, and blinking a bit in surprise.

“What do you want to do now?” asked Ahsoka.

“I’d like... to take things slowly, for now,” said Barriss.

Ahsoka nodded, looking just as worn out as Barriss felt. “That sounds like a good idea.”
Pulling of her boots, hanging up her coat, Barriss stood in front of her bed, then exhaustedly fell face-first into it, spending a few minutes lying perfectly still before rolling over to see the room lit up in a soft violet glow.

“Well? How did it go?” asked Revan.

Barriss was exhausted. Despite how long it had been, there was still a faint taste of alcohol and vomit in her mouth. Her feet were sore from all the walking before and during the date. The food wasn’t exactly agreeing with her. Her palms were perspiring relentlessly. Her throat felt dry and scratchy. She’d banged her head in the Eclipse when Ahsoka wasn’t looking, and there was probably a bruise under her hair. And even though she’d been awake for less than ten hours, she was exhausted.

She’d also kissed Ahsoka.

“It was wonderful.”

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Well, that was a thing, Ahsoka thought as she lounged around in the living room, feeling restless and wondering if she’d moved things too fast, unable to think of any reason waiting longer would’ve changed anything, or anything else she should’ve done. She was dating Barriss now. And she felt pretty damn good about it. The last person any sane being would’ve expected, or recommended.

Eh, it wasn’t as if anyone else whose opinion she cared about was around to criticize.

There was a knocked on the door. No ringing of the chime, just a knock. Nobody should know they were here, and no one on the planet had any business with them. Ahsoka cautiously, quietly stood up and slowly walked towards the door, not feeling or hearing anything unusual.

Keeping her distance, she used the Force to press the button to open the door, and saw a paper envelope stuck to the inside of the door frame. Who uses paper? She didn’t sense anyone nearby, either, had this been put here by a droid?

Levitating the envelope rather than risk touching it, she tore it open and removed a single-page typed letter:

Good work with the drop-off, and thanks for keeping things discrete like I’d asked. Hope you’re finding Corellia pleasant. Payment’s been received, now comes my end of the deal. Meet me at the Corusca Star restaurant tomorrow at mid-day. I’ve got news.

Please destroy this message once you’ve memorized the name.

-TK
In Plain Sight

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

As the galaxy falls further into darkness under the reign of Emperor Palpatine, rebels Ahsoka Tano and Barriss Offee continue their search for allies and resources that can be used to shatter the Galactic Empire, finding the odds stacked against them at every turn.

After helping to assemble and unite enemies of the Empire, the pair have traveled to the Core World of Corellia, delivering a fleet of warships to its rogue elements under the authority of dissident senator Garm Bel Iblis.

While on Corellia, the smuggler leader and information broker Talon Karrde extended an invitation to the former Jedi, intending to uphold his end of their bargain by leading them to other survivors of Order 66...

The Corusca Star was as gleaming, impressive, and decadent as the ecumenopolis it was named for, boasting of the finest cuisine of Coruscant and other Core Worlds. The layout was simple, concentric rings of tables and booth, above them all, a massive white hologram of the galaxy providing the majority of the light.

After explaining they were meeting someone here, they were directed towards Karrde, seated at a table to their left at the outer rim of the room, one which gave him a full view of the majority of the restaurant, his back to the wall. Ahsoka hadn’t recognized him at first on account of the wardrobe change.

Instead of the rugged, practical smuggler gear from Myrkr, Karrde was wearing what must’ve been the most average-looking suit on Corellia, completely uninteresting down to the smallest detail. Because there were no details. The suit was a darkish-bluish-grey, the exact same shade as the tie. It looked relatively new, sort of, from a moderate price range, or maybe it was bought secondhand? And it fit but wasn’t tailored. Or the tailoring wasn’t high quality. Maybe. Even the buttons were dull. His black hair was similarly combed back and smoothed out into this weird shell with no loose strands, and he didn’t have any stubble. If Ahsoka was asked to describe the look later, she wouldn’t be able to, because there was nothing noteworthy about Karrde’s appearance whatsoever. In her opinion, he looked a lot better when he was roughing it in a forest.

“How are you both?” he asked cheerfully, waving to the two seats in front of him. Considering how many credits had recently been put into his accounts, not to mention his plan had worked perfectly so far, he had every reason to be happy.

“We’re very well, thank you,” Barriss said as she took her seat.

“Same,” Ahsoka said as she followed Barriss’s lead. “Mind explaining how you knew where we were staying?”

“The information trail can’t lead any undesired attention to you, if that’s what you’re worried about.”
Karrde answered reassuringly. “Your message told me which system to deliver the agreed-upon ‘supplies’ to, so I figured you would be staying here for at least a few rotations. I’m aware of what happened on Pantora, and the Corellian VIP whom I figure is involved meant you were probably somewhere here in the planet’s capital. Beyond that, well, you left your freighter sitting out in the open on one of the tallest residential complexes in the city. I got lucky during a flyby. Nice place you’ve been staying at, too. And here I thought I was the most hospitable ally you had.”

“Where’s Vrask? Or did you come alone?” asked Ahsoka.

“She’s around,” Karrde answered. “I wanted to keep a low profile, and Vrask doesn’t exactly blend in. Even by Trandoshan standards, she’s enormous, and very reluctant to part with her weapons.”

“Fine. Let’s get down to business- why did you ask us here?” asked Ahsoka.

“To uphold my side of our deal, of course. You recently moved six items from our inventory, with more certainly to be sold later, and brought me tens of millions of credits. Now, I’m going to help you locate your old comrades.”

Ahsoka perked up at that. “You’ve found a Je-?”

“General-purpose solution to your supply concerns? You bet I have,” Karrde interrupted with false cheer, not missing a beat, eyes drifting around the room at the other guests to let Ahsoka and Barriss know to choose their words a bit more carefully, even if it didn’t seem necessary. “I’m not in contact with anyone in particular, no. But I have a few leads, the most promising of which is an archive facility which holds up-to-date data on your old organization. Who’s alive, who’s not, where they met their end, where they might be. And we’re going to get inside.”

“Why are you doing this personally? Don’t you have a smuggling organization to manage?” asked Barriss.

“Not so loud, please,” Karrde admonished. “To answer your question, my people are more than competent enough to handle things without me until this job is complete, and it’s not like I don’t have communication equipment to keep me up to speed on what’s happening. I’m here personally because this facility has tight security, your ‘special talents’ may prove necessary to get in, and no one except Vrask and I know about your prior occupation. If you want to avoid bounty hunters or disloyal employees betraying us at the worst possible time, we should keep it that way.”

“What are we waiting for, then?” asked Ahsoka, eager to get going. Even now, she knew, somewhere in the galaxy some of the Jedi were being hunted. Now that she finally had some practical means of helping them, lunch was the last thing on her mind.

“There’s no point in rushing. We have a window of opportunity we’ll be taking advantage of where security will be at its weakest, and it isn’t going to happen right this second,” Karrde said. “And rushing in immediately will almost certainly lead to failure.”

“Couldn’t you have just talked to us somewhere more private?” asked Barriss. “You knew where we’re staying.”

“I was trying to arrange a pleasant business lunch,” said Karrde, gesturing to the menus in front of them. “Please. This is my treat.”

With some reluctance, Ahsoka took a look through what the place offered. She couldn’t say Karrde was being stingy given the prices attached to some of these meals. Not that he would be short on cash after moving those dreadnoughts.
Restaurants weren’t exactly Ahsoka’s preferred places to eat. Many of her meals over the past several years had come out of a package and scarfed down in the field.

Digging into her second steak in the past rotation, the opulence of it all compared to her previous experience was discomfiting. Even if her meal was delicious. With Barriss, she’d at least been in a fairly low-key place, while their present company only added to the sense of veneer of civility.

Back on Myrkr, Karrde hadn’t been slobbish by any means, but he was very practical and casual in his demeanor. Now, Ahsoka noticed his etiquette and posture were downright perfect, almost as naturally elegant as Barriss, blending into the luxurious surroundings easily.

“How’s your meal?” he asked. “One thing I’ve learned in my line of work is that fresh food can go a long way. Nobody chooses to live off of ration blocks and synthesized slop.”

“This isn’t the first time we’ve had good food on Corellia. We just went to another restaurant last night for our date,” remarked Ahsoka, who immediately questioned whether she should’ve provided such a complete answer.

“...‘Date’? You’re a couple?” Karrde asked, a big grin spreading across his face, directed towards Barriss in particular, who was not at all amused. “Wow, I feel embarrassed for not noticing it before. Then again, neither of you are acting all that different towards the other... Forgive me for crowding you.” He flagged down the waiter droid, standing up and pulling credit chips out. “Yes, I’ll be paying for the meals now, plus the most overpriced dessert you serve, for my two guests here.”

Ahsoka protested, not interested in being buttered up like this. “Wait, we don’t want-”

“You’re going to reject my offer? After the transaction has already been processed and the cooks are now doubt preparing whatever that thing I just paid 150 credits for is? I’m shocked at your rudeness. Isn’t your girlfriend being rude?” Karrde said to Barriss, acting offended, as Barriss straightened up and looked uncomfortable at being put in the middle of things. Then the smuggler straightened up and smiled at them as he turned away. “Tomorrow, landing bay Y-17. We’ll talk more then.”

Ahsoka watched Karrde exit, tempted to make him trip before the opportunity slipped away, deciding against it once their deserted arrived at a remarkable speed, a thick round pastry of some kind with various fruit sauces between each layer, topped off with at least five forms of chocolate. Barriss took the first bite of the confection and smiled at her, and Ahsoka decided not to hold that moment of irritation towards Karrde.

“What do you think of all this?” asked Ahsoka.

“It’s quite delicious. You should try some,” Barriss said, cutting off a piece of the pastry and putting it on Ahsoka’s plate.

“I was talking about Karrde and his information,” said Ahsoka, accepting Karrde’s unwanted effort at hospitality and taking a bite of what may have been the most succulent thing she’d ever eaten.

“We don’t have any more pressing concerns at the moment, and this may be our best opportunity,” said Barriss. “Obviously, we should hear him out.”

The next day, Ahsoka and Barriss were walking towards the specified landing pad in Coronet’s
primary spaceport, and spotted the large, tan-orange CEC Action VI transport Karrde used as his personal smuggling vessel.

“Welcome aboard the Wild Karrde,” Karrde said, showing them inside and then heading off down one of the corridors. He was now out of that bland suit and in his leather jacket, pants with a light blue-grey Corellian stripe, matching combat boots, fingerless gloves, and with a head of slightly tousled hair.

“Did you seriously name your ship after a lame pun?” snorted Ahsoka.

“No, I named my ship after an excellent pun,” quipped Karrde.

“Is that standard operating procedure for your smuggling ships?”

“Sorry, the details of how I run my business are on a strictly need-Tano-basis,” Karrde added with a self-satisfied smile as Ahsoka cringed, figuring he must’ve been waiting a while for an opportunity to use that one. After leading the pair to the ship’s lounge and galley area, he told them, “I’ll be back in a moment. Make yourselves at home.”

The ship was over three times larger than the Eclipse, able to carry a wider range of cargo and house a larger crew. From the different designs of some of the internal components, Ahsoka could tell this ship had been heavily modified to output a lot more power than another of the same model, a useful trick for surprising law enforcement. While Karrde did whatever he’d gone to do, Ahsoka wandered the ship, Barriss lingering behind her as she tried to make sure they could make their way back to where Karrde had left them. Ahsoka moved quietly, listening for signs of life, homing in on the sound of heavy breathing, accompanied by footsteps even more deceptively light than her own.

“Hello, Ahsoka,” a reptilian voice hissed from around the corner.

“Hello, Vrask,” Ahsoka replied back, following the source of the voice to a small armory where the towering Trandoshan was cleaning that gigantic rifle of hers.

“One carnivore to another: start taking currents from ventilation systems into account when aboard starships. Lets you know whether you’re up or downwind inside ships,” Vrask said, showing her teeth and taking a few quick breaths in through her nose, nostrils flaring, pointing towards one of the ship’s air ducts as an example. “Ah, and Barriss is with you, too.”

“Hello, Vrask,” Barriss said with a nervous wave, as she still wasn’t entirely at ease.

“HEY!” Karrde’s voice came back from the lounge. “Where’d you go? We having a meeting, or what?”

A holographic display showing two spheres appeared in front of them, one slightly larger than the other, smaller points of light denoting numerous natural and artificial satellites.

“Our target is the Imperial Security Bureau records facility at the double planets of Mitoth and Yhanz,” said Karrde as the hologram of the planets shrunk to make space for a diagram of an imperial base, a branching facility of numerous building for different departments, along with cargo bays, landing pads, and hangars for all manner of military vehicles, thin walkways connecting them all. At the center was the larger structure, a conical building topped off with the base of a skyhook,
its kilometers-long tether stretching beyond the range of the projection. “In it, there are complete records containing everything the Empire knows about every member of the Jedi Order. In eight days, the four of us are going to break in and steal the files. Along with everything else we can fit onto these high-volume disks,” Karrde said, triumphantly holding up a handful of the data storage devices.

“So it’s not just about repaying your debt to us. You’re also here for information you can use,” Ahsoka said critically.

“No, I found this place as a result of investigating several different leads and through a large number of bribes, and I’m taking the opportunity to get valuable information on the Empire, which I will gladly provide to your rebel friends at a reasonable rate,” Karrde said, unfazed by Ahsoka’s distaste for his greed. “Getting more information than just the files on the Jedi will also help cover our tracks. Steal data on as many sources as possible, and if the Empire learns their security was broken, it’ll make it harder to tell what we were really after.”

“Fine,” Ahsoka said reluctantly. “Tell me more about the location.”

“The double-planets aren’t rocky like you might be expecting,” Karrde explained. “These are a rarity: two gas giants in close proximity, the only planets in the system. Their combined gravity swallowed up everything more than a hundred kilometers wide half a billion years ago, and it was only by a slim chance they formed a stable orbit with each other.”

“The accumulated asteroids they attract also makes the system rich in various metals used in ship construction, as well as dozens of small moons,” added Barriss.

“You’ve been there before?” asked Vrask.

“Once, shortly after the first battle of Geonosis. Luminara and I was dispatched to guard the shipyards from a Separatist offensive expected by Republic Intelligence,” said Barriss, shaking a bit at the memory. “The reports proved accurate. They only underestimated the size of the assault force.”

“I’ve never been there. What’s it like?” asked Ahsoka. “For a moment, it sounded like you enjoyed being there.”

“It is one of the most beautiful natural environments I’ve ever been in,” said Barriss, smiling as fond memories began to outmatch her recollections of the battle. “I had hoped to see more of it in peacetime.”

“You’re right, about both the practical and scenic aspects of the planets,” said Karrde. “It’s good news for us: the booming economy means there’s no shortage of transport ships entering and leaving the system on a daily basis, and there are numerous airborne settlements in both atmospheres harvesting heavy hydrogen, helium, Tibanna, and various rare gases. A couple of freighters won’t stand out, and it’ll let us get close to the ISB’s base.”

“Why does the ISB have a base there?” asked Ahsoka. “The shipyard I get, but what makes the system a good place for archive facility?”

“Most likely a combination of defense thanks to the shipyard and the planet’s environment, and perhaps some intelligence channels they have in the various settlements keeping tabs on the market for rare metals,” said Karrde.

“If they’re keeping an eye on incoming ships and crews, we could be spotted,” noted Ahsoka. “Barriss and I are wanted criminals, remember?”
“Oh, we remember,” said Vrask, who pulled out what appeared to be the rank bars of an ensign in the imperial navy, a red square over a blue square, and handed it over to Barriss. “This is a holographic disguise matrix. Heh, a disguised disguise matrix. Press the panels red-blue-blue-red to turn it on.”

As Barriss nervously hit the buttons in the described order, flashes of blue light swept over her. Ahsoka found the change was unexpectedly minor: her clothes and facial features were all the same, only she now appeared to be a brown-skinned, brown-eyed, tattooless human. Someone the Imperial Academy would accept.

“Well? How do I look?” she asked Ahsoka.

“Still cute,” noted Ahsoka approvingly, smirking slightly at the now-flustered Barriss, who began trying to figure out how to shut the hologram off before simply removing the projector. “Guess that’ll work. What about you two?”

“I’m human myself, so I have no need for a disguise matrix,” Karrde said, and for a brief moment Ahsoka thought his eyes had changed from brown to blue-grey and back again between a pair of blinks, she wasn’t sure. “I’ve also got a few tricks to keep from being recognized.”

“Karrde and Barriss will be the ones infiltrating the imperial base, since they’re human or can pass as such,” said Vrask. “You and I will be in supporting roles, staking out the facility, keeping an escape route open.”

“And how will you be getting in?” asked Ahsoka.

“You’d be amazed how much security can be made worthless with tens of thousands of credits slipped to the right people,” said Karrde as he pulled out several imperial code cylinders. “The base is getting a large number of transfers in a few days, as it’s one of the systems slated to receive replacements for its current staff. I want Barriss and I to walk in and walk out while everybody’s getting acquainted.”

“What do you mean? What ‘current staff’ would need replacing?” asked Ahsoka.

“The shipyard, its warships, and the ISB base are all operated primarily by Fett clones,” Karrde explained. “The Empire is replacing them as quickly as it can train troops to fill positions. They’re rushing the whole process, too many people too fast. It’s making them sloppy, replacing large numbers of security personnel with fresh, inexperienced graduates who aren’t familiar with the territory.”

“Will the clones be a problem?” asked Vrask.

“Maybe. It’s possible some of them could recognize us,” Ahsoka pointed out. “Any idea what battalion they came from?”

“The intel I have on the staff says the majority of them came from 104th battalion,” said Karrde. “Transferred months ago at the request of Admiral Yularan, who’s currently in command of the naval operations in the system.”

A lump formed in Ahsoka throat as she processed the news. Admiral Yularen and Commander Wolffe, both in the same system, standing in the way of her reaching the surviving Jedi.

“That’s... incredibly unlucky. They know me. I don’t suppose there are any other facilities we could get the information from?” Ahsoka asked hopefully, wanting to avoid confronting any remnants of
“Of course the Empire has other archive facilities, but I don’t have confirmation as to their contents, and none of them will be as vulnerable as this one,” replied Karrde. “Yularen... have you served under him?”

“During the first year of the war, he and my master cooperated frequently,” answered Ahsoka.

“That should be perfect. What are his weaknesses?” hissed Vrask.

“His weaknesses?” asked Ahsoka.

“Come one, you served with him in multiple battles, you must know some of his shortcomings as an officer, something we can exploit to make this easier,” said Karrde, before taking a second to study Ahsoka’s reaction. “Oh. I get it. You’re not eager to go up against as old ally. Ahsoka, you’re not being asked to do anything that would bring direct harm to Yularen, and whatever you can tell us about him will make this whole process easier.”

“Yes, I understand the strategic reasons,” said Ahsoka, thinking over the problem. She’d occasionally considered herself a better strategist than Yularen in her more prideful moments back then, but she’d never seriously considered fighting the guy. “Okay, Yularen is an experienced naval commander with thorough knowledge of formations, starship offensive and defensive capabilities, and he commands respect and trust from his crew. He also isn’t very imaginative and irregular tactics will throw him off, for a time. But, he’s analytical enough to figure out the true intent and method behind a strike, even if he’d never come up with it himself.”

“When do we need to be at the double planets?” asked Barriss.

“The window of opportunity is in eight days’ time, that’s when the new ensigns, lieutenants, non-commissioned officers, and stormtroopers begin flooding in,” said Karrde. “We should arrive as soon as possible to get a better understanding of the facility layout and how the imperials are running it. We’ll each arrive in our own ships to look less conspicuous.”

“What’s conspicuous about two freighters arriving in a system known for its metal export?” asked Barriss.

“The way neither of them will be carrying any such cargo in or out. It could be written off as a refueling stop, or a business trip to find new clients, but we still shouldn’t appear directly connected to each other,” replied Karrde as he got up and headed towards one of the cargo holds. “Okay, Vrask, you familiarize Ahsoka with the settlements around the Empire’s facilities. Barriss, we’ve got an imperial uniform for you to try on.”

The drab grey uniform was a bit loose on Barriss despite being the smallest standard size, proving rather tight around the neck. The idiotic hat she was wearing didn’t thrill her either, as it blocked the upper third of her field of vision. She supposed it might make her hard to recognize, at least. Just when she’d gotten used to having a hood again.

“Where did you obtain this uniform?” she asked Karrde, tugging at the tight neck while he took measurements of where the uniform needed to be tightened or loosened to fit properly and look more convincing.
“Stole it from a manufacturer,” Karrde said absently, as he made a note on his pad to loosen the neck a few millimeters. “Assembly lines on a hundred planets are churning out millions of the things. It won’t be missed. Neither will the fifty others of varying sizes I’m sure I’ll find a use for. Though I hope their wearers will find them more fitting than you. I’d rather not have to sew them all myself.”

“You can sew?” asked Barriss.

“Of course I can sew,” Karrde said, a touch offended at the question of his abilities, as Barriss suddenly noticed several stitches of decent quality all over his jacket. “You’d better hope I can, or Vrask’ll have to do it. You ever see a Trandoshan hold a needle with those claws of theirs? And I’m not wasting good money on a tailor.”

“Oh, I’m sure you would. You’re not half as greedy as you like to front,” Barriss said.

“Even if you’re right, that would still be pretty damn greedy,” Karrde said with a devious smile.

“You had all this planned out well ahead of time,” Barriss pointed out, the point making Karrde stop what he was doing and pay attention to her. “It’s impossible for you to have discovered all this information in the few days since selling the six dreadnoughts. You were looking for Jedi well before we had brought in any money. At least since we left Myrkr, possibly even before we met.”

Karrde’s smile shrunk by a few teeth. “Take it as a sign that I was confident in your abilities. Or maybe I have diabolical plans for the other Jedi I find,” he said.

“You shouldn’t have provided more than one reason,” said Barriss. “It tells me you made them both up.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ve got such a brilliant heart of gold, explicitly doing things that are extremely beneficial to me in various ways,” Karrde said, turning up the brim of the uniform jacket to see where it would need to be hemmed. “I’ve told you before, I’m against the Empire because they’re against me, or they will be in the not-too-distant future.”

“You’re afraid of them,” said Barriss.

“Yes, I am. The Clone Wars ravaged the galaxy, I saw it, and I’ve seen the accounts of how much money is being poured into imperial weapons development. Things are only going to get worse. Even though I don’t want to get involved, billions of people are going to suffer and die before the Empire is destroyed. Even now that I am involved, billions of people are going to suffer and die anyway,” said Karrde, shuddering slightly, looking for a reason to get away from this depressing subject. “How’s that ysalamiri you bought from me, by the way? Is it healthy?”

“Snoots is doing quite well, by all indications.”

“Snoots’?” said Karrde, baffled by the odd name. “Okay, sure, that works. Anything unusual? Has it produced eggs?”

“Eggs?”

“Ysalamiri reproduce asexually. Their claws are embedded into their perches, so it’s not like they can move around to mate.”

“How can they lay eggs without them rolling off the tree branch?” asked Barriss

“They come out covered with a weird adhesive that sticks to bark. It’s disgusting, but it washes off easy with soap,” said Karrde. “Just keep an eye out for any eggs, and don’t let them hatch
“Why not?”

“Ysalimiri are sometimes cannibalistic. Tree space is limited, and the young will eat the adults if they need the calories or want the branch. The little ones will also eat one another when they’re small if they can’t find any insects, and they won’t be getting fed otherwise if they pop up in your cargo hold. You’ve only got one nutrient frame, and they’re all going to want it, assuming they can recognize its purpose.”

“What should we do with the eggs, then?” asked Barriss.

“Vrask is a purist and prefers them hard-boiled, I like them scrambled with a bit of Bantha milk to make them fluffy. Take your pick. Don’t salt them, though, it gives them a weird taste,” Karrde said, head tilted back slightly as he fondly recalled many satisfying breakfasts.

“Duly noted,” said Barriss, as she retightened the boots of her uniform. “Where is your uniform?”

“I have my own, no need to try it on. Now, we need to work on other aspects of our appearances,” said Karrde, standing up perfectly straight, hands clasped firmly behind his back, expression harsh and judging, and replying in a distinctly snobbish Core World accent, “I believe my capacity for deception shall prove more than adequate for convincing the security personnel.”

“You sound very much like Admiral Tarkin,” Barriss said with a slight cringe.

“He is now known as Moff Tarkin, having earned the favour of our great Emperor. I sound like the illustrious moff because I have been studying recordings of him for several days as a template for this aspect of my disguise, dedicating myself to achieving the correct accent, word selection, and enunciation,” Karrde said, with an unsettlingly dead-on impression. “In the wake of his increasing power within the Empire, I concluded he would be an ideal choice for imitation, commanding respect from our fellows.”

“...I recommend you don’t use that voice around Ahsoka. She won’t respond well,” she said quietly, recalling that Tarkin shared almost as much blame for what happened to Ahsoka after the bombing as Barriss herself did.

“I appreciate your concerns, and shall take them into thorough consideration,” Karrde said, then coughing and clearing his throat, and replying in his deeper, vaguely Mid-rim accented voice, “Alright, your Coruscanti accent won’t stand out as an imperial officer, but we’ve got to get you familiar with imperial regulations and etiquette. It’s not enough to have the right code cylinders, you’re going to have to walk and talk like an officer, too. Having an ensign’s bars will get you some leeway with expectations, but you’ve gotta stop looking so nervous.”

“I can handle myself,” Barriss said, pressing the buttons on her rank bars, standing up rigidly straight, and adjusting her hat as she looked confidently up at Karrde, only for the damn thing to slowly slink over her eyes.

Karrde held back a sigh. “Yeah, we’re gonna be here a while. Try to copy my movements, we’ll make an officer out of you yet.”
Talon Karrde: a constant reminder that you can't spell "smuggler" without "smug".

Before I began writing this, I read the 20th Anniversary Edition of *Heir to the Empire*, which contains numerous notes from Timothy Zahn about his process for writing those novels which were extremely instructive. So instructive that I will not stop bringing up *The Thrawn Trilogy* and how good it is at every opportunity until I get more people to read it. One point was that he often derived the names of planets and cities from people he knew, rearranging the letters a bit. Another was that he apparently thinks double planets are neat, since they show up twice in his Star Wars novels. He also likes Norse mythology.

Hence my first original Star Wars worlds, the double planets of Mitoth and Yhanz, pronounced "Ee-hanz", like the mythical tree Yggdrasil. Which I just now realize is probably part of how Zahn named the tree-dwelling ysalamiri.
Meditating while in hyperspace had always felt unusual whenever Barriss had tried it, which had by necessity become more and more frequent over the course of the war. The Force was still very much present, even when removed from the physical universe, save for whatever vessel she was traveling in.

“The Force is the energy connecting all life in the universe- but basic cosmology tells us the universe existed for billions of years before life ever evolved. Did the Force exist then, too? Did it create life? Was it created by life? I don’t know,” Revan said. Barriss thought about it for a second. These weren’t the kinds of topics the Jedi committed much study to. Revan continued, “Personally, I think what we call the Force predates life, though I can’t really prove it. What do you think?”

“The Force connects all life,” Barriss replied. “Without living organisms, it has no presence.”

“Light existed before any creature had eyes to see it. Water molecules sat frozen in the depths of space before becoming oceans teeming with life. The carbon atoms composing your brain, the physical manifestation of all your thoughts on these matters, were fused together inside a star billions of years ago,” Revan replied. “It’s foolish to think that because you can use something, it was placed there for your benefit.”

Barriss sat on her bed, closing her eyes again, feeling the pulsing energies of hyperspace. It had always been here, One day, however long ago, the hyperdrive was built, the first living thing to enter hyperspace used it.

Kyber crystals were buried beneath countless worlds before anyone had thought of building a lightsaber.

The Force? What was the Force, before any living creature felt its influence?

Maybe it didn’t really matter. Whatever it was, wherever it came from. it was here now, and Barriss could use it.

“How are you and Ahsoka headed to this time?” asked Revan.


“I suppose you could use all the allies you can get,” said Revan. Barriss suspected the holocron wasn’t particularly thrilled with the idea of finding more Jedi. “If anything, I guess keeping the Jedi alive will frustrate Palpatine.”

“Perhaps the Hutts or the Mandalorians would be willing to help combat the Empire,” said Barriss, knowing those options were implausibly optimistic.

“The Mandos are still around, huh?” Revan said with unexpected disdain. “Are they still committing mass murder for the hell of it?”

“No. For the past several centuries, Mandalore had existed as a sovereign entity, and a pacifistic society.”
“Really? Oh. Hey, good for them!” Revan said approvingly. “Wait, if they’re pacifists now, why did you just suggest getting their help?”

“Unfortunately, their world was devastated at the end of the Clone Wars, which saw a return to their violent roots, and as far as I’m aware, Mandalore is currently under an imperial occupation,” finished Barriss, much to Revan’s disappointment.

“Of course it is. Dammit, things like this are why I cut the Jedi so much slack,” said Revan. “When presented with situations like this, the Jedi will usually try to rectify the situation. Not always. But usually.”

“Didn’t you turn rogue and cause a rift in the order because you fought the Mandalorian Neo-crusaders against the council’s wishes?” asked Barriss.

“Yes, I did. And hundreds of Jedi agreed to follow me without needing much convincing, including many respected masters. Sure, I was persuasive, but they all still agreed with me in the end. They all wanted to prevent the suffering the Mandalorians would bring,” said Revan. “It wouldn’t have been much of a schism if a large chunk of the order hadn’t agreed it was the right thing to do, now, would it? Even the Jedi who stayed behind weren’t exactly pleased with the situation. I think it was the council’s groupthink mentality that was the root of most of the order’s problems. A dozen powerful, experienced masters with only one brain between them. They’d take turns using it.”

“I suppose some things refuse to change,” grumbled Barriss.

“Something has to be different, something has to have gotten better in the last four thousand years,” said Revan. “How are the Wookiees? Are the Wookiees doing okay?”

“The Wookiees have developed advanced technology, and Kashyyyk became a member world of the Republic,” Barriss said uneasily.

“I can hear the uneasy tone there. What’s the catch?”

“In the wake of the Clone Wars, many Wookiees were enslaved, and Kashyyyk has been blockaded.”

“Why do people keep enslaving the Wookiees?! We have DROIDS for this stuff!” Revan yelled with genuine aggravation and rage. “That was the whole point of developing automation! Droids don’t need food, water, or sleep! Wookiees have no advantages over them! I like them, but they’re as needy as any other species of meatbag!”

“It’s something else we’ll need to rectify when the Empire is torn down,” replied Barriss, an answer which instantly calmed Revan.

“Heh. My thoughts exactly,” said Revan. “Is there anything else you’d like to discuss?”

“Um, actually, I need some advice,” said Barriss, tapping her fingers on her knees as she worked up the nerve. “Relationship advice.”

“Oh, this should be good. If you’re having trouble, and I totally get it if you don’t want my help on this, but I can give you some advice on how to, y’know, use your tongue.”

“I’ve figured out kissing well enough, thank you,” Barriss said as she got the feeling she was going to regret taking the conversation in this direction.

“That’s... not what I was referring to, but it’s adorable you think it was,” said Revan. “Oh, Barriss.
So young. So naïve.”

“What else could you be referriOH MY GOODNESS, NO!” yelled Barriss, whose predictions were coming to pass.

“Aahahahaha! Woah, maybe not so naïve! Somebody’s been clearing her holonet search history, huh?”

Barriss pressed her fists against her forehead, eyes closed, her face scrunched up with frustration. A few deep breaths and a bit of silence, she resolved to get back on track. This was for Ahsoka. For Ahsoka. For Ahsoka. “Very soon, we are going to learn who among the Jedi Order have been killed by the Sith and the Empire. I believe many people Ahsoka cared for deeply fall into that category. I... I don’t believe she will handle the news well, even if she already knows they likely did not survive. How can I help her deal with this?”

“Oh. Oh, that’s much worse. Okay, hm, well, there isn’t a whole lot you can do,” said Revan, taking the conversation much more seriously now. “If they’re dead, that’s not something you can fix. All you can do, the most important thing, is to be there for her.”

“That’s it? Simply... be in close proximity?”

“Kind of, yes. People she loved aren’t with her. She’s going to find out they will never, ever be back. Even the Force isn’t much of a comfort, given the circumstances of their deaths,” Revan said solemnly. “They’re gone, but you’re not. So be there. Remind her that she’s not alone. Also, you’re probably gonna be doing the cooking for a couple weeks, because she is not going to feel like doing it.”

“All right. I can certainly do that,” Barriss said with a sharp nod, relieved to have received instructions she could follow through on.

“One of the people she’s looking for... it’s her master, isn’t it?” asked Revan. “You really think he’s dead?”

“I’m afraid I do. Why? Do you not?” asked Barriss. “How would you know anything about the subject? Do you sense something in the Force?”

“It’s not the Force... call it experience. Hardly a substitute for hard information. We’ll see once you get that data,” said Revan. “I’d like to know more about her master. I’ve only gleaned a few bits and pieces from you two.”

“Anakin Skywalker,” Barriss began. “He was only her master for roughly two years of the Clone Wars, during which time the two consistently defeated CIS forces in the majority of their engagements. Commonly considered to be one of, perhaps even the strongest Jedi Knight in the entire order, superior even to most masters in swordsmanship and combat-related Force techniques. There were also rumors that he was the one described by prophecy to bring balance to the Force.”

“Prophecy? What ‘prophecy’?” Revan asked skeptically.

“Its origin is unknown, all I know is that it was said that someone would destroy the Sith and bring balance to the Force,” said Barriss. “There were rumors that Skywalker was the most likely candidate.”

“Putting that much pressure on someone sounds like a surefire way to drive them completely insane,” said Revan. “Was he as good as he was expected to be?”
“Skywalker did prove himself quite powerful,” said Barriss.

“But not powerful enough,” Revan noted. “You think he’s dead. I guess he was too weak to stop the Sith.”

“There are many words I can think of to describe Skywalker. ‘Weak’ is not one of them,” Barriss said, as she gently rubbed the back of her head.

“Uh-huh. I don’t believe in any prophecies,” said Revan. “They’re too easy to interpret to mean whatever you want. The Sith will, presumably, come to an end at some point, and you could come up with some way of explaining their destruction as the act of one person, no matter how many factors and actions of others built up to it. It doesn’t make the prophecy correct, it just means the Sith aren’t invincible and somebody’s getting all the credit.”

“Perhaps you set some chain of events in motion that caused the Sith to be destroyed,” suggested Barriss. “Then you’d be the Chosen One.”

“I... find that very unlikely,” said Revan. “Though I am of the opinion that if you want something done, you should do it yourself.”

“Isn’t the expression ‘if you want something done right, you must do it yourself’?”

“I wouldn’t say I do things right. I just do them,” Revan said with a shrug. “Let me know what you find out. I’m very interested in learning more about this guy.”

The *Eclipse* emerged from hyperspace several hundred thousand kilometers outside the orbit of Mitoth, the blue-grey gas giant dominating the view. Yhanz drifted further in the distance, its pale purple mass blocking out the system’s sun.

For such inhospitable planets, the two gas giants were relatively bustling. Scanners showed hundreds of freighters moving between the various settlements in the two atmospheres, and even more mining vehicles plundering the hundreds of asteroids caught in orbit, none of them significant enough to be considered moons.

Lights of cities were visible on the dark side of the planets, while above Mitoth, connected to the facility below by a kilometers-long skyhook supplying some of the raw materials, was the Empire’s Mitoth shipyard. Three long, equally-space branches extended out from a central hub, under-construction *Venator*-class Star Destroyers lined up along each side.

All the work Ahsoka and Barriss had done to organize people against the Empire had been paying off. A network of allies forming. Dreadnoughts in the care of Corellian rebels, with means of spreading dozens more across the galaxy. Now they were going to search for surviving Jedi to bolster their forces.

*It won’t be enough,* Ahsoka thought to herself.

To destroy a modern Star Destroyer would require a minimum of two of those dreadnoughts, and they’d never get through a fight like that unscathed. So far, they’d moved six.

There were twenty-four Star Destroyers docked over the planet at varying stages of completion, plus
another two fully-operational ones on patrol. At this one system. These planets were rich with resources, sure, but this wasn’t the biggest shipyard, or the most critical.

“It won’t be enough, will it?” said Barriss, as she and Ahsoka both stared at the passing shipyard during the descent. “That’s what you’re thinking. Right?”

“Yeah,” Ahsoka said quietly, turning her attention away from the Empire in favor of the immediate concern of finding an open landing platform.

“There are paths to victory besides having the larger fleet,” said Barriss.

“Yeah, but the bigger fleet probably helps,” Ahsoka said as she took the ship down.

Their destination was Vinnekel, a flying city suspended in a breathable layer of Mitoth’s atmosphere, the closest one to the Empire’s base that was open to the public, or at least closest at this particular moment. Cities on Mitoth didn’t remain completely stationary, drifting gradually to move out of the paths of storms, some of which could dwarf continents, or to connect to one another to trade resources and equipment.

It seemed they’d beaten the Wild Karrde here, since they weren’t picking up any signals on the agreed-upon frequency.

After paying one of the attendant the requisite landing fee on one of the available public landing pads, Ahsoka stood in the middle of the walkway connecting to the main structure of the floating city, which consisted primarily of a two-kilometer-wide ring containing all manner of docks, hangars, and landing pads, which then connected into a central hub where the workers in various areas responsible for extracting rare gases from Mitoth’s atmosphere lived. A massive filtration column extended so far down into the clouds its end couldn’t be seen. Its effect on the surrounding air was quite noticeable, swirling vortices appear at the intakes as they adsorbed various forms of hydrogen, helium, some exotic elements formed from cosmic rays, and ever-precious Tibanna gas.

“Do we have any rebreathing equipment?” asked Barriss.

“Um, yeah, it’s with the hazardous environment equipment. Why?” asked Ahsoka, as she followed Barriss back into the ship to the compartment that had what she was looking for. “Isn’t the atmosphere at this altitude breathable?”

There were a pair of spacesuits, one humanoid and another with a suitable helmet for herself, anti-radiation tablets, water purifiers, and a pair of portable rebreathers which she took.

“I want you to see something,” said Barriss, handing Ahsoka one of the rebreathers, along with a pair of protective goggles for each of them, which she thoroughly cleaned off. “The majority of casual visitors restrict their visits to areas well within the life zone. The best view of Mitoth will be deeper down that filtration column.”

“I’ve seen the whole planet from orbit, Barriss. It’s a big ball of gas.”

“That tells me how little of it you’ve really seen,” Barriss said as she led Ahsoka back out, the two of them heading towards the center of the metal island in a sea of clouds.

“How exactly are we going to get down there?” asked Ahsoka. “It didn’t look like it was open to visitors.”

“Well, the majority of the operation are performed via automated systems. Workers are almost only seen there when performing maintenance, and the minimal wear on the filters tell us it’s brand new,
possibly installed by the Empire,” said Barriss. “As long as we have the proper safety equipment, no one will bother us. We won’t get into any trouble.”

“You’re certain?”

“Absolutely,” said Barriss.

“How are you so sure? ...Have you broken into places like this before?” Ahsoka said teasingly.

“I did it before. Once. Accidentally. I was lost.”

“Of course. You were just looking for the bathroom.”

“No, I was trying to find the central control room to monitor air intakes because I suspected they were a weak point which could be used to infiltrate and sabotage the harvesters but I didn’t realize how far down they went so I took one of the service elevators down to the lower levels and got turned around because every extractor looked the same and there is absolutely no one monitoring them. Please don’t mock me, Revan more than meets the quota of what I’m capable of tolerating,” said Barriss, as Ahsoka laughed softly and locked elbows with her for their walk.

The trip through Vinnekel was made without incident. There was no reason for there to be, it was a public place, full of various people of various species making a living. Then Ahsoka watched as Barriss, with precision indicating she’d been planning this out in her head since they’d landed at the latest, found an emergency access stairwell, and yanked several wires out of its protected alarm system. After getting inside and reconnecting the wires back up again, just in case there was an actual emergency people needed to know about, the two followed the stairs led down into the depths of the gas processing facility where Vinnekel prepared the majority of its export.

Periodically stopping and listening for other beings nearby, showing a level of hunting instinct that surprised and impressed Ahsoka, Barriss led them down the metal stairwell and into the filtration column, a three-kilometer long tube of pumps, pipes, membranes, filters, storage canisters, and magnetically-levitating elevators that went all the way up and down its length.

There was a single person present to notice them on their journey: a Verpine engineer who was typing something into a console while monitoring the intake and processing of the incoming gases. He looked over at the intruding duo, who were unsure what they should do until Barriss hazarded an acknowledging wave at him. He waved back, craned his head slightly to look over his desk to check that they had appropriate boots on in addition to lung and eye protection, which they did, so they were good to go. And go they did. He didn’t bother to ask them who they were what they were doing there. Whatever it was, they’d come prepared, so it was probably fine. It also wasn’t his job. If they were an actual threat, which was unlikely since they weren’t obviously armed, he wasn’t getting paid enough to risk getting shot.

The elevator descended down hundreds of floors, Barriss obsessively checking both of their rebreathers to make sure they were sealed to their skin and functioning properly.

The automatic door opened up, allowing the pair out into the lowest platform at the edge of the planet’s habitable layer, finding a surprisingly spacious balcony with a solid slab of metal you’d have to intentionally climb over to fall into the abyss.

Ahsoka had seriously undervalued this place.

The diameter of Mitoth was around ten times that of the rocky planets Ahsoka had usually been on, which meant she could see far further in any direction. Kilometer after kilometer of rolling, multi-
hued clouds. High in the sky, half a million kilometers away, Yhanz drifted, its bands of purple, periwinkle, and magenta clouds at different latitudes discernible even from this distance thanks to the opposing planet’s size. Peeking over the edge of the guard rail, the stretch of Mitoth’s clouds immediately beneath them were cobalt-blue.

The other planet was partially eclipsing the sun, the light refracting through the outer edges of its atmosphere making it look like a ring of bright violet. The darkness was so complete that Ahsoka could make out a few stars around Yhanz, until the yellow sun finally peaked out from the upper-right edge, illuminating Mitoth as rays of light shone through the cloud layers. The city above them was so small by comparison, and so far away now it did nothing to mar the view.

“Wow,” Ahsoka said breathlessly, out into the layered cumulus clouds. while Barriss stared at her.

“Oh, it’s not over,” said Barriss, glancing at her chrono. “It’s late enough in the day, and with light out now they should be coming up to feed-”

As she spoke, hundreds of strange animals, bags of low-density gas directed by sets of four fins emerged from the lower depths of Mitoth, finding a good spot in the sun, and unfolding a second set of fins to absorb as much sunlight as they could, each one blossoming to between ten and twenty meters across.

“They’re called ‘thurarrcleacks’,” said Barriss, trilling the two ‘r’ s to get the pronunciation right. “Living bags of hydrogen that use the sun as an energy source, absorbing silicon and water from the atmosphere to grow.”

“They’re amazing,” Ahsoka said as she watched the flower-shaped animals drift on the air currents.

“I loved the time I spent on this world,” said Barriss. “Before the war... worsened. I saw so many battlefields torn apart by explosives and blasters of every kind, cities bombarded, but no matter how intense the fighting or how destructive the weapons, none of them could ever scar these clouds. I’m glad I had the chance to see it with you.”

“Yeah, I’m having a great time,” Ahsoka said, tilting her head down towards Barriss, who’d closed her eyes and was leaning up.

Then their breath masks clunked against each other.

Both of them needed a second to open their eyes and realize what had just happened.

“If you’d like to take these off for a minute, I’m willing to risk it. I can hold my breath,” said Ahsoka, tentatively reaching for the straps holding the mask to her head before Barriss grabbed her wrist and pulled her hand back down.

“Absolutely not. These clouds don’t possess nearly enough oxygen, and they contain trace amounts of chlorine and ammonia,” said Barriss, making it very clear she didn’t consider a kiss worth the risk of breathing in toxic fumes, then putting her arm around Ahsoka’s waist and leaning against her. “We’ll simply have to wait until we’ve returned to a higher altitude.”

“Fine. I can make do,” Ahsoka said, holding Barriss close, feeling her warmth in the thin, cold air, and directing her attention back towards the view.

Ahsoka quietly enjoyed the cool, calming colors of Mitoth, watching other life forms join the thurarrcleacks’, various floating, flapping, puffing, and even bioluminescent organisms drifting through an expanse of gas thousands of times greater in volume than any ocean in the galaxy, all while wrapping Barriss in her arms.
Ahsoka’s attention drifted when she noticed something to the east, souring her mood, as she held Barriss a little bit closer. The clouds parted, showing the branching walkways and buildings of the imperial base, its skyhook cable glinting in the light as it fueled the Emperor’s fleet in the space above.

Chapter End Notes

People often describe Star Wars as being more fantasy than science fiction, but I consider part of its strength how it's a successful combination of both. I've also never encountered a soft scifi story that was made less interesting or immersive by taking a realistic approach to the science and technology occasionally, because the scale and beauty of space can inspire awe and wonder just as well as any fantasy. Which is why I did the math on how Mitoth and Yhanz orbit each other.

They each have comparable mass to Saturn, 1.1x in Mitoth’s case, 0.9x for Yhanz, which assuming similar average density gives them radii of 1.03x and 0.965x Saturn’s. As a result, they have similar gravity to Earth’s at the edges of their atmospheres. They complete their orbit around each other every 3 days at a distance of 510,000 km, a pretty fast orbit due to Mitoth catching Yhanz when the system was forming rather than their masses accreting together. It's necessary for them to be moving that fast to maintain a stable orbit, because the space between them is only about 4x their diameters. If you looked into the sky of either planet at the other, it would look approximately the same distance across as the distance from your wrist to fingertips on your outstretched hand.

They orbit their yellow sun at a radius of about 200 million kilometers, which is between the orbits of Earth and Mars, so the sun looks considerably smaller than either planet to anyone standing on the other. Resulting eclipses can have paths of totality covering the majority of a hemisphere.

Also, I speak from professional experience in industrial settings that if you're walking around in proper safety attire, and maybe have a clipboard to look like you're doing something important, nobody's going to bother you or ask why you're there unless you get in their way first. Never. The chiller plant building at my university only had three other people in it regularly, and I don't think anyone was there at night. The front door of the power plant had swipe card access, but if you had a hard hat, pants, and close-toed shoes, you could probably walk right through the back entrance the trucks used and no one would stop you. Hell, having the Verpine notice them at all was a stretch.
The *Wild Karrde* set down in one of the landing pads, in the twilight, Vinnekel illuminated a faint blue as the sunlight refracted through the atmosphere. The freighter was positioned few pads down from the *Eclipse* past various airspeeders, light freighters, and interstellar transports, facing the Empire’s airborne base.

Vrask welcomed Ahsoka and Barriss into the ship, leading them back into the lounge they met in previously. Karrde appeared in an officer’s uniform sporting the rank of lieutenant, his facial hair sporting several days’ growth since Corellia, hair combed in a different style from usual under his hat, his eyes now a shade of brownish-green.

“Okay, I was willing to let it go once but I need to know, are they implants, do you have your own disguise matrix, are you secretly a Clawdite, what’s going on with that?” asked Ahsoka, vaguely gesturing at Karrde’s eyes, while also thinking about how he changes his hair almost as often as Padmé did.

Karrde opened his mouth, reflexively about to answer her question, then closed it after studying Ahsoka reaction for half a second, gave her an amused smirk, and brought up holographic schematics of the base without answering anything. Then he glanced back at Ahsoka, flinched at the glare she was giving him, and said “They’re polychromatic lenses, alright? Stop being weird about this.”

“Wha- *You* stop being weird!” Ahsoka snapped back.

“Wow. I can see why the Empire hasn’t been able to catch you, with that vibro-sharp mind you’re sporting-”

“Your disguise is quite deceptive, now, where’s my uniform?” interrupted Barriss, seeking to defuse the argument, as Karrde handed a code cylinder and a folded uniform over to her.

After stepping into the refresher and changing, Barriss poked at her face, studying herself in the mirror testing how reliably the disguise matrix could adjust and keep her natural skin color hidden. The new uniform fit well, much more comfortable, even though she’d be missing her coat for the next few hours. And she still hated the hat. Once she rejoined the group in full garb, she found them seated around a hologram of the base, going over the details of the plan.

“I selected our aliases based on people of the appropriate rank who at least vaguely resemble us,” said Karrde, pointing the areas of the holographic schematic. “You’re now ‘Ensign Berovi’, I’m ‘Lieutenant Onco’. Our destination is the imperial archive inside the central hub area here. We possess adequate clearance and requisition orders to make copies of any piece of information we want, all we need to do is get inside. The basics of the plan is to take an imperial transport in, walk to the archive room, get the data, walk back out.”

“I take it you’ve taken the time to go over the layout of the base?” asked Vrask.

“Of course,” said Ahsoka. “We know every escape route, every weapon emplacement, every air vent big enough to get through.”

“I’ve memorized schematics more complex and chaotic than this one,” said Barriss.
“The code cylinders we have will get us past any security checkpoint we could run into on our way to the archive,” said Karrde. “Just in case they can’t, that ‘Jedi Mind Trick’, how effective is it, exactly?’”

“It depends on the strength of the recipient,” explained Barriss. “If they’re more intelligent and focused, it won’t be as effective. It could even blow our cover. It also depends on how convincing and natural the suggestion is.”

“You also have to wave your hand at them, right?” asked Karrde, imitating the gesture.

“Doing so can help, yes.”

“Hm, that’ll draw too much attention,” he said. “Can you do it passively? Our credentials and my, er, salesmanship should be able to get us through. But if you can, say, lower the resistance of the guards we meet by perhaps 10%, that’ll make things much smoother.”

“I’ll try,” said Barriss, thinking about how she should focus her attention.

“What about concealed weapons?” asked Ahsoka. “We’ll never get Barriss’s lightsaber inside, but do you have holdout blasters?”

“The only concealed weapon we’ll have when inside is right there,” Karrde said, pointing at Barriss. “If a lightsaber or even a small blaster is detected, we’ll be dead. Barriss’s Force abilities will be all that we’ll have to protect us if we get found out, until we can procure some weapons from inside. Can you do it?”

“Yes,” Barriss said nervously.

“You’ll also each possess one of these communicators,” said Vrask, giving a handheld device to Karrde and Barriss. “They’re set to a frequency that can only receive transmissions from their counterparts, which will stay with Ahsoka and I. They’re set to vibrate when receiving, so they won’t instantly give you away if we need to reach you.”

“Very well,” said Barriss, clipping the communicator to her belt. “It may also be best if Ahsoka is the one to transmit messages to us. She doesn’t sound noticeably nonhuman.”

“Excellent,” said Vrask. “Now, let’s talk contingency plans...”

Karrde had been right about the personnel assignments at the Mittoth base. Since they’d arrived, Barriss had seen clones, both troopers and unarmed officers, enjoying the facilities in Vinnekel while off-duty. The number of non-clones had increased over the past two days, and now, they were the majority. She wondered what would become of the clones after they got whatever meager retirement package the Empire intended to provide them. No, she couldn’t lay the blame for the clones’ predicament entirely at the Empire’s feat when the Republic and the Kaminoans had created and used the clones. Created them with shortened lives and no individual rights.

“Let’s go,” said Barriss, standing up to get on the airspeeder, then noticing Karrde hadn’t moved.

“Wait,” said Karrde. “Let’s wait a few more groups. Watch everyone. Watch how they act around each other.”
“They’re all getting to know each other,” said Barriss, as she watched the various officers introducing themselves to each other, forming loose social groups.

“They’re all in a new environment, with new people. Looking to make connections. Looking to find their way around,” said Karrde. “We know more about their own base than they do.”

Despite the darkness that Barriss felt permeating everything that acted on the orders of Palpatine, Barriss could sense life here. Everyone in the Mitoth base was a person. She wondered, in the wake of the clone wars with so many homes and whole planets devastated, how many of them had any more choice in enlisting than the clones had.

The next airspeeder between Vinnekel and the base showed up, imperials getting on and off.

“Let’s go,” said Karrde, heading towards the airspeeder with Barriss following after him, slightly behind him and to his side, carrying the case with the drives inside.

The shuttle between the base and the city was a slow, tense ride as Barriss and Karrde sat crammed between various officers and soldiers of the Empire.

Around her, the various imperials who were staffing the base chatted idly about their new assignments, new security personnel, supply officers overseeing transports of liquid hydrogen and Tibanna up to the shipyard, communications officers monitoring transmissions from other imperial sectors. One pair of mechanics were discussing frequent problems with unexplained damage to their patrol transports.

“Excuse me,” said Karrde, getting the mechanics’ attention. “I couldn’t help but overhear- is the damage to the transports in the form of vacant, microscopic pockets forming in their solar arrays?”

“Um, that’s exactly it, how did you know?” asked the mechanic on the left, who had gone from aggravated by the whole situation to feeling a ray of hope.

“The technicians on Jestefad dealt with a similar problem when I was stationed at their base,” Karrde explained, the few meters between him and the engineers causing a few other bystanders to take note of the discussion. “It appears that the structure of the solar collection arrays makes them susceptible to hydrogen and helium blistering when traversing the lower atmosphere. I recall their solution was to use selective coatings which can cover the arrays without impairing solar collection. Not a particularly elegant modification, but effective.”

“That... makes sense,” the other engineer said, taking notes on her datapad at the shuttle landed at the base. “Thanks a lot- um, sir,” she said uneasily, embarrassed as she realized she hadn’t been addressing a superior officer correctly.

“Lt. Onco,” Karrde said. “Happy to be of help.”

“C’mom, Rudani, we’ve gotta tell the chief we know how to solve the problem.”

On one side of the hallway was a lost-looking ensign who was trying to read a map mounted on the side of the wall, looking frustrated as she tried to orient herself. Not a big deal, all they needed to do was walk past her and-

“Are you having trouble finding your way around, ensign?” Karrde asked, as the ensign turned around, surprised, then noticed his rank bars and stood at attention.

“Sir, I’ve been trying to find the security checkpoint in section F-5, and seem to have gotten turned around,” she said uneasily.
“No need for the formalities, navigating an unfamiliar base is a common predicament, one I’ve found myself in more than once. You’re currently in E-block,” he said pointing to the map tracing out a path. “Turn down this corridor, then use the lift to get up two levels, you can find your way from there.”

“Thank you so much, Lt.-”

“Lt. Onco,” Karrde said with a slight nod, watching the ensign rush away to her shift.

“Was that really necessary?” asked Barriss. “What we’re doing is dangerous enough as it is without drawing attention to ourselves.”

“You believe demonstrating detailed knowledge of the base layout, assisting a subordinate, implying past service, and endearing myself to other officers would draw attention?” asked Karrde. “Yes, that lieutenant knows his way around and went out of his way to assist me while being completely civil and professional, he must be an intruder. Sound the alarms!”

“We would be even less noticeable if we did not speak to others at all,” said Barriss. “And if you must do so, please refrain from providing technical information which will make the Empire more efficient.”

“Not to worry, the membranes are merely a short-term solution, and a costly one at that, and may not even be especially effective in Mitoth’s atmosphere,” Karrde said.

“Also, can you please not talk in that awful impersonation, at least when we’re alone?” asked Barriss. The Tarkin impression was starting to grate on her.

“I sincerely apologize, however this impersonation is nuanced, and it is quite difficult for me to switch back and forth at a moment’s notice. It would be better for me to speak in this manner consistently,” said Karrde, as they walked into the turbolift that would take them to the archive level in the complex’s central building.

“Hey! Hold that turbolift!” a voice called from further down the hall, the sound of multiple pairs of footsteps coming closer.

Barriss reached for the button to close the doors, while Karrde reached out and blocked the sliding doors with his hand, welcoming a quartet of stormtroopers into the turbolift with them.

“Ah, thanks. It’s a real pain to snag one of these things with everybody using them to keep out of that freezing air,” said the trooper captain. “Really, what’s the point of even having all those walkways outside if the uniforms issued here can’t handle the weather?”

“I agree completely, and I am always happy to assist a fellow servant of the Empire,” Karrde said curtly. “I’m Lt. Onco, by the way. A visiting archivist.”

Out on the Eclipse’s landing platform, Vrask hummed to herself. Or, rather, the Trandoshan equivalent of humming, which involved using her exceedingly flexible tongue to cover the gaps between her teeth at certain points to hit the right note. Not an easy thing to keep track of with that many teeth.

The hissing noise should’ve been annoying, but with the melody as it was, Ahsoka found it a welcome source of relaxation as she waited for Barriss to come back. Or to go to the rescue when the plan fell apart. Then again, this could all go according to plan.

No it can’t, it never does, Ahsoka told herself, her fingers rapping on her lightsaber as she stared out across the clouds. Barriss’s lightsaber was hidden in the other side of her vest, waiting for Ahsoka to return it to its owner.

“So, you and Offee are together now?” Vrask said. “How’s that working out?”

“Karrde told you?” said Ahsoka, still not exactly thrilled with his amusement back on Corellia.

“He said nothing. I can smell her on you,” Vrask said with an amused hiss and a brief flare of her nostrils, as Ahsoka tried to ignore the topic. Now was not the time.

“Great. So, how long do you think it’ll take before we have to go rescue them?” asked Ahsoka.

“What are you talking about?” asked Vrask, slurping up a glass of water carefully held in her claws as she watched fighters, shuttles, and skyhook cars enter and exit the base. “We’re just backup. Karrde and I worked hard on the original plan to make it as reliable as possible. Are you expecting it to fail?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say I’m expecting it to, um... Don’t you have bad luck at infiltration missions like this?” asked Ahsoka, becoming a bit disconcerted by the apparently different experiences she and Vrask had. “I’ve broken into facilities before, but there’s always some security measure we didn’t account for, or they’re expecting us, or something else goes wrong.”

“Aren’t you ex-military?” asked Vrask. “How did you go on so many missions which were so ineptly planned? How did you survive so many missions if they all blew up in your face? Karrde and I, our plans typically go off without a hitch. Of course we’re prepared for other eventualities, but we never go in thinking we’ll fail.”

“Really? How?” asked Ahsoka.

“What are you talking about? We get thorough reconnaissance, we act when our opposition is at its weakest, we get all the best equipment, we cultivate thorough understanding of enemy procedure and facility layout. How did you prepare?”

“...One time, I disobeyed orders not to go on a mission, was not present for the briefing, froze myself in carbonite, then was unfrozen when the mission was underway,” said Ahsoka. “It turned out, um, fine. It was fine.”

Vrask stared at her for a while, her scaly mouth slightly open in shock, her green, horizontal-slit eyes blinking more frequently than usual as she tried to fathom how Ahsoka hadn’t been killed years ago. Then she shrugged and turned away to continue watching the base through her macrobinoculars, muttering to herself in her native Doshan, now thoroughly on edge thanks to Ahsoka and waiting for something to go wrong.
A few years ago, Barriss had absolutely no problem with confined spaces. Having walls close around her didn’t mean anything. Why would they? It wasn’t as if she’d ever been in danger, or lacked enough air. She had a difficult time recalling ever even being in a place she’d found uncomfortably cramped.

Then she’d been buried under a pile of rubble, slowly suffocating to death. Then there was the space battle over Umbara, stuck in her cockpit as blaster bolts flew around her, feeling the deaths of clones and Umbarans, and the creeping feeling that she was next. Then she’d spent months in a prison cell. Then she’d spent months in another, much smaller cell, isolated, her connection to the Force as restricted and constrained as her body was. Then she’d gotten shoved into an escape pod and launched into the skies over Myrkr, blind to everything around her as she plummeted to the ground.

Being in this cramped, austere imperial elevator, encircled by four troopers and a smuggler, was just another new memory to add onto the problem.

These troopers were clones, too, they all had the correct voice, so they were all programmed to kill her if they learned her identity. The one behind her to the right, while professional enough to know to keep his rifle raised up and away from her, was still in prime position to shoot her in the back.

It was unlikely they would recognize her with her holographic disguise, even if they knew her real face. She just hoped her uniform was convincing. Clones were sharp and attentive, something inherited from their genetic donor, and this outfit was a bit worn and was resewn to fit her. Even if they didn’t recognize her as a Jedi and have their programming triggered, getting outed as an imposter in this position could get her killed anyway.

A bead of sweat ran down her left cheek. She hoped the hologram was reliable, though that concern could be quieted. One thing she’d noticed about Karrde was that he wasn’t stingy with money and would always select quality equipment.

Barriss closed her eyes for a second and tried to reassure herself that she would get through this. She’d already gotten this deep in the facility, and no one had noticed.

Also, thinking about it, she realized she was more than capable of killing every one of these clones. In this small space, blunt telekinetic attacks on their bodies wouldn’t kill them quickly, but she could take control of their own blasters and have them shoot each other. Or pin them all to the wall, tear some wiring out of the panel, and electrocute them, which may be easier to accomplish without harming Karrde in the process. That could conceivably be explained as a bizarre technical malfunction if someone came to investigate, rather than try to convince people four troopers had all been shot and she had nothing to do with it.

Thinking about this succeeded in making Barriss less afraid of the clones.

She’d also wound up scaring herself a bit, because she came up with all of that in a couple seconds knowing full that coming up with ways to murder people so easily should not be normal.

“Computers, right?” the clone captain asked her.

“Excuse me? Oh- yes, I’m an archivist,” said Barriss, saluting.

“Name’s Dex. That’s Blu, Doctrine, and Sixes.”

“CT-6666,” corrected Sixes. “You know the new regulations. We address each other properly while on duty.”
“Yeah, we know, and I know it’s hard to remember everybody’s serial number, and it takes too long to say every single time. C’mon, brother- it’s not very efficient, is it?” said Dex, as Sixes grumbled. “You barely look old enough to have left an academy. First posting?”

“Yes,” Barriss said. Best not to go into any further details, let him believe whatever story he came up with. “Is it that obvious?”

“You’re nervous. We can all tell. You’re tightly wound, like a shiny,” said Blu. “Like a lot of the people who’ve shown up in the past few days. Don’t worry, we’re all a lot less strict than the creeps the new imperial academies are cranking out. You can relax a little, sister.”

Being called ‘sister’ put Barriss more at ease than any of her internal efforts. She’d forgotten how familial the clones were with each other, and with her, once they’d worked with her.

“Is something wrong?” asked Sixes.

“No, nothing is wrong,” Barriss said, realizing thinking about the war was only making her more anxious about these clones. She decided to roll with it. “I saw the battle of Ukio. The Republic army was, um, close to where I lived, and I met some of the clone troopers. They treated me much like you are doing now.”

All of it was true, no sense risking a lie being picked up when she didn’t need to tell one. She had been on Ukio when the Republic was taking it back, though Master Windu had done most of the work himself.

“Ah, glad the other clones were there to help you out. You a farmer?” asked Dex.

“I, um, yes,” Barriss said, trying to remember anything and everything she knew about farming if she needed to talk about it. Which was little. “At least, I was. Our farm was destroyed by the seismic disruptions caused by the battle with the Separatists. We had to move on, I wound up enlisting to make ends meet for my family, and eventually ended up here.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Dex said. “The Seppies would destroy everything in their path. At least our brothers managed to beat them back, right?”

“They, well, most of the battalion there didn’t make it. The battle was lost” Barriss said quietly. That was also true. She’d seen the aftermath, looking for survivors with the other medics. There weren’t many.

The elevator was quiet until it finally stopped at the floor she needed to get too, and she got off. As did the clones.

“Where are you headed?” asked Doctrine, as the four troopers headed in the opposite direction.

“Um, actually, we’re headed to the archives on an assignment,” said Barriss.

“Eh, well, try not to get lost.”

The infiltrators continued on their way down several halls now that they were on the right floor.

“You handled yourself rather well,” Karrde said approvingly after a moment of walking, interrupting Barriss’s contemplation of the clones.

Turning down the hall towards their destination, Barriss noticed a quartet of imperial ensigns and some non-commissioned officers and technicians getting into a disagreement.
“Honestly, how did you get a posting this important with such mediocre technical skills,” said the leader of the harassing group. “If you’re not capable of performing such simple work, why don’t you head back to the Outer Rim and leave civilized people to run the Empire?”

Karrde stopped, and Barriss sensed a sudden twinge of anger despite his completely even expression as he turned to the ensigns.

“What exactly is going on here, ensigns?” he asked, emphasizing his fake accent. the young officers taking a second to notice Karrde’s lieutenant rank bars.

“Nothing sir. Just having fun,” said the leader, who just a moment ago had been rather high and mighty, being the one with highest authority.

“What’s your name?”

“Ensign Itiron, sir.”

“And what department are you in, ensign?” asked Karrde.

“I’m on the path to command,” said Itiron. “I- I’m sorry, Lt.-”

“Onco. Records department. Tell me, Itiron, is it behavior becoming of someone who intends to command the forces of the Empire to take opportunities to insult someone of lower rank, exploiting the impunity your status offers you from rebuttal?” asked Karrde. “Do you believe that shall inspire loyalty in those you expect to obey your orders? Insulting them from a position of power? Showing a complete lack of respect for their work?”

“No, sir,” Itiron said uncertainly. “Though I’m not sure what an archivist would know about leadership.”

“Hm. I’ve seen your type before. Relying on reputation and money of your family because you’re not clever or competent enough to command respect on your own. If you keep going as you are now, your uselessness will lead those under your command to their end, followed by your own,” said Karrde. “I may be a mere archivist, however I look forward to the day I see your date of death entered into the Empire’s database. I doubt it will take long. Good day, Ensign Itiron.”

With that, Karrde and Barriss left the stunned and thoroughly unnerved Itiron and his friends to get back to the task at hand, while the non-commissioned officers looked at the fake lieutenant with expressions of awe.

“Was that really necessary?” asked Barriss.

“Yes. It was,” Karrde said coldly, his brow creased with more anger than he had ever displayed in her presence previously, slowly fading as they approached the archive room, until one of the technicians walked around them, blocking their path.

“Hey, what’d you say your name was, again?” asked the technician, her expression concealed beneath that elongated black helmet they all wore, which seemed to blend into her black suit.


“That’s funny,” the technician said suspiciously. “I knew a guy from that department, same name,
looks a lot like you. But it’s not you, is it?”

“You must have met my brother,” Karrde said calmly, without even a split-second’s hesitation to invent the lie. “The resemblance is rather strong, isn’t it?”

“Uh-huh. I talked to Onco quite a bit, he didn’t mention having any brother. You don’t sound much like somebody from Rusurasquam, either.”

“That’s... that’s extremely upsetting,” Karrde said, putting genuine hurt into his voice. Barriss looked over at him, seeing that he was blinking more frequently, and his eyes were actually watering. “We’d been growing apart for years, but I would never have expected him to completely omit me like this! Pretend I don’t even exist!”

“What?” the technician said, put off by having touched such a sensitive topic. “What about your accent?”

“Ugh, ya think that was my real voice?” Karrde said, his shoulders slumping unprofessionally with disappointment, ditching the Core World accent in favor of not his regular voice, but a third one Barriss hadn’t heard before and couldn’t place the origin of. “I changed my accent to blend in better at the academy. You’re somebody who works for a living, right? You know how those snobs from the Core can be, you just saw it with that ensign. It’s part of why my bro’ and I grew apart, he didn’t like me trying to get away from our roots, but ya just can’t get anywhere in the navy when all the higher-ups thinks you’re some schmuck from the Outer Rim, no matter how good yer work is. Once you tell somebody ya grew up herding nerfs, you’re just some backwards yokel. Doesn’t matter that ya know how to properly format archives, doesn’t matter you’ve built and programmed agricultural droids from scrap, doesn’t matter ya went through the same training and graduated near tha top of yer class, doesn’t matter that ya believe in the New Order just as much as them!”

“Ah, wow, I’m sorry for giving you a hard time,” the tech said, sounding genuinely apologetic and stepping out of their way. “Hey, uh, good luck, lieutenant. Also, if it’s not too bold, sir, try giving your brother a call.”

“Yeah, yeah maybe I oughta...” Karrde trailed off, sighing, walking away despondently and around the corner, then blinking and wiping away the false tears that had been forming in his eyes. Then he muttered to Barriss in what she could now only guess was his actual voice, “Okay, point made, we’ll do things your way from here on. No more diversions, that was way too close.”

“Your ability to lie convincingly had gone from useful to disturbing,” said Barriss. “How did you come up with that massive lie so easily?”

“What can I say? I’m just better at improvising than you are,” he said critically, then immediately began getting back into character, trilling all his ‘r’s and speaking in a pompous tone. “Ravenous rancors rampage relentlessly...”

Suddenly, Karrde stopped and darted down into the hallway to their left, while Barriss confusedly watched him, then looked back to the door that had just opened not far ahead of her.

Out from the office came Admiral Yularen, flanked by a pair of stormtroopers, speaking with a white-uniformed ISB colonel, finishing up some conversation Barriss barely heard the end of.

“I completely agree, Admiral,” said the colonel. “Coordinating security between our facilities is paramount, and in the event of an attack from space, I will defer to your command.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Yularen said, then walking away from the colonel with his guards following.
“Good day, Colonel Brek.”

Barriss stood aside against the wall and at attention, forcing her eyes to keep staring dead ahead, but in her periphery she could tell Yularen had looked right at her. She tried to recall if she’d ever met Yularen personally, recalling that no, she hadn’t spoken to him personally, but he had seen her prior to the second invasion of Geonosis. Ahsoka had also mentioned him occasionally. He’d also no doubt been among the countless people who’d heard her condemnation of the Jedi at the conclusion of Ahsoka’s trial.

“Excuse me, ensign,” said Yularen, prompting Barriss to turn around. She had to resist the instinct to step backwards, to try and get away from the man most likely to blow her cover. “What is your name? Have we met before?”

Yularen hadn’t noticed Karrde, so it was best to keep it that way. Which left Barriss to deal with the situation herself. To speak directly to the person most capable of exposing the whole infiltration, with a pair of troopers at his sides.

Time to improvise.

“Ensign Berovi, sir, and I don’t believe so,” Barriss with a salute, keeping her voice as controlled as possible, and her posture rigid. “It’s likely you saw me in passing at some point since I arrived on site.”

“That’s certainly possible, however I recall your voice quite clearly,” he said, stroking his chin, trying to place her.

“My accent isn’t too unusual at the imperial academy on Coruscant,” she said earnestly. “I could easily sound similar to any of dozens of officers you’ve met.”

“Hm. I suppose so. Well, as you were, ensign,” said Yularen, heading once again in the direction of the base’s skyhook to return to his flagship.

Yularen’s claim of curiosity appeared genuine, as Barriss couldn’t sense any malice behind his questions. He honestly didn’t recognize her, and as he walked away, Barriss concentrated on him, trying to nudge his attention towards other matters and away from her for as long as she could maintain her focus on his mind.

Once he was further away and out of sight, Karrde returned to her, and they both walked ahead in a nervous silence to the archive access room just down the hall from the colonel’s office, each of them taking a deep breath, and waited for their hearts to stop pounding before going inside. There, they found the place protected by four more troopers, with an unarmored clone at a desk in front of them, who didn’t seem pleased with unexpected visitors.

“And who are you?” asked the clone.

“Lieutenant Onco, ISB archivist. This is my assistant, Ensign Berovi,” Karrde explained confidently with an air of Core World posturing. “We’re here on assignment to obtain direct copies of classified sections of your archives to update facilities on Scarif and Danuta.”

“I wasn’t aware of any such request,” the clone said suspiciously. “I’m gonna need to see some clearance.”

As she watched in silence from the side, Barriss tried to ease the mind of the five clones, finding it difficult to do so without visibly straining her concentration. Their minds were all those of professionals, alert and ready for anything. She just needed to provide some distraction, some
sedation to make them easier to get past.

“Certainly. Here are both of our clearance codes,” Karrde said, promptly handing his and Barriss’s cylinders over for checking. “I also possess request orders, if that makes things easier,” he said, handing over a pad with the appropriate, convincingly falsified documents.

“It does,” the clone replied, his tone noticeably lightened, taking the pad and reading it over before handing it back, satisfied that everything was documented and in order. “All right, this all seems to be in order. Nice to see some of the new guys know how to follow proper procedure.”

“Yes, I’ve dealt with many such headaches of my own, people not appreciating the hard work we archivists do,” Karrde said appreciatively, the clone nodding incrementally a few times. “Even this assignment was rather rushed as the other archives try to correlate information.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean.”

“Thank you for your understanding, Corporal...”

“CT-1138,” replied the clone.

“Is that what you prefer to be called by?” asked Karrde, getting the attention of the other four clones, whose helmeted heads turned to observe the discussion taking place.

“Oh, uh, my brothers call me ‘Script’,“ said Script, pleasantly surprised by the question.

“Thank you for your understanding and assistance, Corporal Script. We’ll complete our task as quickly as possible, and leave you to your work,” Karrde said with an informal salute, as he and Offee approached the archive access console without incident. Barriss could sense Script and the four clone guards were now significantly more comfortable with their unexpected presence.

Seated in his office aboard the Valiant, drinking a hot cup of caf, Admiral Yularen idly tried to place where he’d seen that ensign before, suddenly quite intent on doing so after realizing he’d somehow come close to forgetting that encounter completely. He was certain he’d never met any ‘Ensign Berovi’, not that he’d familiarized himself completely with every new academy graduate, yet she seemed familiar. He decided the fastest way to settle this would be to simply bring up her file, which he did, seeing a young ensign resembling the one he’d met down below.

It was only ‘resembling’ her, though. She didn’t look quite right, despite the correct name, rank, and department on file. The build, hair, skin tone, eyes, they were all correct, but her features definitely weren’t the same. It wasn’t an old image, either. He spent a moment checking similar names on files and their profiles, concluding it couldn’t simply be a mix-up with the images.

A chill ran up his spine as he recognized her, fitting that voice to the declaration made to the Jedi Order about their failure in the Clone Wars, fitting those features to a similar face with different pigments. He nearly dropped his cup.

Barriss Offee, he thought as he headed to the bridge to warn the base below.
Filling up drive after drive with data, Barriss scrolled through documents she pretended to be checking off of her pad, but were really just anything and everything that looked like it might be important various supply lines, personnel files for high-ranking officers, weapons development, fleet construction progress, special operations. The entirety of the archive couldn’t fit in a single suitcase, but she could still take plenty of the Empire’s biggest secrets while she was there.

Then, she saw the files: everything the Empire had on the Jedi Order. Barriss tried to contain her tumultuous feelings as she entered the commands to copy them.

Karrde was idly chatting with the clones, getting all of them to chuckle, no longer put off by Karrde’s fake upper-class accent, his rigid imperial demeanor, and the snobbishness that normally came with it. Now he was just another coworker, and an unexpectedly nice one at that, making a point to learn the four guards’ names were Buffer, Softshell, Repeat, and Tigerr.

The laughing stopped as the speaker system turned on, the commanding voice of an imperial officer came through.

“All personnel! There is an intruder, real name Barriss Offee, operating under the alias ‘Ensign Berovi’ who presents an imminent threat to imperial security,” said Colonel Brek, the clones’ attention suddenly turning from the speaker to their guests. “She should be assumed to be armed and extremely dangerous. Taking her alive is preferred, but not demanded.”

“Well, kraytspit,” Karrde muttered in his regular voice, regretting that he’d unnecessarily referred to his ‘assistant’ by name to the clones as Barriss reached out and pulled their blasters away. Arming herself and Karrde with two light rifles that leapt to their hands, they stunned all five clones before they could draw their sidearms or enter hand-to-hand combat in a flurry of wispy blue bursts of plasma.

“I wish we hadn’t had to do that,” said Barriss as she relieved the troopers of their ammunition, along with a combat knife.

“Hey, better them than us,” Karrde said as he downloaded random files off the archive as quickly as he could, then removed the last of their drives, set his rifle to maximum power, and blasted the terminal and the archive storage behind it.

The two thieves proceeded to re-stun every trooper just to be safe, then targeted every piece of monitoring equipment they could see, backed out of the fume-filled room, then quietly walked across the hall and into the office of Colonel Brek, who apparently had neglected to lock his door.

“This is an emergency, what are you two-” was as far as the colonel got before getting stunned, and then relieved of his code cylinders.

While Barriss moved the unconscious man to the guest chair across his desk and began tying him up with his own belt and strips of fabric she tore from his jacket with the knife, Karrde took a look at his computer. Before their arrival, the colonel had been about to send out an image of Barriss to all security checkpoints.

Karrde replaced it with the file image of another female officer who looked vastly different from Barriss, and sent it on its way. It was her problem now. Then he shot the computer for good measure.

Removing his arm from his jacket’s sleeve, Karrde proceeded to blast the loose piece of fabric at the elbow, and after slipping his arm back in, he inspected the uniform to find he convincingly appeared...
to have been shot. Barriss performed a similar trick with the side of her stomach, then the two of them left the office.

Hearing a squad approaching from his left, Karrde began shooting straight ahead at empty air as he held his arm to his chest, using his ‘good’ arm to support the ‘injured’ Barriss, who could now conveniently close her eyes and concentrate on allaying the squads' justified suspicions of the pair.

“There are at least three Bothan spies with stealth-field generators, I think they’re trying to poison the garrison via the ventilation systems! They have ships waiting outside the base! Go to section F-3!” he shouted to the approaching troopers, who did not raise their weapons.

“Sir, you’re injured!” the lead trooper said, buying the disguise.

“It’s only my arm, I’ll live. I need to get this ensign to the medical bay, stop those Bothans!” he shouted, prompting the squad to head off immediately in the wrong direction, calling in the report.

As they put more distance between themselves and the archives, they repeatedly came across more squads of stormtroopers and officers trying to find the intruders.

“Separatist saboteurs, they said their target was the base of the skyhook! You must reach A-0 to secure it! Go, quickly!” shouted Karrde, as the next group similarly responded to the phony threat.

“Some pirates are disguised as clones, they’re going to destroy the repulsor generator and topple the whole base! Don’t trust any unfamiliar trooper! You have to get to Z-13!” said Karrde, suppressing a smile as five guards took the elevator down and out of his path of escape.

“The real target is the communications array, I think they’re going to cut off communication before a major attack! Get to section E-5!” said Karrde, as troopers ran back the way they’d come.

Satisfied that enough chaos had been sown for the moment, now they just needed to get out of here before Yularen could sort through this mess.

“You’ve got the rest of the data, right?” asked Karrde, as they finally got somewhere out of the way and could signal for help.

“Yes,” Barriss said, opening her bag to reveal the drives, all of which were loaded with countless documents detailing the Empire’s activities, then pulling out her comm to Ahsoka and Vrask. “Well, it’s a good thing we prepared for this.”

Chapter End Notes

Barriss and Karrde's aliases came about due to a small hope I had that Benicio del Toro's character in The Last Jedi would turn out to be the recanonization of Talon Karrde. A hope that movie thoroughly crushed, like many others. While he still could be DJ, we don't know his real name, I'm not treating them as the same person. DJ stays neutral because he doesn't consider any of the battles worth fighting, Karrde stays quasi-neutral because if he openly favors one side, he's a significant enough threat that the other side will attempt to kill him and the people he leads. But it did help me come up with some names to use.
Berovi, Onco - Libero vivunt, non copulare - Live free, don't join.

Also, "onco" is a prefix related to tumors, fitting for an infiltration mission intended to cause long-term damage to the Empire.

Vrask's singing is mostly made-up, though I did make sure it can be sung through clenched teeth with minimal lip movement. It's also paced to Rey's theme.

Colonel Brek is another Legends import brought in for no other reason than because he has facial hair on par with Kallus's.
“They’re in trouble!” Ahsoka shouted, breaking out of her meditative trance to find Vrask looking through her macrobinoculars at the base.

“I could’ve told you that,” she snarled, as Ahsoka looked through her own pair to see the base was locking itself down, people only visible as specs scrambling across the walkways. “Karrde? Karrde, what’s happening?” she said into the comm.

“Yularen spoke to Barriss once when we were inside, he must’ve realized who she was,” said Karrde, his voice relatively calm despite the situation. “I don’t think they know I’m here, though. The warning only referred to Barriss, he didn’t see me. We’ve managed to wreak some havoc in here, directing people to random posts and immobilizing the commander officer.”

“Well, let’s wreak a little more, then,” Vrask hissed, tapping several buttons on her wrist gauntlet. Modified mining droids, who had been inconspicuously circling the base, suddenly shot towards it and began ‘attacking’. There were flash-bangs, and low-power blaster shots spraying everywhere, a fancy light show that wouldn’t do anything except convince the imperials the attack was a lot bigger than it really was.

“Guess the extraction plan’s in effect,” muttered Ahsoka, racing away to the Eclipse.

“Just get them out of there,” Vrask shouted after her, as she started up all her phony droids and sent them to draw fire. “And try to do it right, I’d rather not have to go in after the rest of you on my own!”

Between the numerous conflicting pieces of misinformation different security teams and stations had received, the diversionary light show outside, the total or severe lack of experience in roughly half the personnel, and the fact that the commanding officer was presently unconscious and tied to the chair in his office, the Mitoth base was rapidly descending into a frenzy, something Barriss and Karrde sought to avoid by approaching their escape route from below.

A route which began by going down in another of these damned blank, cramped, grey turbolifts that made Barriss feel like the metal walls were pressing against her. Barriss closed her eyes, working to imagine a wide open area around her despite being able to hear the faint sound of the car descending through the shaft, air currents shaking it just enough for her to hear.

“Hey,” Karrde said, diverting Barriss’s attention away from the environment. “Nice work back there. I probably wouldn’t have gotten this far on my own with the alarms going.”

“You’re welcome,” she said, finally exiting the lift at the lowest level of the base, taking a deep breath now that she was finally out.

A breath which included a noticeable amount of industrial coolants and, yes, a faint wafting of
sewage. The Mitoth base needed enough facilities to remain completely self-sufficient, and down here was where all the wastewater was recycled, air was filtered and regulated, and energy was generated. Despite the rather unclean purposes these facilities served, Barriss was surprised to find that, barring the smell, it was in immaculate condition.

“Let’s see... Tano’s going to be coming for us through the main hangar, which if this was elevator A-18, we should go this way,” Karrde said, getting his bearings and leading Barriss down a walkway between all manner of pipes and past last pieces of humming industrial equipment for recovering energy from heat, removing airborne particulate, and destroying microorganisms. The place was surprisingly specious, providing ample room for the trespassers to walk side-by-side.

“I don’t suppose this disguise matrix has additional settings to it?” Barriss suggested, nervously fiddling with her rank bar to find a way to get a new disguise. All the noise around her was distracting her, and combined with the heat and humidity it was only a slight improvement over the turbolift.

“Sorry, but we couldn’t fit anything more sophisticated than those color filters into such a small space,” said Karrde, marveling at the quality maintenance work around him. “Wow, this is the cleanest waste processing room I’ve ever seen. I wonder if there’s any quick way to break it that would make trouble for the Empire... nah, it’d probably take too long for them to notice anything was wrong unless we somehow divert the past day’s excrement right into the control room.”

“There most certainly is a way to do that, and nobody except me is finding out until after I get my severance pay,” came a deep, booming voice from behind them. Barriss and Karrde spun around to see a Herglic wearing a jumpsuit and large safety goggles stretched around his enormous head, his sleek black-and-white skin glinting in the light as he lumbered towards them, air puffing out through the blowhole on the back of his head. “You’re not imperials, I gathered that much. What’re you doing down here? Are you the ones who stirred up all that trouble above?”

“What if we are?” Karrde asked neutrally, not making any aggressive motions but keeping his hand firmly on his blaster, and Barriss did the same.

“You can go ahead and bring this whole place down if you want, just give me time to find a way off is all I ask!” the Herglic said, looking up towards the base above with contempt. “Working for the Republic I got good pay and a plenty of respect. Now those humans insult me for working down here making sure their waste doesn’t mix with their drinking water, and they do it after cutting my pay by thousands. You want to make them hurt? Go right ahead.”

“Duly noted, but we’re not going to destroy the base, we just want to get off it. Also, what’s your name?” asked Karrde, easing up a bit and acting more friendly.

“Nabeal,” said the Herglic.

“Is there anywhere in the neighboring city you frequent, Nabeal?” he asked, as Barriss was slowly walking back towards their destination, expecting Karrde to follow.

“We don’t have time for whatever you’re up to,” she said, tugging on his elbow.

“I like to head over to the Rolling Cloud Cantina when I’m done with work,” said Nabeal.

“Great. I can’t guarantee anything right now, but my organization could always use more qualified engineers and technicians, so I might send someone around to offer you a position if you’re really sick of the Empire,” Karrde said, tossing Nabeal a credit chip as incentive while he walked quickly to catch up with Barriss.
“You’re very kind, but messing up the Empire is its own reward,” Nabeal said, ready to toss the credits back.

“But it doesn’t need to be the only reward!” Karrde shouted back from down the walkway.

“Was that really a good time for a job interview?” she asked. “You shouldn’t be getting distracted by your business interests in a situations such as this.”

“This is how I work, Offee. When I execute a heist, I don’t just leave with stolen goods. I leave with new accomplices.”

Soon they found themselves at the end of that section of the base, at a heavy door that would take them to the vehicle maintenance area underneath the main hangar.

“Fighting is going to break out above soon,” said Barriss. “I hope Ahsoka shows up on time.”

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The Eclipse hovered in place over the landing pad for a moment as Ahsoka powered up the engines, as the droidekas listened to her orders.

“Okay, guys, we’re going in hot!” she shouted back to the droidekas, who were awaiting deployment. “You know the plan: protect the Eclipse while I go in and extract Barriss and Karrde. Do what you need to in order to survive, I want to find all of you back aboard in one piece when we leave.”

The droidekas said they would obey her commands, and the pathetic clones of the Empire could not hurt them.

There would be clones protecting that hangar. Ones from Master Plo Koon’s army. Good men whom Ahsoka knew.

“That said... please don’t kill any clones if you don’t have to.”

The droidekas said they would reluctantly obey her commands, and she was not making it easy. But they would try. For her.

“Cici, I need you to fly the ship. Focus on keeping the shields up once we’re there, and use the gun to take out any emplacements that can damage the ship,” said Ahsoka, bringing the ion engines to full power. “No point to all this if the ship isn’t spaceworthy when we get back.”

“Okay, got it,” the astromech said, plugging herself into the wall socket ready to take over the ship’s systems once Ahsoka released control. “Be careful in there, and please don’t refrain from protecting yourself. I don’t want you to die if all it would take to save you is other meatbags dying in your place.”

“...Thank you, Cici.”

Taking a deep breath, Ahsoka punched it, the freighter shooting forward with surprisingly powerful acceleration towards the Mitoth base. With the shields as strong as they were and the enemy defense so disorganized, in less than a minute of powering through laser potshots and past a few TIE fighters, the Eclipse flew into the hangar at high speed and braked hard, hovering in the air, the air catching
up with the ship and knocking several technicians off their feet. With its turret locked in the forwards position, Ahsoka shot the solar collectors of the TIE fighters that hadn’t taken off yet, then spun the ship around and blasted the bay doors to make sure they couldn’t close and cut off their escape, not letting up until the mechanisms were all slag. No way were those getting repaired in time.

The ramp descended, and the droidekas descended along with it, leaping out of the freighter before it had even landed, their three hydraulic legs easily absorbing the impact and leaving three equidistant dents in the floor as they unleashed hundreds of blasts upon the imperial troopers, technicians, and pilots who were scrambling for covered as all counterattacks proved useless against the droidekas’ shields.

The *Eclipse* settled down behind the droidekas as they concentrated their fire on various manned and automated heavy-weapons emplacements put in to protect the hangar, quickly obliterating anything capable of damaging the ship or themselves. Following that, they destroyed several fuel canisters, engulfing a quarter of the mostly-evacuated hangar in a brief inferno that provided Ahsoka enough time to get out of the ship unseen.

Ahsoka held Barriss’ lightsaber in her hands for a moment, then clipped it to her belt. Igniting her own saber and cutting her way into one of the ventilation shafts along the floor, right where the schematics said it would be, Ahsoka descended into the base.

Blaster fire sprayed the hangar bay as a line of fourteen droidekas, a damned big number for that particular class of clankers, held their ground against the clone garrison five-to-one odds.

Wolffe couldn’t believe this. Station in this boring cloud of gas, and the clankers had still managed to find him for another fight. He grinned under his helmet, taking his place alongside his men behind the cover provided by various supply crates and wrecked pieces of equipment.

Lucky for them, the droidekas were even worse shots than ever. If they could even hit a clone, they were only non-lethal hits. So far, at least, and he was determined to end this before they could take any of his mens’ lives.

“Come on, clones! Don’t tell me these are the first droidekas you’ve smashed!” he shouted, rallying one squad to act as a distraction while another circled around to the droids’ flank. The trick was working, the stupid things focusing all their attention on Wolffe while his men rolled grenades at their enemies, slowly enough to penetrate those damned shields.

It should’ve been over then. The explosives should’ve gotten inside the shields and reduced the droids to scrap. Wolffe had seen that trick work so many times he’d lost track.

What he had never seen was a few of the droidekas notice the bombs, alert the others, and all of them scuttle out of the paths of the rolling grenades, causing them to miss their targets and explode uselessly, the blue shields rippling as shrapnel was deflected off of them.

Worse, the droidekas didn’t hold their new positions. The detonations had produced a gigantic cloud of smoke and dust, and the enemy had fallen back inside of it. The black vapors blocked the troopers’ sight, but it didn’t stop the droidekas’ infrared.

Hundreds of blaster bolts emerged out of the cloud from unknown positions towards the troopers, who had no visual on the enemy, and no weapon that could damage them even if they had luck on
their side and landed a hit.

Reinforcements arrived just in time, bringing much-needed heavy weapons.

“Heavy trooper reporting, sir,” one trooper shouted, holding a loaded RPG.

“We’ve got droidekas out there, brother,” said Wolffe, “and right now you’re the only one with the firepower to hit them. We’ll draw their fire, take the first shot you get!”

The trooper nodded, readying his weapon as other clones popped up from cover and moved their positions away from the him, attracting more blaster fire.

Eventually, the cloud had dissipated enough for the blue bubble shields to show up, the full body of one droideka emerging with it. The heavy trooper aimed and fired. Even with the shield, the force of the impact ought to be enough to destroy the clanker.

The second the trigger was pulled, the droideka turned off its shield and partially contracted into ball mode, ducking down enough that the rocket flew right over it and left a scorched dent in the wall behind it. The droideka was unfolded and shielded again before anyone else realized the attack missed and could take a shot at the unshielded enemy.

The droidekas seemed to take last attack a bit personally, because every one of them was now focused on blasting apart the heavy trooper’s cover, blowing off chunks of the wall, exposing him little by little. Wolffe watched, taking more shots at the droids, trying to divert them away from his brother before it was too late.

The heavy trooper realized he could either stay where he was and get killed, or run to the next closest cover and maybe survive this. He bolted, too loaded down with armor and equipment to outrun those blasters. Shots hit his leg, sending him to the ground and making him dropped his RPG. He was an easy target.

An easy target the droidekas didn’t go for. They directed their attention to the RPG, the only weapon still around that could hurt them, turned it to slag, then they went back to laying down suppressing fire on the other clones.

Wolffe didn’t understand. Clankers didn’t show mercy, and they never refused an easy kill, be it soldier or civilian. He understood the tactical reasons for going after the RPG, but there was nothing in their programming that would tell them not to kill a clone.

Peeking around his cover, Wolffe zoomed in on the enemy through his macrobinoculars, staring for several seconds to make sure he wasn’t imagining what he’d seen. The reason behind all the strange behaviors of these droids, all explained by the symbol painted on every one of their heads.

Wolffe stood tall and walked out from behind cover, ignoring the protests and warning of his troopers, stepping towards the ‘enemy’.

The droidekas ceased fire, turning towards the unexpectedly courageous clone. All the fire of his troopers had also stopped, either due to fear of hitting their commander, shock that he wasn’t already dead, or expecting him to have some kind of plan and not wanting to interfere. A few droidekas took potshots at Wolffe, all aimed towards his feet, all misses, futilely trying to scare him back. Getting closer, he noticed the armor of the droidekas were all painted with all kinds of simples accents and patterns, making them all distinct. Just like that of him and his men, back before the Empire.

Staring down the closest destroyer droid, inspecting the symbol on its head, Wolffe demanded to know, “Where’s Ahsoka?”
“She’s nearby,” Barriss said, sensing a presence nearby, drawing them towards each other. “Ahsoka is in the base.”

“Is she coming towards us?” asked Karrde.

“I believe so.”

“Great,” he said tensely, raising his arm to stop her, then back up a few steps and peeking out into the hallway into the repair bay connected to the hangar above. “Because we’re going to need her help in a minute.”

Barriss looked around the corner and saw a squad of stormtroopers marching around in that stark white armor amidst the dull grey starship parts. It was difficult for her to tell how many there were exactly.

“We have to leave the blasters here,” Karrde said.

“What?! Why?”

“There are at least five troopers in there. With the machinery scattered around, there could be others lurking around,” Karrde explained. “If we don’t stun them all at once, which we realistically can’t, whoever we miss will call for backup and the place will be swarming with troopers.”

Barriss closed her eyes and tried to sense the troopers. More clones, eight of them, but she couldn’t narrow down their positions. “And we can’t be carrying around weapons we weren’t issued. So we try to keep up the pretense that we’re imperials?”

“Yep. Just some visiting archivists who got caught in the middle of a rebel attack. How terrible for us,” Karrde said. “We just need to wait there and mingle with them until Ahsoka shows up, along with your saber.”

Approaching the troopers with hands up, it didn’t take long for the clones to notice, suddenly getting on the alert and demanding an explanation for their appearance, which Karrde, as the higher-ranking officer, provided.

“I’m Lt. Onco of the Imperial Security Bureau, sent here on a routine mission when this rebel attack began. We almost ran into some Bothan saboteurs, and wound up in the lower levels trying to escape,” he explained confidently. “Unfortunately, we lost our comms in the fray, and since we’re not familiar with the base, we got lost trying to find our way around before we ran into you.”

“What are you talking about?” said the squad’s captain. “She’s got a comm attached to her belt.”

“You- you had your comm on you?” Karrde said, acting incredulous with Barriss, who did indeed have a perfectly visible comm. “We’ve been crawling around these shafts ever since the alert was sent out, trying to avoid getting killed by rebels, trying to find help and you had your comm on you?”

“Please stop yelling at me,” Barriss said, as she flinched and trembled.

“Fine. Fine. Doesn’t matter. We found help,” Karrde said to the clones, his voice settling into a polite
“Do you mind if we stay by you? We’re unarmed, and we don’t want to run into hostiles again.”

“Alright, but you’re not getting your own blasters,” the clone captain said. “We need ours.”

“Fine by us,” Karrde said as he and Barriss waited with the clones for a few minutes, looking for a way of getting around them unnoticed without looking like they were looking.

The situation wasn’t good. Barriss noticed the captain was standing far away from them, holding his wrist comm near his helmet, receiving a transmission from somewhere, she couldn’t hear what he was saying.

Then, the clones all had their blasters trained on them, and with some trepidation, Barriss and Karrde raised their arms in defeat.

“I demand to know the meaning of this,” Karrde said petulently, slipping halfway back into his Core World accent before remembering he hadn’t been talking like that when he’d introduced himself and cutting it out. It seemed having so many blasters pointed at him had finally managed to ruffle him a little.

“Just got new report from Colonel Brek,” said the captain. “Gave me descriptions that matched yours, and oh, is he looking to have a word.”

“You’re going to pay for your crimes against the Empire,” one of the clones said, while Barriss tried to find a way to immobilize their captors. The clones all had their guns trained on her and Karrde, they were expecting a fight, unlike the ones she’d taken by surprise before. Trying to disarm them all at once could get them both killed.

“Alright, alright, you got us. What’ll it take to let us go? Say, fifty thousand credits?” suggested Karrde. Barriss sensed an unexpected calm coming from him, and while she looked for a backup plan, decided to let him talk.

“We’re not going to turn traitor for credits,” the clone captain snapped, keeping his gun aimed at Karrde.

“I’d have thought less of you if you did, but my offer wasn’t finished,” Karrde said confidently. “How about you lower your weapons, we all get out of here together, and I make sure you guys get those chips out of your heads? Is that a better deal for you?”

All the clones flinched, a few turning their heads incrementally to look at each other, trying to do so without Karrde noticing. It didn’t work.

“How do you know about the chips?” demanded another clone.

“I know a lot of things you’d be surprised by,” Karrde said confidently, feeling that he was getting the upper hand. “I know you were part of the 104th battalion under Plo Koon. I know that he was a standout even among the Jedi in terms of how close he was with his clones, and I’d bet that none of you really believe the line that the Jedi were traitors who needed to die. Is any of that wrong?”

It took a lot of effort for Barriss not to flinch and draw attention to herself. When Karrde had mentioned the chips and the deaths of the Jedi, she could feel the guilt, the anger, the surge of disgust coming from the clones. Strongly enough she thought she could see flashes of memories, none of them pleasant.

“I don’t like this, Captain. We should stun them,” a third clone said.
“Brek wants them conscious for questioning, and he wants them now. No stun weapons,” the captain replied sternly.

“It happened to you, didn’t it?” asked Barriss, her voice sympathetic as she considered how the clones felt to have their control suddenly ripped from them, only to find it returned so they could see the friends they’d killed. “They forced you to kill your own commanders.”

“I took an oath to serve the Empire, and to follow orders!” snapped another clone.

“No, you took an oath to serve the Republic. Do they seem the same? You accused them of being traitors, but you killed them even though you didn’t believe they were the enemy, so what does that make you?” asked Karrde, taking full advantage of the clones’ proven refusal to shoot him to be as cutting as possible. “I read those oaths you all took. Real inspiring stuff about honor and loyalty. Tell me, what would’ve happened if you’d refused to take it? What do the Kaminoans do with defective products? What will the Empire?”

The clones all looked at each other, none of them trying to hide it now. All except their captain, who was completely focused on Karrde.

“Is there anything about what I’ve said which you find inaccurate?” asked Karrde. “Any context I’m unfairly omitting? Anything you find skewed?”

“No,” the captain said flatly, still keeping his gun trained on Karrde.

“You can come with us,” said Barriss, deciding this was a better option than trying to attack them and probably get stunned, or worse. “As I understand it, the chips are fairly simple to remove with the correct equipment. You can escort us to the ship, and we’ll all leave. You’re under no obligation to serve a government you swore no oath to, and if we do it this way, none of your brothers will suffer any harm.”

“I don’t want to hurt any of you, but I can’t say the same for your new commanders. What’s your name, captain?” asked Karrde.

“CT-2...” he stopped himself, then uneasily added. “Boost.”

Karrde lowered his hands, extending the right to the clone. “Well, Boost, do you think we can make a deal?”

The turbolift door to their left slid open before Boost could respond, revealing a very disheveled and furious Colonel Brek, who had chosen to simply discard his uniform’s torn-up jacket rather than walk around with the missing section of fabric Barriss had cut to tie him up with. Flanked by ten stormtroopers who’d crammed themselves into the lift, they took up positions alongside the clones, their blasters pointed at the intruders.

“Huh. You recover from stun blasts pretty quick, I see,” noted Karrde, who’d immediately raised his hands back up. “What, do those sideburns of yours dissipate blaster fire? Is that why you spend every morning meticulously trimming every hair on your face?”

“Excellent work, CT-21515,” Brek said, ignoring Karrde’s comment and taking up a position next to the clone. “I’ll be sure to include a mention of your success in my report. I doubt many clones have had the honor of detaining a Jedi since the end of the war.”

“Thank you, sir,” Boost muttered under his breath, stepping aside to let the colonel inspect the prisoners.
“You don’t sound thankful, Boost,” Karrde said. “Almost as if you’re doing something you don’t want to.”

Brek raised an eyebrow. “Have the prisoners been speaking to you, CT-21515?”

“Yes, sir,” Boost replied reluctantly. “They attempted to bargain for their safety.”

“Indeed,” said Brek. “You sound discomfited, Captain. Were they that persuasive?”

“...No, sir,” Boost said quietly.

Brek’s expression became harsher, hearing the dishonesty. His eyes flitted to the other clones, seeing how they were watching for what their captain would do.

“Hm. Not only are your loyalties insufficiently programmed, you can’t act convincingly either. Things like this are why you clones are fast becoming obsolete,” Brek said with an unimpressed sneer “Execute Order 43.”

The instant they heard the phrase, the clones all lowered their blasters, their postures slumped, none of them saying anything more.

“What did you do to them?” asked Barriss, stiff with shock, sensing no feelings or intent from the clones anymore.

“Order 43: pacification protocol in case of a clone revolt. Instantly suppresses their ability to fight,” Brek explained. The unaffected stormtroopers he’d brought down with him, non-clones, remained by his side. “Don’t give me those shocked looks. You forced me to do this to them, feeding them seditious thoughts.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure I didn’t make you do that,” Karrde said dryly, eyeing the silent, docile clones, feeling disgusted by Brek and unfazed by the attempted guilt trip. He eyed the blasters of the new stormtroopers accompanying Brek. Karrde had never seen the non-clone troops in action, but he’d heard rumors that their marksmanship was something that must be seen to be believed. “If all I need to start a revolt is to say a few words, your empire won’t last long. Thanks for eliminating half your own forces, by the way. Makes our job easier.”

While Karrde chatted up their captors, Barriss tried to come up with a plan for how to deal with these new developments and get them out of here. The pacified clones still held their blasters, and she could take control of the weapons and use them against the new arrivals. But if she didn’t take them all out immediately, which she almost certain couldn’t while trying to aim several blasters at once from this non-ideal vantage point, Brek and his men would instinctively return fire and kill the helpless clones on her account.

“You. You’re not another Jedi,” Brek said to Karrde. “You don’t act like one, you’re far too undignified. Some criminal accomplice, I take it? Fringe scum? Perhaps you may serve some use. If you can tell us more about other Jedi survivors, I could arrange for a reduced sentence for your crimes.”

“No, I, the master thief Oribuyce Kihkovid, always keep my word,” Karrde with such brazen confidence it almost convinced Barriss that actually was his real name. “I made a deal, and I’m going to make good on it, even if it kills me.”

“An apt choice of words, as it soon will, if you don’t start cooperating,” Brek remarked with a satisfied grin, raising his blaster.
While the clones were barely focused enough to stand, Barriss could easily knock them to the ground as a distraction, then attack the imperials.

“Yeah, yeah, I heard it the moment I said it,” Karrde groaned, rather disappointed in himself for walking right into that one. “You Empire types all think you’re so clever, but really, even with massively superior numbers and equipment, you’re barely pulling off victories. You call me scum, but I worked my way past all your security, with minimal effort by the way, and if it wasn’t for Yularen giving you the alert, which was probably pure luck on his part, too, you’d never have known I was here. Even when you did, I still got pretty damn far, and humiliated you in the process by stunning you and sending your whole base into chaos.”

Barriss stopped thinking, realizing the best option now was to wait for what would happen next.

“Shut your mouth,” spat Brek, now at the end of his patience, striking Karrde with his pistol, breaking his nose.

“Fine, then. I guess I’ll shut up,” Karrde said after moment, blood dripping out of his nose. “After all, that little speech of mine-”

Crawling around through the air duct towards the supply depot, Ahsoka waited and listened, literally and figuratively. There was the slight vibrations of the vent as the air blew past her, the sound of footsteps of imperials running to their stations.

And, about thirty meters ahead of her were a group of stormtroopers and a reassuringly familiar presence.

Kicking the vent out of the way, Ahsoka dropped down and Force-pulled the stormtroopers and their colonel to the ground, while Barriss and Karrde grabbed blasters and stunned them all.

“-has already stalled you long enough,” Karrde said to the unconscious colonel, as if he was finishing a sentence.

“Um, what?” asked Ahsoka, who could tell she was missing some context as she held out Barriss’s saber to her. “Woah, Karrde, what happened to your face?”

Before she could get an explanation, Barriss took the saber and threw her arms around Ahsoka, holding onto her tightly as they stood among the fallen troopers.

“Now who’s getting distracted?” remarked Karrde as he strolled past the couple towards the exit, a heavy door blocking their access to the upper levels. “A lightsaber can handle this, I hope?”

Before she could get to work on that, Ahsoka heard a transmission coming through on the comm of the lead officer she’d just knocked unconscious. A voice that was very familiar to her.

“Colonel Brek?” said Admiral Yularen, having heard the attack that knocked the colonel unconscious. “Colonel Brek, respond!”

The comm shot through the air and into Ahsoka’s hand.

“He’s not here, Yularen,” Ahsoka said.
The other end of the comm grew dead quiet. Barriss and Karrde, who had moved on a few steps ahead, took notice of what Ahsoka was doing, deciding not to interrupt as Barriss used her saber to cut through the thick security door.

“Ahsoka Tano,” Yularen eventually said, speaking more to himself than into his communicator. “I didn’t expect you to be behind this.”

“I wouldn’t say I’m behind it. I’m just one of the people trying to bring the Empire down. One of many,” she said. “Where are you transmitting from? Did you come down to take command in person, or are you hiding up in orbit?”

“I’m not foolish enough to engage a Jedi in close proximity, no,” said Yularen, with an edge of annoyance at being called a coward.

“Is that how you handled yourself during Order 66?” asked Ahsoka. “Ordering clones to kill their own allies? Your allies? Getting rid of them from a distance?”

“I followed my orders,” Yularen replied stoically. “And I’m not completely unwilling to bend them when presented with an extraordinary situation. Given the timing, I don’t believe you were involved in the Jedi’s attempted overthrow of the government. If you turn yourself in now, I would use my position within the Empire to grant you amnesty.”

“What are you- ‘attempted overthrow’? You’re serving Palpatine, the man who’s overthrown the Republic’s government and replaced it with a fascist dictatorship, because he told you the Jedi... were plotting to overthrow the Republic’s government? And you believed him? Are you an idiot?” Ahsoka replied with as much sarcastic contempt as she could fit into the words, quickly realizing how little that comradery built up during the war really meant to Yularen.

“You’re cooperating with Offee,” Yularen noted, ignoring her questions. “Tell me, are you truly that forgiving of what she did? Or, perhaps, were you two working together to bomb the temple from the beginning, then she took the fall to preserve your freedom, so you could liberate her at a later time?”

“The former,” Ahsoka said back dryly. It was doubtful he’d be convinced, not that she really cared at this point.

“I’m giving you one last chance, Tano. Surrender to the nearest imperial personnel, or you and your accomplices will not leave Mitoth alive.”

“That’s all you’ve got to say to me?” said Ahsoka. “After everything, you’re completely fine trying to kill me?”

“What else were you expecting from me?” asked Yularen. “I have a duty to follow the directives I am given. The Republic nearly tore itself apart, and Palpatine’s New Order has a chance at restoring peace.”

“Yeah, it’ll be really peaceful when Palpatine has killed everyone who speaks against him,” countered Ahsoka.

“If that is what is required to prevent the devastation of the Clone Wars, then so be it,” Yularen said coldly.

Ahsoka imagined Yularen’s face, that stiff, civilized face looking down on her. She wondered how old he looked now, remember he had far more grey hair the last time she’d seen him than the first.

“You’re going to have to kill me to stop me. If it takes the rest of my life, I’m going to tear the New
Order down,” Ahsoka said, throwing her comm away. Returning to the others, she found Barriss had cut through the security door, and the three of them took a slow-moving maintenance turbolift, one usually reserved for moving starship parts, up to the next level. “Okay, we’re all together, now what?”

“That depends. What’s it like above? Can we get to your ship?” asked Karrde.

“We’ve really kicked the stingworms’ nest. Clones are everywhere, and we’ll have to get through them to reach the Eclipse,” said Ahsoka. “TIEs are scrambled outside, too. Cici can’t get the Eclipse out and around to another access point without it getting blown to pieces. We have to find a way through the clones.”

“The control room for the hangar will be our safest route into the hangar,” suggested Barriss, as the lift came to a stop. “We can recall the droidekas, then Cici can deploy and position the ramp so we can cut through the windows and reach it without having to fight our way past a small army.”

“The control room would be... this way,” Karrde said, taking a left down the hall. Ahsoka took a quick look at Barriss, whose own sense of direction agreed with Karrde’s and they started on their way.

Which left the issue of positioning the Eclipse. It was a shame the droidekas didn’t have a true ‘stun’ setting, just typical concentrated blaster bolts of various power levels ranging from ‘lethal’ down to ‘mild burn’. Ahsoka pulled out her personal comm to call up all the droids. “Guys, we’re going to make a run for the Eclipse and get out of here, so all of you get back aboard. Cici, there’s a control room window that should be to the ship’s left. When I send you the signal, position to ramp in front of it and we’ll make our escape.”

What in the Empire is Ahsoka doing with these things? Wolffe wondered to himself. The droidekas were ignoring him, even though he knew they could understand his questions. These ones could talk, too; he’d heard them exchange a few phrases, not that he’d understood the droidekaspoken.

At the moment, the droidekas were holding their positions, shields up, all facing different directions to cover each other, ready if the clones tried anything. One thing Wolffe couldn’t help but respect about clankers is that even though they were on the wrong side, they were always vigilant and prepared for a fight.

The clones had all taken cover, watching the intruders but holding fire, knowing it wouldn’t do any good. It was frustrating, not just because they couldn’t do anything, but because everyone had realized how outmatched they really were. Medics were attending to the wounded, the placement of the hits on their limbs making it clear the droidekas had been charged only with keeping Wolffe’s men occupied, not killing them. Toyng with them. Through their defensive shields and their new tactics, they could’ve slaughtered the clones if they’d been ordered. They still could.

“Commander Wolffe, report! What’s happening down there?” Yularen yelled through Wolffe’s comm.

“Admiral, the intruders have been stalled in the hangar,” Wolffe said, firing his sidearm in the general direction of the droidekas to make it sound like something was still happening. None of them seemed bothered by it. “All attempts to destroy them have been unsuccessful, but we’ve stopped their
advance and are holding our positions.”

“We’ve gotten reports of at least five different groups of attackers hitting twice as many key systems,” said the admiral. “Inform me if anything changes. Ahsoka Tano is present in the base, and she cannot be allowed to accomplish whatever her goal is. Prevent her from escaping on that ship.”

“Yes sir. Very good, sir,” Wolffe said. None of what he’d said was untrue, technically, though he had more of an idea what was happening now. The droidekas weren’t the main attack. They were the diversion, drawing as many soldiers as possible into a fight they couldn’t win because Ahsoka had trained the clankers in all their tactics.

Which meant Ahsoka was off somewhere else in the base, moving towards her real objective. Whatever her reasons for being here, however she’d gotten a hold of those droidekas, she’d ensured none his brothers would be killed.

Which meant that whatever her real plan was, it wouldn’t involve the destruction of the base or the deaths of the people here.

If sticking around here and pretending there was a real emergency meant he and his men wouldn’t have to kill her, and she wouldn’t have to kill any of them, that was fine by him.

Wolffe wondered what had drawn the kid here, exactly. She could be a threat to the Empire, but he wasn’t really willing to kill her. He’d already chased her down once when she’d been in the right, he wasn’t looking to do it again.

The droidekas suddenly became active, retreating back into their ship, blasters pointed menacingly at the clones, warning them not to push their tolerance by following.

The speaker system crackled to life again, delivering an update from the admiral: “Attention all stormtroopers: We are under attack by Jedi traitors. Clone Protocol 66 is in effect.”

In the next moment, Wolffe’s doubts and questions were suddenly gone. He knew what to do. He had his orders, and he’d follow them like any good soldier.

The hangar control room was lightly defended, the majority of the available troopers being down below ready to hold off the droidekas and whatever else they were afraid the Eclipse carried. It still proved challenging to make a move on the control room, as the hallway leading towards it provided a choke point creating a back-and-forth between the imperials at their attackers.

Several clone troopers opened fire on them, Ahsoka and Barriss going in on the right while Karrde took cover between two of the bulkheads to fire stun blasts at the defenders.

Ahsoka and Barriss were powering through the blaster bolts, the small area and single direction of fire preventing the clones from overwhelming them with numbers.

From behind them, Karrde shouted, “Execute Order 43!” at the clones to absolutely no effect. It seemed the control chips were sophisticated enough to ignore commands from enemy units. With a disappointed shrug of ‘I tried’, Karrde kept shooting back.

Ahsoka stormed down the hallway, pulling blasters from the hands of the defending imperials one by
one and slicing them apart in the air, forcing them back further and further until they were boxed in and unarmed, allowed Karrde to hit them with stun shots. The control room was theirs.

Ahsoka pulled out her comm. “Cici, *now.*”

With all the imperials incapacitated, Barriss cut a hole through the transparisteel as the Eclipse rose to meet them, its ramp only a few meters away. Barriss used the Force to lift and throw Karrde, making the leap herself a second later. The clones beneath them on the hangar floor were opening fire, but the freighter’s shields were protecting them.

Instinctively ducking down, a blaster bolt flew over Ahsoka’s head. The control room personnel must have alerted the others that they were under attack, and now they were coming, squads of white-armored soldiers storming down the hall after them.

Ahsoka deflected several shots back at them, then ran towards the opening with her ship hovering in front of her, Barriss and Karrde looking back and expecting her to follow. As the clones advanced, Ahsoka made a break for the opening, walking back while deflecting blaster fire.

As she turned to make the jump through the opening, a blaster bolt struck the back of her knee, and she fell five meters onto the metal floor below, with a crowd of clones around her.

The sight of her lightsaber was all the stimulus the clones surrounding her needed, and Ahsoka could feel the change. Feel the clones’ personalities all being suppressed for the moment to make them compliant. Feel the cold precision, the focus on what they were supposed to do.

At least she understood what was happening to them. Ahsoka wondered if the Jedi had time to piece it together.

The clones raised their weapons, aiming them at Ahsoka, blaster fire about to come at her from all directions. While she raised her saber, she knew she couldn’t block so many shots from so many directions, with her wounded leg hindering her movements.

“STOP.”

The troopers froze. They didn’t simply hold still, all of them had stopped mid-motion, like armored statues, unable to so much as twitch. Some were turning around, some hadn’t quite lined up their target, some were mid-stride. All of them stopped.

“*Drop your weapons,*” ordered Barriss, as she fought the organic chip in the brain of each clone for control.

The troopers complied, their hands openings, the only movement they were capable of. The clattering of rifles hitting the floor echoing through the hangar.

Ahsoka had to consciously tighten her hold on her saber, as she could feel the grip loosening.

Karrde wasn’t hesitating, stunning all the closest clones as quickly as possible, giving Barriss fewer minds to concentrate on.

“I don’t know how much longer I can keep them like that,” Barriss said, her eyes tightly shut as she concentrated on suppressing the initiative of a hundred minds all around her.

The *Eclipse* lowered as far down as it could go without landing or hitting the floor, and Ahsoka managed to limp her way up into the ship, jumping up with her good leg and getting a hold of the ramp, Karrde pulling her aboard as Barriss struggled to keep standing under the strain.
Amid the confused as the ship pulled away, disoriented trooper clutching their heads, Ahsoka saw one stormtrooper, his armor as blank as all the others, give a small wave to her. With no idea who he was, Ahsoka gave an uncertain wave back to him as the ramp closed.

Barriss and Karrde supported Ahsoka as they got her to the pilot’s seat, seeing as she was still a the best pilot they had despite the pain in her leg.

The *Eclipse* withdrew from the hangar as hundreds of TIE fighters swarmed around the base, and Yularen’s Star Destroyer descended into the atmosphere.

Chapter End Notes

Talon Karrde's master plan to defeat the Empire is to steal all their employees and give them high-paying jobs with great benefits until there are so many vacant positions their military, infrastructure, and economy collapse, and interstellar trade consists entirely of small, fast smuggler ships running things past non-existant law enforcement. That's his dream. Everything is illegal. Everything is smuggled.

In other news, being a clone in the Star Wars universe continues to be an unending series of degradations with no hope of getting justice or freedom for yourself.

After rewatching their fight in the Sabotage arc I've been undecided on whether to treat Barriss as being stronger than Ahsoka. Yeah, Ahsoka was tired and down one saber, but Barriss didn't have her preferred style and, depending on how you interpret her mental state, probably wasn't at 100% either, but still wiped the floor with her. She also got several good hits on Anakin, who's generally recognized as the best fighter in the Order. With all the training she's gotten lately, and this new development, Barriss is probably the stronger of the two when it comes to the Force, even if she doesn't like throwing her weight around if she doesn't have to.
“Thanks for the pickup, Tano. Next time, though, we’ll need to factor in how dead-set the Empire is on killing you,” Karrde said as his attention switched between the canopy, through which he could see dozens of TIE fighters swarming around them, and a Star Destroyer, heated atmosphere glowing orange around it, descending towards them.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got this,” said Ahsoka, tightly gripping the controls and sending the Eclipse into a sharp decline into the swirling blue-grey clouds of Mitoth. She did indeed have a plan, and the fact she came up with said plan in the past ten seconds didn’t make that statement any less true. “TIE fighters can’t handle turbulence. We shake them off, resurface, then get to hyperspace. We can contact Vrask when we’re clear.”

Obscured from sensors thanks to the think cloud cover, the Eclipse enjoyed a few minutes of relative calm, until turbolaser fire sliced through the clouds, the dissipating heat causing rapid expansions of gas like thunder, except close enough to shake the ship like explosions. That Star Destroyer didn’t have their exact position, but it had their last vector and could match their top speed, even while skimming the upper atmosphere. Sensors showed that last shake wasn’t a single good shot, Yularen was bombarding square kilometers with turbolaser fire, clearly knowing the effect it would have on the dense gases.

“Turbulence might help us get away from the TIEs, but Yularen’s taking you much more seriously than we’d expected. There’s another Star Destroyer and at least a hundred TIEs in orbit, they’ll be waiting for us,” Karrde said. “We can’t evade them in a freighter!”

“What about the other side of the planet?” asked Ahsoka. “We can slip around through a lower level of the atmosphere.”

“Even if they don’t identify the ship, Yhanz is in that direction now, we’ll never make it past the planet’s gravity well and into hyperspace before we’re blasted apart,” Karrde pointed out. As Ahsoka took them deeper, instruments telling her and Barriss that the pressure was becoming dangerously high, Karrde mulled over whether he wanted to show them his ace in the hole. “Head to this latitude and longitude. We can hide out there until the planets move through their orbits and we can escape.”

The roaring of the TIE fighters and the thundering of the turbolasers grew more distant as they got knocked around by the wind several kilometers beneath the surface, allowing Ahsoka to bring the freighter about and headed to the coordinates Karrde punched in. Their destination was fifty kilometers northeast through thick cloud cover, obscuring vision and, hopefully, imperial sensors.

There was nothing there except for more billowing gas.

“What now?” asked Ahsoka. Karrde had taken position next to Barriss and was punching a code into their comm.

“Just need to get this to the right frequency...” he said, fiddling with the controls on their transmitter.

A few seconds after the signal went out, the clouds beneath the Eclipse split open.

“Now, we go down,” he said, settling back into his seat to let Ahsoka steer the ship down this odd
tunnel in the clouds. Looking at the edges of cycling vapors, Ahsoka spotted faint crackling, a weak energy shield that had expanded and was maintaining a survivable pressure for the ship.

The light from the surface quickly faded as the *Eclipse* flew deeper into the clouds, until that crackling shield was the only light save for the freighter’s lights shining into the darkness, the only thing telling Ahsoka where to go.

Ahsoka tried to stand up, placing more pressure on her injured leg, and got a painful reminder of the damage to her knee, gently setting herself back down. Barriss immediately got up and rushed to work on her leg, a faint glow appearing around her hand as she healed the wound, repairing damage to the skin, tendons, and muscle of her knee.

“Thanks, Barriss. I don’t know if- oh, okay-” Ahsoka said as Barriss threw her arms around her, squeezing her tightly as she tried not to show her discomfort at how Barriss’s arms were constricting her rear lekku. Barriss only letting go to start rapidly kissing Ahsoka, with the latter unsure what to do with her hands since Barriss kept jumping around between her lips, cheeks, and forehead, only stopped doing that to go back to hugging her again, this time more on cradling her head.

“Don’t scare me like that,” Barriss said, on the verge of tears, finally settling down as she held onto Ahsoka.

That tender moment was interrupted by a sound most similar to someone trying to inhale a pureed steak. Ahsoka and Barriss looked to see Karrde swiveling boredly in his chair, his eyes covered with his hand, and beneath it, his broken nose still slowly leaking blood.

“I can help you with that,” Barriss said, moving over to him and rolling up her sleeves to avoid getting his blood on them. Ahsoka shot Karrde an expression making her annoyance at the interruption clear, while he shot a glare right back at her and silently pointed at his busted face, his lips pursed both with irritation and to keep the blood out of his mouth. The pain was finally starting to get to him, and it wasn’t like anybody had directed him towards a medkit or anything. Barriss began healing him, a faint blue aura enveloping the space around her palm as she repaired the nasal fracture. “You should be more careful when taunting imperial officers.”

“Well, keeping quiet is not my strong suit. Neither is physical toughness, unfortunately,” Karrde said, flinching slightly as Barriss fixed up his broken nose, then wiping the remaining blood onto his sleeve. An act he immediately regretted as he looked down at the red smear and realized this wasn’t his ship, and he had no change of clothes. Nothing around would fit besides the uniform unless he wanted to try on one of Ahsoka’s vests. “Kinda wish I’d known you could do that back as the base. I knew you were a medic, but I didn’t realize that meant you could literally heal people by waving your hand over them. Among the other feats you pulled off.”

“I’m pretty interested in that myself,” said Ahsoka. “Not to say I’m not glad, or impressed, because I am, but how were you able to restrain all the clones like that?”

“The clones were going to kill you,” Barriss said, her voice trembling slightly. “I wouldn’t let that happen.”

“You heard her, Ahsoka,” Karrde said. “The more danger you put yourself in, the stronger Barriss will get in order to save you.”

“Good to know,” said Ahsoka, getting a grip on the control yoke again and staring into the endless tunnel of clouds, focusing on their course now that the issue of their immediate injuries was taken care of. “Now, where are we going?”
“It’s a bit of a secret of mine,” said Karrde. “We’ll be safe there, don’t worry.”

“Karrde, can you just tell us up front?” demanded Ahsoka, less than pleased at the idea of going any deeper into Mitoth. “You keep trying to act enigmatic, but you’ll just end up telling us everything anyway. It happened with the ysalamiri, and your contact with the inquisitors, and the Katana Fleet dreadnoughts, so can you please cut it out for once?”

“...Fine,” Karrde said reluctantly after mulling it over for a second. Giving out secrets for free wasn’t something he wanted to get into the habit of, but he couldn’t deny the pattern, or that Ahsoka’s concerns were well-founded. “There’s a base hidden deep within Mitoth’s atmosphere, and I’ve been setting it up for some high-risk smuggling operations. The situation demanded me to bring it out.”

“You have a base within a gas giant, well beyond the crush depth of most starships?” asked Barriss, not particularly satisfied by this explanation.

“I’ve got a lot of things, and more details than that aren’t part of our arrangement,” Karrde said cryptically, sitting back in his chair, twitching his newly-fixed nose. “It’ll be about an hour’s time to reach it at this speed.”

The trip was tense, all the ship’s occupants on edge as they descended further into the planet, acutely aware of the danger posed by the environment and how powerless they were here. The only sources of light besides those of the ship was an occasional white rippling of the cylindrical shield around them, and occasional static discharges in the clouds beyond.

Deep in the atmosphere, Ahsoka felt an approaching darkness, immense, yet strangely suppressed, as if something was blotting it out. This didn’t serve as much of a comfort, because she could tell they were still moving towards it.

The source of the shielded tunnel became visible an hour later in the Eclipse’s forward lights, thousands of kilometers beneath Mitoth’s surface. It was a floating base, roughly spherical, built so wide the darkness obscured its edges, blending into the gas around it.

Ahsoka’s hearing, beyond the range of what Barriss or Karrde could manage, could detect faint roaring and screeching in the distance, loud enough to be transmitted through the thinned atmosphere of the tunnel and the hull of the ship. Through the Force, Ahsoka sensed life, sensed things wandering around and hunting in the dark depths. She hoped the lights wouldn’t draw any of them any closer.

Doors on the uppermost level of the floating facility slowly opened, and the Eclipse passed through another osmotic shield and into a breathable atmosphere, settling down, the only vessel in an abandoned and immense hangar bay, larger than that of a Star Destroyer. In fact, Ahsoka considered it might be possible to fit a Star Destroyer itself in here.

“What is this place? There’s no way this is some smuggling outpost you threw together yourself,” asked Ahsoka, setting the ship down in the vacant hangar. The design of the facility was completely unfamiliar to her. Grated floors with yellowish lights beneath them to mark walkways, massive, rounded pylons, dull grey and red metals of a composition she wasn’t sure of.

“This base is Rakatan!” Barriss realized with a tinge of excitement, trying to make out the limited area the freighter’s lights shined on. “It must have laid undisturbed here for tens of thousands of years, how did you know it would be here?”

Walking towards the exit, Karrde stopped, thinking, and decided it would be easier to answer the question rather than have Barriss worried. “I recently came into possession coordinates to this facility
from an outside source.”

“Well, why is it here?” asked Ahsoka.

“Same as every other facility in this system. The Rakatan Infinite Empire had a mining operation here, looking to take advantage of the rare metals and gases,” Karrde said as Ahsoka and Barriss followed him out to inspect their new surroundings.

After the initial excitement of the discovery wore off, Barriss thought over everything she knew about the technology of the Rakata, how it could supposedly be so sophisticated it could access the Force. And how its creators were steeped in the dark side.

“Karrde, I know you can’t sense the Force and may not even fully believe in it, but you can’t have your people working in a place like this,” urged Barriss. “The Rakata were as vile as the Empire ever could be. This place is an epicenter of hatred and evil, and it will wear you down over time if you stay here.”

“I’m aware of the risks,” Karrde replied calmly as he descended down the boarding ramp. “And I’m nothing if not prepared.”

Ahsoka and Barriss uneasily followed after him into the hangar, the station’s internal lights slowly starting up and illuminating the room. The group found themselves in a hangar populated by dozens of ysalamiri lined up along the walls and support columns, all mounted on nutrient frames identical to the one in the *Eclipse*’s own cargo hold, a miniature, artificial replica of Myrkr’s forests.

“How did you find this place, again?” asked Ahsoka. “And be specific this time.”

“With one of those,” Karrde replied, pointed towards the center of the chamber. There, perched atop a round pedestal, elevated a few meters with rings of steps leading up to it, was the centerpiece of the whole room. Three long, radially-spaced metal fins fanned out, and once in position, a metal sphere rose up between them, forming the center of a hologram of the galaxy. Lines appeared connecting various controlled worlds, displaying the glory and scope of the Infinite Empire as it had to everyone who had ever entered this place.

“A Rakatan star map,” whispered Barriss, who had never expected to see a device like this in person. It was theorized that such maps were created not for the purposes of navigation, but to inspire awe at its creators’ power. It was having the intended effect on her, albeit perhaps not for the intended reasons. She felt fascinated, not intimidated.

“I found a counterpart to this one on Myrkr after you left, hidden in some of the local ruins,” Karrde continued. “Translation programs for a language that’s thirty-thousand years dead aren’t easy to come by, but we managed.”

“Wow, this is... Wait, isn’t it a bit of a weird coincidence that this base was right where we needed it to be?” asked Ahsoka, switching from similar awe at the implications to confusion at their luck.
“What ‘coincidence’?” said Karrde. “Mitth and Yhanz are loaded with enough resources to construct entire fleets. The Infinite and Galactic Empires both recognized this and built bases. It would be more surprising if there wasn’t something here, really.”

“I guess that works. Any idea what all this stuff does?” asked Ahsoka, wandering around the hangar, spotting numerous exits and entrances of various size leading to who-knows-where.

“I understand the basics of the language and know my way around, but I’m not sure what individual pieces of equipment are supposed to do, no,” Karrde explained, wandering around the chamber. “It’s tough to find experts in such a specific area of galactic history who’re also reliable enough not to slip something to the public. Then the Empire will take the place for themselves.”

“Hold on a moment,” Barriss said as she dashed back to the Eclipse. “I believe I know someone who possesses the expertise you need.”

“You were right, it’s definitely a mining facility,” Revan said, looking over the text on the consoles in the command center one level above the hangar, as Barriss held the holocron to provide a clear view of everything. The control room was filled with various consoles for monitoring the functions of the entire outpost, along with various bits of modern technology Karrde had brought in whenever he’d last been here. “Surprisingly good condition, too. Probably abandoned long before the Rakatan empire started splintering, otherwise the various warlords would’ve been fighting over it.”

“Not that I’m ungrateful for the advice, but how does that holocron know so much?” asked Karrde.

“Buddy, I know more about the Rakata than just about anyone. You’re not the only person to find a functional star map, or five,” said Revan. “Let’s see what this place can do- gravity projectors, fusion furnaces, processing center, supply depot... manufacturing? ...Oooh.”

“Oooh?” repeated Barriss, as she carried the holocron around to give Revan a complete view of all the controls.

“I think the tech here contains less advanced versions of what went into the Star Forge. Maybe this was a test bed, small-scale experiments with harvesting and controlled fusion of lighter elements in less hazardous conditions before moving onto tests near an actual star. At the very least, this place was built earlier in their technological development.”

“What’s a star forge?” asked Karrde.

“The Star Forge was a superweapon, a mega-factory that could produce endless materiel. Capital ships, starfighters, transports, war droids, all constructed from matter and energy extracted from the corona of a star,” explained Revan. “Only one ever existed, built at the apex of the Infinite Empire. It fueled the Rakatan expansion and conquest, feeding off the darkness of their society and making them progressively more barbaric until they turned on each other and their empire splintered, with their slave races taking advantage and rebellions spreading across the galaxy. Almost four thousand years ago, I found it, reactivated it, and nearly conquered the Republic with it before assisting in its destruction.”

Karrde listened attentively, trying to recall what little he knew of ancient galactic history. “Wait a second, are you-”
“Revan, yep, that’s me.”

“...I was going to ask if you were Exar Kun. Wasn’t he the guy who nearly conquered the Republic around that time?” Karrde said, as the Revan hologram slowly, eerily turned to face him directly. Despite the mask, everyone could tell he was being glared at, and the smuggler shifted around in his chair, unnerved by Revan’s palpable annoyance.

“Alright, we’re safe for the time being. We got the data we came for, right?” Ahsoka asked, Barriss raising the case containing all the drives in response. “We just can’t escape right away. What do we do now?

“We wait,” said Karrde with a shrug. “Yhanz’s orbit will take it between Mitoth and the local sun in about a day. Once it does, its gravity well won’t be blocking the path into interstellar space, and we can slip around the fleet escape along one of the hyperspace lanes back to Corellia. Hm, we might want to make it two days, to give the Empire more time to be convinced we’ve either escaped unnoticed or been crushed in the atmosphere.”

“You really shouldn’t be hanging out here for long,” said Revan. “Rakatan technology practically radiates the dark side, and I’ve seen several instances of it warping local wildlife just by proximity.”

“Like what?” asked Karrde.

“The Sith on Korriban built one of their tombs around one, to give you an idea of how bad those things are. I’ve seen a mutated krayt dragon, firaxan sharks, and terentateks all guarding star maps just like the one below us,” said Revan. “And possibly this really aggressive albino kath hound, though that one might have just been the most evil and vicious thing on Dantooine from the day it was born. Which I assume occurred when it spawned fully-formed out of the darkness in the local caves.”

“Very funny,” Barriss said dryly.

“I ain’t laughing. You have not known true terror until you’ve lured a large, angry animal into a mine field and it walks right back out,” said Revan. “Anyway, there has to somewhere else you can wait until things calm down.”

“We have no choice but to stay here, and the ysalamiri should offer enough protection. Also, I’ve been down here before, and have enough confidence in all of our self-control that we won’t go homicidally insane for at least a week,” Karrde said flippantly. “We just pulled off a massive theft of the Empire’s secrets, and we’re on the verge of getting away with it. Let’s get some rest to be at our best before pulling off the final stage.”

“Fine,” Ahsoka said, stretching out her arms. She did feel pretty tired, not that getting into fights and almost dying was anything that unusual. “C’mon, Barriss, let’s get back to the ship, make sure we’re in good shape to get out of the system.”

“Offee, would you mind leaving the holocron with me?” asked Karrde. “My grasp of the Rakatan script isn’t great, and I could use the help.”

“Well, I don’t know,” Barriss said. “Revan-”

“I’d be glad to help,” said Revan, as Barriss handed the holocron over to Karrde. “And I’ll be sure to let you know if I find anything interesting.”
Warbling, beeping, and chirping their report of what happened in the fight with the clones, Ahsoka listened carefully to the droidekas, relieved none of the clones had been killed and concerned by the fact this was now the second time the paint on their heads had given her away. Sure, there were extenuating circumstances in that both times it was because someone there knew of her personally, but it still meant they couldn’t act stealthily.

She wouldn’t have expected any less from Wolffe. At least the whole ordeal gave her the opportunity to wave him goodbye.

“Maybe I should remove the paint on your heads,” Ahsoka thought idly, only to jerk back with alarm as the droidekas replied with an loud, adamant no, they liked their decals. “Okay, okay, I was just thinking we would want those covered if you don’t want to be recognized as droids who work for me. Maybe we could find some spare armor plates and switch them out when you’re on missions, or make them easy to attach and detach to cover up the symbol.”

The droidekas blubbed and grumbled amongst themselves for a moment, reaching the conclusion that the second option would be preferred so long as they could be sure they could quickly recalibrate their rolling motion to compensate for the added mass.

With that, they rolled off to their recharging station, while Ahsoka held a pad containing a copy of the files Karrde had given her, the promised payment for aiding his schemes. Everything the Empire knew about the Jedi Order. The data Ahsoka had come here for, that would tell her what had become of everyone in the order, her family, was sitting right in front of her, on a device that could read it and tell her everything.

After committing so much effort to get this far, she wasn’t sure she wanted to look through it.

In the months since the Jedi were destroyed, she’d wondered who among her friends and mentors had been killed. When that wave of darkness spread across the galaxy with Order 66, she’d thought about which of the lights that were snuffed out may have been people she’d cared about. Not a day passed without her thinking about it, at least fleetingly.

Now wasn’t the time. Even in the most optimistic cases, someone she knew, someone she’d hoped to see again, would be listed as dead, most likely gunned down by the clones they’d come to see as trusted allies. Now, when she had to find a way for her and Barriss to get off this planet, with the Empire above her, she did not have the luxury of grieving.

Settling down for the night aboard the Eclipse, Ahsoka felt restless, still a bit shaken by the day’s events. Particularly the encounter with the clones.

Barriss noticed the datapad lying on the floor next to the bed, and recognized what it was. “Have you looked at what’s on it?” she asked.

“No,” Ahsoka replied, staring up at the ceiling. “I decided reading it would cause a lot more stress than it would help with, and we can’t afford that right now. It’s not like knowing what it says will help me save anyone right this minute. And this place, everything that happened today, it’s stressing me out enough as it is.”
“I feel the same way,” said Barriss, looking around their cabin, thinking about everything beyond it. “We’re in a Force-neutral bubble inside an ancient station immersed in the dark side, with crushing pressures outside due to being within the atmosphere of a gas giant, and with an imperial fleet above us. Or were you referring to something else?”

“That covered most of it. There’s also the clones. I could feel them,” said Ahsoka, shuddering a bit as she recalled the blankness of the clones’ minds as they all became set on killing her. “I could feel their personalities dissolving away as they aimed their weapons at me.”

“There may be some small comfort to be found, despite how horrifying the clones’ conditioning is. When I was- well, when I was stopping them from cutting us down, I was fighting the control chips, not the clones’ own will, and was barely succeeding,” said Barriss.

“That’s what I’d expect, but it’s not really comforting.”

“What I mean is, I don’t think I could’ve done that entirely on my own,” said Barriss. “I believe they were resisting, too.”

Ahsoka wasn’t sure if that made it better or worse. The clones hadn’t wanted to kill the Jedi, which was good. They were also completely powerless to stop themselves from being used by Palpatine. They were still as powerless today as they were months ago.

“Hey, Barriss?” Ahsoka asked.

“Yes?”

“Would you be okay sleeping with me tonight?” Ahsoka asked, getting a response she ought to have anticipated.

Barriss’s previously peaceful expression turned to absolute terror as she likely misinterpreted exactly what Ahsoka meant.

“Uuuuuuuuhhhhhhhhkkgkgkg...” Barriss coughed, snapping out of the daze as she forgot to swallow and nearly choked on her own spit.

“I meant that literally, just sleeping,” reassured Ahsoka, not wanting to give Barriss a heart attack. “It’s been a difficult day, and I feel like tomorrow’s only going to get worse.”

“...Certainly,” Barriss said, as Ahsoka moved over as much as the small bunk allowed to make space for her.

Turning off the lights, the two of them got comfortable, or at least as comfortable as possible. It took a few minutes of trying to get into a position where neither of their arms would get its blood restricted during the night, Ahsoka’s left lekku needed to be moved out the way for Barriss to rest her head on her shoulder, and the blanket distribution was tricky because Barriss wasn’t used to having someone else’s body heat and wasn’t sure how to keep herself at the right temperature with Ahsoka’s arm around her. After much experimentation, and a bit of negotiation because Barriss could feel herself about to roll off, Ahsoka, they finally got things arranged down to the millimeter.

Almost asleep, Ahsoka was stirred back out of it by something Barriss said to her.

“Ahsoka, I, um, I want you to know I’m here for you. No matter what happens,” Barriss said. Ahsoka felt a kiss on her cheek, and drifted off to sleep.
Slowly lifting the heavy ysalamiri nutrient frame up to the command center despite the thing’s weight, Karrde positioned it behind his chair, just to be safe. Dark side superstitions aside, the place was dimly-lit, chilly, and creepy.

Eating a meal of scrambled ysalamiri eggs, feet propped up on an ancient console, the smuggler looked over the data stolen from the Empire while idly stretching his neck and back, regretting that he hadn’t left a cot or something behind the last time he’d been here. The night would not be pleasant, sleeping here in this chair, but he knew this was the only option. There were two bunks in Tano’s ship, and either 1) they were both occupied or 2) she and Offee were in the same bed, and there was no way in all the hells he was going to ask if he could take the spare next to them, no matter how uncomfortable Rakatan designs were on a human spine. Not that he was particularly interested in sleeping, even though he knew he ought to get some rest.

This holocron he held was far too interesting to waste time sleeping instead of listening to it.

It seemed to have an answer for every question. A wellspring of information, eager to strengthen everyone around it. No wonder Offee had gotten so powerful so fast.

“Rakatan society was based around their presumed superiority over everyone else, and it’s tough to argue with the results. Every species they encountered bowed to them, and their technology remains far superior to most modern equipment, at least in its scale,” the holocron said, overlaying holograms of Aurebesh Basic translations over the Rakatan letters on the console while Karrde used a light pen to rapidly jot down all the different words he’d been missing. Control over osmotic shielding capable of separating cubic kilometers of gas, repulsors capable of maintaining the station’s position for millennia, gravity projectors that could reach down to Mitoth’s metallic core, it was all here.

“You and Offee said that this place will corrupt anyone who stays. How does that work?” asked Karrde.

“The Force is everywhere. Thoughts, feelings, actions of every living thing all connected regardless of distance or time. The pulse of life across the universe,” said Revan. “It means that thousands of years ago, countless slaves suffered and died here, working to fuel Rakatan expansion so other people across the galaxy could suffer and die. And this place remembers.”

“Would that even affect me?” asked Karrde. “I can’t sense the Force. Why would I, or anyone who’s not a Jedi, be at risk here?”

“You say that as though the Jedi are the only ones who are connected to the Force, and I’m not sure why you would think that. Generally, it takes a bit of talent to hear the Force’s whisper, the awareness of all the life around you,” Revan said, looking over the schematics. “It wouldn’t take much to hear the echoing screams in a place like this.”

“Wouldn’t a non-Force user be more resistant to that effect? Not less?” asked Karrde.

“If your mental defenses are strong enough,” Revan said. “That’s one reason I’d like to train someone unfamiliar with the Jedi. Diversity in characteristics is beneficial in many situations; military, biology, economics. Maybe the Jedi have always been vulnerable to places like this because their members are trained in the same way, and it leaves them with the same weaknesses.”

“I’ve heard that the Jedi seek out their members practically from birth,” said Karrde. “Are there ways to become Force-sensitive without being born so?”
Revan suddenly looked at Karrde more attentively. The avatar disappeared briefly, flashing into existence behind him and to his left. “Oh. You wish you had that power, too, don’t you? You want to know what it feels like,” Revan said, vanishing and reappearing again with each sentence. “Hm, let’s see here. Cunning, attentive, and with a flexible-but-present moral code. Not one to ignore anything. Ambitious and able to take advantage of opportunities. Rather overconfident, but able to think on his feet. Good intuitive understanding of cooperation.” Karrde stopped trying to follow along, staring down the holocron, figuring the projection didn’t count for much, and the holographic distractions stopped. “Yeah. Yeah, you’re a viable candidate.”

“What do you mean by that, exactly?” Karrde asked, not liking the sensation of being studied.

“There are many orders besides the Jedi. Seek a few out, you’ll get there,” Revan said. “The Jedi only accept those with raw talent, people they think the Force chose. Even if it didn’t choose you, you can choose it. It’ll be tough, but it can be done. Shame I already have a student, I’d be interested in the results.”

“You wouldn’t have to wait on me to see a Force-sensitive smuggler,” Karrde muttered, a glib comment he regretted saying when he realized Revan wouldn’t let it slip by unnoticed.

“And what do you mean by that, I wonder?”

Karrde paused, contemplating whether it was a good idea to reveal certain things he knew. But this holocron... it might be able to shed some light on things.

“I try to act and appear as independent as possible, but there is someone I answer to, the criminal who first put me in charge of his smuggling ring. Jorj Car’das. He’s done things, destroyed enemies when it shouldn’t have been possible, acted on information he couldn’t possibly possess, outmaneuvered everyone else in the fringe in the months since the Clone Wars, and done it all with brutality that rivals the Hutts,” Karrde said, finding it difficult to control his fear as he recalled witnessing some of the aftermath. “He’s definitely no Jedi, but I thought maybe the Force could explain how he does it.”

The holocron listened carefully to the young smuggler, considering the kind of threat Car’das might pose.

“I get it. You’re scared. Not just of what might happen, but because you know the dangerous position you’ve been occupying without even realizing it,” Revan said. “Let me guess: you haven’t been entirely forthcoming to the boss about what you’ve been up to with these rebels, right? The amount of credits you’ve been bringing in, and from where? And you realized that your fuzzy little pets here were the only reason he hasn’t sensed you weren’t as loyal as you appeared, the only reason he didn’t dispose of an overambitious lieutenant? You got dumb lucky and set up shop on Myrkr, the one planet in the galaxy where you can operate without your actions being felt through the Force? You’re smart to be scared, kid. Your luck’s held, because I have soft spot for smart young people who are in way over their heads.”

“So, you can tell me how to access the Force?” asked Karrde, feeling oddly eager at the prospect.

“No, I don’t time for the necessary training, especially not here, and Barriss remains my priority regardless. But I can point you in the right direction. There have been instances where people without the natural aptitude the Jedi look for can connect to the Force as a result of intense study and training. The nomadic Matukai order, for example, channel their powers through their meditative arts, as do the Echani warriors with their battle precognition. Or did you mean artificial methods? Artus Prime is supposedly home to crystals similar to those inside lightsabers that can strengthen one’s connection to the Force from exposure. There have been other attempts: flash-learning the
procedural memories of trained Force-users into others, systematic exposure to nexuses of power, all met with mixed success.”

“How ‘mixed’, exactly?”

“They can offer power, but it’s a cheat, a quick route to unearned power, more trouble than it’s worth as it starts affecting your personality,” Revan explained, as Karrde got the implication that Car’das may have taken a similar shortcut, and the side effects were quickly coming to the forefront. “Something you should learn very quickly: whatever he’s done, Car’das is not invincible. He’s obtained some small power that gives him a broader view of things, that doesn’t mean his blind spots have ceased to exist. The Force is a great power to have, but just like armies and wealth and starships, it isn’t always enough to save you. He can be killed, and he wants everyone to believe he can’t be, because that’s a better defense than any shield.”

“Just like the Emperor,” suggested Karrde.

“Yes, the Sith like to cultivate a similar image of invulnerability, as did the Rakata. It’s a weakness that can be exploited, like all misinformation an opponent believes,” said Revan. “The latter eventually fell apart primarily because they came to believe their own propaganda.”

“What do you mean?” asked Karrde, not quite getting the subtleties involved.

“The Rakata were an expansionist power that couldn’t sustain itself because despite its practically limitless material resources, it had no interest in producing anything of value, of strengthening themselves in ways beyond their capacity for destruction. Much like the Empire is becoming. It'll take time, but even if the Jedi don't return and the rebellion is crushed, it'll all turn out the same way,” Revan explained. “Now that I’m in this place, I’m glad events have landed me here. Seeing the ysalamiri answered some long-standing questions of mine.”

“What questions?” Karrde asked, intrigued.

“Well, maybe it doesn’t quite answer things so much as connect a few pieces of information,” said Revan. “The Rakata were once powerful Force users, but they gradually lost their connection to it over time, supposedly due to a plague created by one of the races they conquered and enslaved. When I learned this, I wasn’t wholly convinced something like that was possible. Now, with the ysalamiri in the picture, suddenly I have more confidence in a biological agent as an explanation. And a plausible candidate for the world it originated from.”

Karrde thought about that, wondering if there was some way he could expose Car’das to such an agent. He didn’t have the expertise to manufacture such a plague, but perhaps he could find some sample of it with coordinates from the star maps. The Rakata must have studied it at some point to try and stop it. Or, failing that, ambush Car’das with ysalamiri. He didn’t really want to kill his employer, but the sad fact was with Car’das’s rapidly increasing paranoia, his employer would want to kill him eventually. Maybe it would take years, or maybe he could just keep in the man’s good graces until retirement. He had options.

“Whatever civilization was on Myrkr, it’s just ruins now, overgrown with trees infested with ysalamiri,” said Karrde. “I don’t think the Myr survived long enough to celebrate their victory.”

“A victory doesn’t cease to be a victory just because you don’t live to see it,” said Revan.

“Maybe, but I still want to see it. And I won't throw my life away for it.”

“...Good answer. You’re almost as good a student as Barriss,” remarked Revan, clearly with a bit of
pride at the thought of Offee’s progress.

“Wouldn’t you prefer teaching Tano? Someone with more experience with the Force?” asked Karrde, disinterested by the flattery.

“If she had any interest in learning from someone new, certainly. She’s a better choice than you by a wide margin. But she doesn’t have any interest,” said Revan. “Everything I’ve seen of her tells me, for better or worse, Skywalker is Ahsoka’s first and final teacher.”

“Well. Thank you for the advice, but I should be getting some rest,” Karrde said, setting the holocron aside, its violet light dimming, but not going out entirely.

Right now, he didn’t want to think any more about how to deal with his quasi-omniscient boss. That confrontation was far away, and his defense was still very much present. He removed his jacket, put it over his chest, leaned back, and went to sleep.

Barriss woke up with a crick in her neck, her first thought being the realization that Ahsoka’s shoulder was as hard as a rock and about as comfortable to rest one’s head on for long periods.

Pressing her hand against her nape, a faint blue glow appeared as she tried to loosen up the muscles, getting back to normal a moment later.

“I didn’t know you could use healing on yourself,” said Ahsoka, as she groggily sat up in the bunk.

“There are limits to it,” Barriss said, tilting her head in different directions. “Performing healing on anyone requires intense concentration. If I’m healing myself, the more pain I’m in, the less I’ll be able to focus. The more injured I am, the less useful the ability. At least I can quickly recover from an odd sleeping position.”

“Yeah, these bunks don’t have a lot of free space. Once we’re out of this, we might want to, you know, get one large bed,” said Ahsoka. “Eventually, I mean, we don’t have to-”

“Yes, I agree with this,” Barriss said as convincingly as possible. She really was okay with this, she just hadn’t expected it this fast.

“Okay. Good. Great. We’ll look into that whenever we have the chance,” Ahsoka said, staring at Barriss for a few seconds before lying back down. “I’m going to keep resting.”

Barriss smiled nervously as she backed out of the room, put on her boots and blue coat, and headed up the stairs to the command center. It felt good to be out of that imperial uniform and feeling more like herself. Now she’d better make sure Karrde was right about his expected time frame for not going into a homicidal rage.

As she walked up the stairs to the command center, Barriss felt a couple weird pains in her knee and back, stopping to sort them out before continuing. The sooner they got a new bed, the better. Barriss slowed down slightly as her brain tried to process that, yes, she had agreed to that. Perhaps her suggestion a week ago to ‘take things slowly’ didn’t mean much when neither of them had any idea what the normal progression of a relationship was.

“Good morning,” Karrde said as he stretched in his chair, with an ysalamiri positioned behind him.
“Is it actually morning?” asked Barriss. “I didn’t check the chrono.”

“It’s near midnight, local time,” Karrde answered, not looking well-rested himself. “We still have a bit of a wait until we can leave safely, if that’s what you’re checking.”

“Well, Barriss, you look, uh, not particularly well-rested. Maybe you should go back,” Revan said knowingly, hologram fizzing into existence beside her. Without a word, the holocron leapt to Barriss’s hand and she shoved it down into her pocket. Revan didn’t protest, but she could hear muffled laughter coming from inside the coat. She could disabuse Revan of certain notions later, in private.

“Karrde, may I keep possession of the disguise matrix?” Barriss asked, taking out the phony rank bars from the other pocket. “Being able to quickly conceal myself could prove useful in the future.”

“Yes, I was talking about alcohol.”

“It’s only morning, more or less,” said Barriss. She didn’t know much about drinking, but she knew it was usually an evening thing. “Keep drinking like this, you’ll start reminding Ahsoka of Hondo Ohnaka.”

“Evil? It’s his incompetence I find insulting! Who successfully kidnap and ransoms Count Dooku only to kidnap the people who brought him his ransom money! It’s an outrage!” Karrde said, sounding more furious than Barriss could ever remember. “Sometimes, you need to quit when you’re ahead. He was very, very far ahead, light-years ahead, and against all sense he took the hyperspace route right into the biggest black hole he could find. I wonder how many people died because of that.”

“Hondo likely isn't responsible for as many deaths as you'd expect. I have sometimes wondered how differently the war would have progressed had Dooku been captured, but considering his connections, I doubt it would’ve ultimately mattered,” said Barriss, recalling instances where Separatist leaders had been captured only to be freed again. “I suppose Ventress or one of his other allies likely would have rescued him.”

“Perhaps, but it still must’ve been a wound to his ego to get beaten by pirates. Almost as if all the Sith’s power makes them so overconfident they can’t imagine any lesser creature taking that power away,” Karrde said as he fondly rubbed his ysalamiri’s chin. “Plus, he’s upper class, they don’t take getting surprised well. I hope spreading those dreadnoughts around will get a similar reaction from Palpatine.”
“As do I, though I’m surprised we were able to find a buyer so quickly,” said Barriss.

“Just keep it up and get them moving to rebel cells,” said Karrde, as he thought about the millions of credits the drop to the Corellians had brought him. “I’d prefer not to be kept waiting, if at all possible. Especially now that I know who some of the dissident Senators are.”

“And would you contact them independently now?” asked Barriss.

“A deal is a deal,” he said, with a slight smile and a shrug. “I said I’d give you the opportunity to sell those ships to people you trust and put money towards finding Jedi survivors. I’m not going to back out just because it’s convenient to me.”

“Even though it’s a difference of millions of credits?”

Karrde’s smile disappeared at the thought of how much profit he was sacrificing for the sake of personal integrity. “Please don’t make me regret taking the high sky-lane on this.”

“Understood,” Barriss said, not wanting to sour the arrangement they’d made with the smuggler, turning her attention to the animal beside him. “Is it safe to keep the ysalamiri here for so long?”

“It’s not their ideal environment, no, but I’ve made sure they’re at least comfortable and have several weeks’ worth of water and nutrients. I’m mainly concerned about the temperature down here, it’s chilly compared to Myrkr, but they’re insulated and can make their own heat,” Karrde explained, inspecting the nutrient frame as the critter’s head turned to look at him. “Your ysalamiri, uh, Snoots, right? You keep it flush against a wall?”

“Yes, it makes that bubble it gives off take up space in the ship’s life-support systems so we don’t walk into it unexpectedly,” said Offee.

“Okay, good. They like having their backs to a wall. They’ve got wide fields of vision, and they always cling to their branches facing outward with the trunks blocking their blind spot. Makes them more comfortable,” said Karrde, point out how the nutrient frames in the hangar were all lined up either against a wall or one of the eight support columns arranged around the star map.

“Interesting. Are there any other aspects of their care I should be aware of?” asked Barriss.

“Ysalamiri like being rubbed all over. Their claws all extend into their perches, and they can’t scratch themselves,” Karrde explained, walking over to one of the animals and vigorously rubbing it, much to the creature’s delight. “Whose biology makes no sense? Yours does! Oh, yes it does! Who’s a cobbled-together abomination of ancient alien genetic engineering? You are, oh yes you are!”

Amused by the purring and excitement of the ysalamiri, Barriss couldn’t help but feel concern as she looked around the control room, pondering what this place might unleash in the wrong hands.

“Karrde, what were you planning to do with this place?” asked Barriss.

“I really only had a relatively mundane goal for it,” Karrde said, recognizing her grave tone and turning from the dejected ysalamiri. “I’m just a smuggler, remember? Use the place as a base of operations in this system to store and move various rare materials taken from the mining towns. A secret base to move tons of hfredium and Tibanna gas between different systems. Hide our ships down here, wait for the authorities to lose track of the cargo and the ships they were loaded onto, then move them out. Completely undercut competing smugglers.”

“Has that changed in light of what you now know?”
“Maybe. I’d like to know more about what this place can manufacture first,” he said. “What, are you worried I’ll unleash another ‘Star Forge’ and try to conquer the galaxy?”

“Not you,” Barriss said evenly. “I’m concerned the Empire will discover this place and obtain the necessary technology to build one of their own.”

“Fair. I’ve given some thought regarding the security,” Karrde said grimly. “There are two pieces of equipment I’ve identified that could be destroyed to make the station unusable: the repulsors keeping its altitude stable, and the shield emitter that makes it accessible to starships. When we’re done here, I’m going to rig some proton bombs to each of them, and if the Empire somehow gets inside, they won’t have long to examine their discovery.”

“What about the main power generator?” asked Barriss. If she wanted to destroy this place, that’s what she’d go after first.

“Uhhhh...” Karde trailed off, going to the console and pressing buttons, displaying schematics of various large, imposing pieces of Rakatan machinery that presumably inhabited the lower levels. “...I haven’t figured out which one that is yet. I think it’s this one?” He brought up an image of a geodesic dome. “It’s at the center of the complex and most of the power cables run into it, but I can’t be sure right now. Power generation may be distributed.”

“Fair enough. Do you have any idea what’s happening above?” asked Barriss, looking at the display of the planet on another monitor, demonstrating the impressive effectiveness of Rakatan sensors despite the dense gases above them.

“Looks like Yularen’s Star Destroyer is holding its position in the upper atmosphere, about halfway between the surface and the shipyard, with that second destroyer remaining above in high orbit. Fighters are still scrambled, so he seems to expect us to come out eventually. I wonder how he thinks we’re hiding,” Karrde said curiously. “Of the ships that are being constructed, it looks like he’s had all of the Star Destroyers capable of moving under their own power detached from the shipyard. Maybe he’s expecting you to target the shipyard.”

“Hm,” Barriss said, studying the positions of the small dots representing the ships flying about the skies and space above them, he eyes switching between them and the controls for all the astonishingly powerful and unexpectedly functional pieces of Rakatan technology. “I wasn’t planning on it, but circumstances, and Yularen, have presented us with an unexpected opportunity.”

Staring at the display for a while, seeing the technology at her disposal, the positioning of the imperial fleet, plans began to form in Barriss’s mind.

Having finally gotten herself out of bed after returning to it for another hour, Ahsoka entered the command center to find Barriss and Karrde huddled around the main control terminal, bringing up schematics of all the equipment fixed to the outside of the station.

“What’s going on? Is the fleet moving?” she asked. “Do we need to get out of the system?”

“Not right away. I have no intention of fleeing,” Barriss said confidently, ready to show Ahsoka her plan. “I’ve found a way to tear that shipyard from the sky.”
Karrde was originally conceived by Timothy Zahn as being a foil for Jabba the Hutt, something that made the character stand out for being so low-key and unintimidating despite having the biggest criminal organization in the galaxy after Jabba died. With the timeline as it is, now he's a foil for Hondo, and it's a quasi-headcanon of mine that he's out there somewhere in canon and is at least part of the reason Hondo has no crews or ships left. Because those two would fucking hate each other, and Karrde has a massive advantage in that he isn't constantly drunk and doesn't encourage his own people to backstab him.

Working to explain the ysalamiri's weird biology and justify their powers is probably the most significant addition to Star Wars lore I've made, and I'm pretty satisfied with the results. I've always liked them both for expanding what's possible in terms of the universe's alien life and for the option to feed Force-users some humble pie by depowering them with a mindless, unassuming animal. The way I've made things work is that their anti-Force bubble only inhibits Force-users from connecting to the Force, it doesn't block it out completely or it would instantly kill anyone who approached them, but this raises other questions. If you die near one, can you still become a Force ghost? Or if you can't connect to the Force at all then are you triple-dog-dead, reduced to nothing as you're unable to become one with the Force? If the life-energy or whatever can't be destroyed, where does it go? Do the ysalamiri consume it? Do they eat souls? Oh god, the ysalamiri eat souls. The Rakatan base isn't even a threat anymore, they absorbed all its dark side power weeks ago. How would their powers and the Jedi Exile's "Wound in the Force" affect each other? Can they sever Force bonds? I don't even like KotOR II, but I'd be willing to acknowledge it more directly just to see Kreia react to these things.

Speaking of KotOR II, writing that section with Revan and Karrde made me realize part of why I don't like it so much. The game makes a big deal about deconstructing Star Wars, but it deconstructs the lamest possible interpretation of the franchise. It makes a big deal of how bad it is that the Force is only used by the Jedi and Sith, but instead of emphasizing that it is used by others and adding to the world, it focuses on how both groups are idiots as a means of deriding the setting, primarily through the use of straw-men. Except there are other orders who use the Force, such as the Matukai that were mentioned. I know this because I first learned of the Matukai from descriptions of their robes and meditation bands, which are equippable items... in KotOR II. I don't know if Chris Avellone is just that big of an idiot, or there was some kind of schism and a programmer threw in those items hoping someone would notice and realize, no, Star Wars isn't actually stupid. Usually. Here's to you, lone Obsidian employee who understands worldbuilding. Your efforts were not in vain.
Tug of War

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It took about a day to move the Rakatan mining base through the atmosphere back to beneath the Empire’s garrison, shipyard, and Yularen’s personal Star Destroyer, the Valiant, its repulsors struggling to get the kilometers-wide sphere into position.

Several hours more for the osmotic shields used to make the entrance tunnel to separate out enough gas to produce a long enough tube of near-vacuum.

After all that, using the gravity projectors to counter the planet’s own gravity well and provide a corridor of relatively uncurved space was refreshingly simple. A clear path into hyperspace going straight up.

Ahsoka tightened her grip on the lever, preparing to send them into hyperspace, closed her eyes, and calmed herself.

Letting her doubts go, she let the Force guide her as the Eclipse disappeared from realspace.

The pitch-blackness of Mitoth’s depths turned to the bright blue of hyperspace, followed by the yellowish sunset as the freighter dropped out so close to the Valiant that the Star Destroyer’s underbelly took up most of the view. Pushing its engines well past the limit of safety, the ship got inside their shields a second before they were raised, then struggled to pull up before impacts. Ahsoka cringed as the bottom of the fuselage scraped against the Star Destroyer’s hull.

Turbolasers sporadically fired at the small freight as it raced across the red-painted hull up an around to the top of the ship. The Eclipse kept low as it sped across the length of the Star Destroyer, daring the turrets to risk blowing a hole in their own ship’s armor. It reached the command tower, then arced upwards, deployed its magnetized landing struts, and anchored itself to the hull.

Directly underneath the windows of the command bridge, between it and the starboard starfighter control bridge.

Still within the artificial gravity of the Eclipse, protected from the thin, cold air around them by their space suits, Ahsoka and Barriss descended down the ramp and up to the window, Cici rolling up behind them.

Controlling air wasn’t an application Barriss had often thought of, and her control was limited, but as Ahsoka cut a hole through the transparisteel she could at least prevent an explosive decompression from asphyxiating the crew. Who were presently either staring slack-jawed at them, or in the case of the smarter ones, calling for security detail.

Ahsoka and Barriss, dove through the hole and into the Valiant’s bridge, sabers drawn as Cici followed in behind them.

In the middle of the walkway, standing in front of Ahsoka, was Admiral Yularen. For a moment, she was surprised by how old he looked now, his hair totally white, his eyes wide with shock at her appearance. Getting a hold of himself, he drew his blaster, ready to kill her right there if it meant putting an end to whatever plan she had.

The blaster was crushed in his hand, sparks flying out and burning his hand as Ahsoka lifted him up
and threw him out of his bridge. Advancing down the walkway, Ahsoka and Barriss pulled the crewers out from the sunken pits to either side. Cici plunked herself down into the starboard pit, her shock prod hurrying a pair of ensigns away as she plugged herself into the nearest computer input port to get to work.

Many of their opponents were clones, and Ahsoka forced down her pain as she saw their terrified expressions. Most of them were quickly stunned by Barriss so they couldn’t resist and the pair threw them out through the entrance along with their commanding officer, who was reaching for a dropped blaster only for it to be pulled out of his grasp.

Finally reaching the other side of the bridge and the door controls, Ahsoka exchanged one mutually contemptuous glare with Yularen as the metal doors closed between them, and then burned through the opening mechanism with her saber.

Even if they could override their control from elsewhere, that door would never open again.

The bridge was theirs.

“Cici, they’re going to try and reroute control from the bridge to somewhere else on the ship. Can you keep up with them?” asked Ahsoka, as the astromech kept working on the computer terminal.

“For at least a little while, I can,” said Cici. “If we wait too long, they’re figure out they should stop fighting me and just cut off control from elsewhere in the ship.”

“A little while is all we’ll need,” said Barriss, as she commanded the helm and tractor beam controls, mentally moving levers around the ship to raise the altitude of the Star Destroyer into the upper atmosphere, and getting a lock on the shipyard with the beams. While she worked on that, Ahsoka configures the shields to concentrate on protecting the bridge area so the Eclipse couldn’t be blown off the hull, then took control of one of the heavy turbolasers, disabling the ion engines on every docked Star Destroyer she had a line of sight on to make sure they couldn’t get away.

Once the Valiant had gripped the shipyard with its tractor beam, its repulsolift were cut out, allowing the weight of the ship to drag the shipyard out of orbit as its engines pulled the immense mass of metal towards an unoccupied spot in the cloud layer. Now all that was left was to warn the crew via a transmission that would be heard by everyone aboard this ship, and the people aboard the Mitoth Shipyard.

“This is Barriss Offee. If you’re hearing this, you’re likely among the imperial personnel operating the Mitoth shipyard, which is now being pulled into the gas giant’s gravity and will sink into the planet’s cloud layer within the next thirty minutes. The descent has been timed such that you will have ample opportunity to escape on escape pods, fighters, and shuttles if you leave immediately... That is all,” she finished, switching off the terminal and putting her helmet back on to leave, then taking it back off and turning on the ship-wide comm. “Hold on, one more thing: our astromech unit has overloaded the Valiant’s repulsors, and there’s no way of stopping it from falling into Mitoth without them operational. Please leave immediately, I don’t want any of you to die. Goodbye.”

The bridge crew stuck out in the hallway listened in horror at the announcement, taking a few seconds to confirm that this was actually happening as their training kicked in and they turned to Yularen to receive his orders.
“Get Captain Pellaeon and the Leveler. Tell him he must use the tractor beams to counter the Valiant’s hold on the shipyard and keep it in orbit!” growled Yularen as he realized precisely what the two Jedi had taken the Valiant’s bridge for. “Contact whoever’s left in command of the Mitoth base, tell them to disconnect the skyhook cable so they don’t get dragged down with the shipyard if we lose it. After that, begin evacuating the ship. Move!”

The crew, clones and recruits alike, all scrambled to get where the admiral had ordered them to. Yularen was forced to realize that the ship was lost without any ability to escape the gravity of the gas giant below. Not without the Leveler’s tractor beams, and they were needed to recover the shipyard. The unavoidable loss infuriated him as he and his trooper escort headed down to the hangar, reports and updates coming in as he made his way to one of the shuttles.

The hangar was half-empty by the time he got there, his orders being received promptly. At least he could get everyone out of here safely. Above him, the open hangar bays revealed the gradually intensifying glow of the atmosphere being heated by the friction of the descent, shuttles and fighters ascending up into it, jostled by the turbulence as they passed beyond the hangar’s shields.

Once everyone was evacuated or ready to do so, Yularen took one final look around his flagship, and boarded his personal shuttle.

Yhanz had moved between Mitoth and the sun, its shadow passing across the thousands of square kilometers of clouds and allowing light past and illuminating the scene. Yularen watched as his Star Destroyer descended grew further away and into Mitoth’s atmosphere, his shipyard and half its unfinished fleet pulled along with it, and the Leveler in pursuit, its tractor beams powering up.

Hundreds of fighters and shuttles were scrambling away from the falling space station and scattering into the surrounding space, containing tens of thousands of crewers and soldiers who were taking Oﬀee’s threat more seriously than Yularen was. The Valiant was lost, but the shipyard would not be, and now that they’d exposed themselves the Jedi had no means of escape.

It soon became a competition between the two ships for control of the shipyard’s path, and with the Valiant so much closer to the planet with repulsors inoperable, gravity would tip the scales and save the station by breaking the hold from the tractor beams. Yularen knew that despite the boldness of the attempt, the two Jedi had miscalculated in their efforts to sabotage the Empire.

The sight was awe-inspiring, even though Yularen detested that it was occurring. The three-branched shipyard was tilting down in the direction of the planet while a Star Destroyer, his Star Destroyer, dragged it down. He told himself it wouldn’t matter, as the other ship set to guard this world, the Leveler, had locked on to the top tide of the shipyard. Despite the difference in size, the sturdy warship was starting to slow the station’s momentum.

Then, Yularen watched helplessly as the ships began to descend faster. There was no mistaking it, despite maintaining the same trajectory, the shipyard and the Star Destroyer pulling it were accelerating far faster than they should be in a gravity field of this strength.

“How are they doing that?” Yularen demanded, looking to the co-pilot for an answer.

“I don’t know, sir. I’m not reading any kind of unusual energy buildup in their tractor beams or engines,” the poor man replied, looking over his sensor readouts for some kind of answer for the admiral. “Sir, if this continues, the Leveler won’t be able to pull the shipyard out!”

“I am well aware, commander,” Yularen said through clenched teeth as he stared unblinking at the unfolding disaster.
Karrde looked over the controls in the Rakatan mining base, and observed the new trajectory of the plummeting shipyard. The Rakatan gravity well projectors mounted onto the base were amazingly precise, not that the shipyard offered a small target, but doing so at this distance was impressive. Unless the imperials had a crystal gravfield trap to detect the spatial distortion, which he didn’t think they did, they’d probably never figure out what was happening. It was a risk he’d just have to take.

With his role in Offee’s rather audacious plan nearly completed, Karrde kicked back and relaxed, and watched the dot on the screen moving down a bit quicker. He wondered about the long-term effects this blow to imperial production would have, which systems they’d need to draw ships from to fill the gaps. Which weak points in patrols his smuggling operations would be able to exploit. Which companies the Empire would employ to pick up the slack, and which ones he should invest in to make money off of a military buildup he’d helped sabotage.

Good thing he didn’t have to go up there, he wouldn’t last a minute. Nothing to do now except read that stolen data and wait for Vrask to come pick him up in the Wild Karrde. Shouldn’t take long, she had the coordinates.

The old coordinates.

The ones that would take her fifty kilometers away from where he was, and a freighter could only hover out in the middle of nowhere for so long before passersby starting getting suspicious.

Karrde dropped his pad, scrambled to the controls, and started up the painfully slow engines on this tub to take him back. He also needed to write up an explanation of everything that had happened and transmit it up to the surface. He did hope Vrask went back to the Wild Karrde soon and saw the received message. There were no other vehicles down here, and one could only live so long on ysalamiri eggs. Though if he got that desperate he could add the ysalamiri themselves to the menu.

That still left the issue of what to do with this base. Offee was right, if the Empire got their hands on it, the technology they could reverse engineer would more than make up for their losses today. And they’d probably be sweeping the planet for any salvageable equipment. Maybe it would be best to destroy it all. It could end up a loss, sure, but Karrde wasn’t particularly concerned about the potential destruction of the Rakatan facility or its technology.

After all, the Rakata been generous enough to leave another one hidden inside Yhanz.

\textit{No}, Yularen thought as the shipyard suddenly picked up speed, continuing down at an impossible rate despite the pull of the Leveler, which shook violently as it lost the tractor beam lock and fell behind their target.

The admiral tried to console himself that this would not be a total loss. Even if they lost the shipyard, the Jedi aboard were doomed. Even amidst the disastrous loss, there remained over a hundred TIE fighters ready to blast their vessel apart. A mere freighter would never be able to escape.

Even if they somehow lost the shipyard here, those damned Jedi wouldn’t be able to escape.
Amidst the glowing-hot air and intense winds around the Star Destroyer, protected by the deflector shields, Ahsoka and Barriss descended down into the Eclipse’s main hold, both of them shaking with adrenaline as they got back inside with their droid and got to the controls.

Detaching from the Star Destroyer, the Eclipse flew to the ship’s starboard, out of the path of the falling space station. The ship found another region of zero-g space the Rakatan base had created, angled itself upward, and shot into hyperspace unimpeded by Mitoth’s gravity well. A swarm of TIE fighters were left in its wake, confused and now lacking a target.

The saboteurs were denied the chance to watch as the abandoned shipyard, with eleven incomplete Star Destroyers still docked, got swallowed up by the clouds, following in the wake of the Valiant. The falling hulk of metal cut through them easily, bits of debris scattering on the wind but inevitably following in the wake of its source. The last visible piece of the facility was the end of the disconnected skyhook cable, which flailed frantically in the slipstream as it descended into the planet, pulled down with the rest.

As it descended, the atmosphere crushed various weak points in the exterior, allowing toxic gases inside and stabilizing the pressure. Eventually, it impacted and sunk into Mitoth’s liquid core, never to be seen by any living thing again as it joined various asteroids and space debris that had fallen in over hundreds of millions of years.

Once it had passed, the clouds drifted back into place, unconcerned with the blow to the Empire as Mitoth continued to turn unabated, as if nothing had even happened.

Hours later, pacing about the office aboard the Mitoth base, Yularen tried to make sense of what had happened. He’d prevented thirteen of the Star Destroyers from being lost, but he’d lost eleven others and had his own flagship stolen right out from under him, along with the shipyard getting destroyed on his watch, blindsided by some technique which he still did not understand.

Much as it pained him to think about it, Yularen knew his time in the navy had come to an ignominious conclusion. There were others who shared in the responsibility, certainly. There was plenty of failure to go around. In the end, the responsibility was his, and he wouldn’t shirk it onto Brek or the clones or anyone else.

All his years of service, his victories, his political allies, his reputation, his fervent loyalty, all they could get him in the wake of such a catastrophic failure would be, at best, the chance to step down with dignity.

Yularen took a look out at the empty space above Mitoth, and considered his future while writing a forthcoming report for his Emperor.
Slurping down a mug of the Rolling Cloud Cantina’s best Corellian brandy past her sharp teeth, which wasn’t all that great, Vrask checked over the various payment and benefit options which had become standard among Karrde’s smuggler ring. She found it all a bit tedious, but couldn’t deny how practical it had proven itself to be. Offering paid vacation had instantly caused theft of company property, a major problem in this industry, to nearly vanish. Everyone was so satisfied with their jobs they didn’t want to risk losing them for some minor payday.

“There are several employee health insurance plans comparable to what can be found in more legitimate companies. We offer guaranteed leave for cultural holidays as well,” she explained, discussing the various options with Nabeal, this Herglic soon-to-be-ex-imperial engineer and maintenance worker from the base. They did need more engineers, though she was feeling a bit put off at the prospect of finally having someone bigger than her around.

“That sounds excellent. So, do the vacation and sick days carry over, or are they just gone if I don’t use them by the end of a cycle?” asked Nabeal, who was sounding more and more interested in the job and its considerably better pay and benefits over continuing to put up with the Empire’s demands. “Oh, by the way, what happened up at the shipyard yesterday? Is that your employer’s work?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Vrask said dismissively, taking another swig. If this guy wanted to work in their ‘industry’, he needed to figure out discretion, and fast. “Now, can you tell me about any additional experience in coolant systems?”

“Hey, there, Nabeal,” a nearby male human interrupted before Nabeal could answer. Vrask wasn’t that great at distinguishing human facial features, but this one she knew well enough. She’d seen it many times before, on many different people. The clone, dressed in civilian clothes rather than trooper armor, walked up to their table. Vrask sniffed the air, instinctively working to size up the potential threat. Getting approached by random strangers had never ended well for her. “I was wondering how those intruders got through your section of the base. You were on your shift around that time, right? Didn’t know you were looking for a new job.”

“Who are you?” Vrask snarled. She didn’t like this coy nonsense, and could barely tolerate it with Karrde, there was no way she was going to listen to some imperial prattling on before a fight. Underneath the table, she splayed the claws on her left hand, considering whether she should go for his throat or his stomach if this got ugly. The man wasn’t armed, not visibly, and there weren’t any other clones around the bar, either.

“Uh, this is a clone trooper named Boost,” Nabeal said, suddenly aware that he might be indirectly responsible for catastrophic losses to the Empire, and more importantly, he hadn’t gotten his stuff moved out of his quarters yet. “And yeah, I’m looking for work elsewhere. Can you blame me after what’s happened over the last couple days?”

“Pleased to meet you,” Boost said to Vrask, ignoring Nabeal’s questionable explanation. The he tapped his skull, looking at Vrask with an unsettled expressing she didn’t quite get. Was that fear? Or hopeful? He smelled scared to her. “One of the intruders- friend of yours, I’m guessing- told me he could get this chip out of my head. Is that true?”

Vrask’s hand closed, and her arm relaxed as she realized what Karrde had done. “I don’t know the specifics of whatever deal you were offered, but our organization is in the middle of rapid expansion,” she said, pushing out a third chair for the clone. “I’m sure we could find a place for you, and provide the treatment you were promised.”
This wraps up the action at the double planets. Next up: the imperial data file with all the information on the Jedi!

It's up-to-date and accurate!

Ahsoka's going to look at it!

There's no way this could be anything but fun!
There was no more putting it off. The cold truth of everything that had happened to the Jedi, without
the generalities and twisting of imperial propaganda, was in Ahsoka’s hands. Literally.

After a long time staring at her datapad, she worked up the nerve to finally look at what was inside it
instead of lazing around here on Corellia.

The files were arranged primarily be association, sorting the Jedi by their position in the order, than
listing their associations. Ahsoka began with the Jedi council members, figuring she may as well start
at the top and find out who her strongest potential allies against the Empire were.

*Yoda: Escaped termination, location unknown*

Yoda was alive. Good. Great. That was, just great. So, that was one council member so far who was
still alive, and on the first look, too. That was something.

Skipping around the rest of the list, Ahsoka found that small sliver of optimism was going to end
there. Masters Windu, Bilaba, Tiin, Plo Koon, Kolar, Fisto, Kcaj, Mundi, Allie, they’d all died in the
purge. Her heart ached as she read through them all, feeling the same way she had months ago when
Order 66 was sent out across the galaxy.

Only two left to check.

Ahsoka wasn’t sure she wanted to know, but she had to, she had to stop trying to put this off. Then
she closed her eyes and pressed to key to show the next entry, nervously opening them.

*Obi-Wan Kenobi: Escaped termination, location unknown*

Ahsoka breathed a sigh of relief, welcoming the good news, glad one of her masters had escaped the
Empire. Fidgeting for a bit, she set the pad aside and thought about what this meant. Maybe he’d just
gotten lucky, maybe the clones hadn’t killed him like Barriss suspected they could.

It didn’t matter. If Obi-Wan was still out there somewhere, if he was okay, she could stop worrying,
and looked back at the files. If he could survive, in all likelihood it meant-

*Anakin Skywalker: Deceased*

For a long time, Ahsoka kept reading that line, over and over, feeling chills go over her skin each
time. Her heart was pounding, slowly but powerfully.

That was it, then. She’d wanted to know for sure, and now she did.

Anakin was dead.

There wasn’t anything else she could do.

Ahsoka switched off the pad and slammed it down onto the table, not wanting to look at it anymore,
her eyes shut tightly as tears streamed out of them.
Barriss felt awful today. Worse than she had in quite some time. Well, a few weeks, at least.

Today was a ‘sleep for twelve hours’ day.

Lying in her bed staring at the ceiling, she tried to think of a reason this was happening, why she felt like this, and found herself unable to come up with anything more specific than the omnipresent sensation that the universe slowly growing into a more terrible place and she lacked the power to do anything meaningful to stop it, while all the people in positions to make a difference were deliberately making things worse.

So she lay there for a while, trying not to be bothered by everything happening in the galaxy around her, and failing.

There was one specific thing she knew was eating at her: somebody had died on Mitoth. It wasn’t that she felt it through the Force, and she hadn’t seen it personally, she only knew, probabilistically, someone must have. There were tens of thousands of people on Yularen’s flagship and the shipyard. Someone had gotten trapped in a locked down section, or the burst of acceleration had caused an accident with a heavy piece of equipment, or someone hadn’t made it to their escape pod.

Something, somewhere, had happened and now someone was dead. With an attack of that scale, it was inevitable, despite her doing her best to avoid it.

The bridge crew she’d stunned and tossed around appeared in her mind, and she imagined them getting sucked out of a hull breach and falling into Mitoth. On most inhabited worlds, with their rocky surfaces, if someone falls to their death, there will at least be a body, something to perform a burial for. There was no such luck to be had with a gas giant. When something falls, it’s gone.

Barriss cringed as she thought about whether someone who fell like that would killed by the increasing pressure, or suffocation in the non-breathable atmosphere. Assuming a consistent terminal velocity and air density, she concluded anyone who dropped into the core would asphyxiate, their choked, lifeless remains plummeting down to the core.

The destruction of the shipyard would be a massive blow to the Empire’s naval production in that sector. People would be safer in the long run because of it.

*Lives are not exchangeable*, she thought to herself.

The worst part was that the destruction she’d caused was as good an outcome as could possibly be hoped for. It wouldn’t be often such a valuable military target could be destroyed with so little loss of life. Many people, had they been in her position, would’ve seen to it that everyone went down with the shipyard rather than give them the opportunity to flee.

*Was it worth it?*

There would come a time when the Empire would fall, when the trillions of beings living under its rule would be liberated. Her actions would bring that time closer.

*You did your best. And your best was rather good.*

Barriss tried to shut out her negative thoughts, breathing in and out slowly to give herself something else to focus on. What else could she have possibly done? She couldn’t have simply let those Star Destroyers become operational and be dispatched to bombard everyone who opposed Palpatine from high orbit.

*You found the best way. It wasn’t perfect. It never will be.*
For a moment between breaths, Barriss felt accepting of things. She felt good _enough_, for a moment. Then her eyes shot open as a surge of anguish passed through it like an electric current, and it wasn’t going away.

Fatigue and despondency could be shut out for a time, Ahsoka needed help.

Alerted by her pain, Barriss came out of her room, finding Ahsoka seated on the couch, crying. Rushing over and putting her arm around Ahsoka, Barriss held her tightly, figuring out what to do as she went along. Barriss moved along the couch so they were as close as possible and considered how she should position herself. Barriss held Ahsoka’s face was over her right shoulder, right arm around her torso, left arm... on her waist? That would have to do.

There was a datapad on the table, and one glance at its screen told Barriss yes, what was happening was exactly what she’d expected it to be.

After about ten minutes of sobbing, sniffing, and unsteady heaving, Ahsoka finally pulled away from Barriss, eyes puffy and reddened.

“Thanks for, um, sitting with me,” Ahsoka said while trying to swallow the lump in her throat, wiping away the tears streaked across her face.

“It’s no trouble at all,” Barriss said as she leaned in to give Ahsoka a kiss, getting too far to back out when she realized much of her face was covered with tears and mucus, and planted one on her forehead. “Do you feel any better?”

“A little,” Ahsoka said, taking a few slow breaths. “It felt good to get that out.”

“I’m familiar with the feeling,” said Barriss. “How long has it been since you’ve eaten?”

Half an hour later, they were eating copious amounts of food, mostly centered around meat, which Barriss had ordered delivered to their door. Reluctant as she was to draw even the smallest amount of attention to their safehouse, she didn’t want to leave Ahsoka alone, and she wanted to provide something a bit more appetizing than whatever ration bars they could scrounge up to improve the mood.

So began Barriss’s delicate task of helping Ahsoka without making the latter feel coddled, which would only serve to make her mad in addition to being miserable.

While Ahsoka poked at some kind of seasoned bird wings with her fork, another chime alerted Barriss to someone at the front door.

Everything she’d ordered had already arrived, there wasn’t anyone else coming, so she approached with one hand on her lightsaber, ready for anything.

In their doorway stood an exhausted-looking, bloodshot-eyed, triumphantly grinning Talon Karrde, with Vrask standing next to him, ducking down so she was low enough to look in at Barriss.

“Okay, I’ve read through everything,” Karrde said, holding up his own copy of the Empire’s Jedi records. “Let’s piece this together and find your friends.”
“I’ve been going through all the reports of encounters with the Jedi since the end of the war,” Karrde said, bringing up several files on the holographic display in the living room table. Vrask sat down next to him, gnawing on chunks of leftover bones Ahsoka couldn’t eat. “After that, I narrowed it down to incidents which didn’t include any confirmed kills. There are multiple reports which didn’t identify their targets, so some might be the same individual, and from the Jedi who have been accounted for, there are at least fifteen and as many as eighty-five masters, knights and padawans who escaped the purge.”

“How many attempts on their lives have there been?” asked Barriss.

“127 incidents total, 23 with known survivors. There’s been a dropoff in incidents over the last few months, Jedi who are more skilled at survival are probably avoiding confrontation, spreading themselves out. You two pop up in a couple of them, by the way,” said Karrde, showing them files listing the encounters with the Inquisitor on Serenno and Pantora. Profile images of Barriss and Ahsoka alongside them, showing her in her old Jedi garb.

“Are Ahsoka and I counted in those 23 failed assassinations?” asked Barriss.

“No, those were all other Jedi.”

Ahsoka noticed Vrask eyeing her, her big nostrils flaring, and Ahsoka got the impression those famed Trandoshan olfactory receptors could smell the residue of her tears. Even though Barriss was doing most of the talking this time, Ahsoka could tell Karrde was paying close attention to her reactions, too, studying her in that creepy way he seemed to study everyone as he looked for things to exploit. This whole discussion was grating on Ahsoka’s nerves, she didn’t want to be here right now, she didn’t want to be studied by smugglers, even though she knew she had to endure it. For the sake of the galaxy. If she could just get through the next hour or so without snapping at anybody, that’d be great.

As Karrde listed several incidents which usually ended in suspects fleeing the system, Ahsoka felt a pull, a feeling like one of these reports might actually important.

“What about this one?” she asked, scrolling through several date stamps and picking one report out.

“Ah, that one was a bit odd,” Karrde noted, surprised Ahsoka had chosen it. “There was a report of a human male in Jedi attire supposedly seen at the outskirts of a local spaceport. An inquisitor followed up on it, but discovered nothing.”

“Which inquisitor responded?” asked Barriss.

“It doesn’t say. That’s another strange thing: this is the only incident report that doesn’t list who was dispatched, only that there was an inquisitor sent. The others all came with a number denoting their inquisitor. There’s at least nineteen of them, by the way,” answered Karrde with a degree of concern. “Worse, I pieced together a timeline of these reports and who responded, and that number has been climbing steeply.”

“How steeply?” asked Barriss.

“Two months ago, there were only six,” Vrask hissed. “Karrde still hasn’t mentioned the worst part of this. That report is odd because it doesn’t say which inquisitor responded, but we know one was sent. Of all the reports, there were 41 others which don’t list any inquisitor at all, and they don’t say who else was dispatched. Out of those, none reported survivors. Someone showed up at the scene, and every Jedi present died. Every single time.”
“We went to all that trouble to obtain these files, and they’re no more informative than this?” asked Barriss.

“We were banking on the ISB being as omniscient as they like to front,” said Karrde. “Maybe our mysterious Jedi killer doesn’t like having bureaucrats looking over their shoulder. Besides, don’t tell me after what you pulled off you don’t consider that last stop worth it.”

Despite the grim news of how badly outnumbered they were, Ahsoka still felt drawn to the report, and the oddities were telling her she should concentrate on it.

“Where was that report from?” she asked.

“A sparsely-populated desert world in the Outer Rim,” Karrde said, bringing up an image of the planet, a completely tan orb of sand and rock, its arid skies nearly cloudless, with twin suns in the background behind it. “It’s called—”

“Tatooine,” Ahsoka finished, letting out the breath she’d been holding, knowing now where she would start the search. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m familiar with it.”

“Is there anything else you’d like to tell us before we depart?” Barriss asked Karrde as she and Ahsoka readied the Eclipse for departure.

“There is. Since Mitoth, I got an update from my people on the ysalamiri shipments to the Empire’s inquisitors, narrowing down the destinations of the shipments. There’s still about thirty possible systems, but it’s progress,” said Karrde. “If they’re using ysalamiri, there’s probably some Jedi they’re containing. I’ll let you know when I have something more definitive.”

“Thank you. Ahsoka, are you coming?” asked Barriss, as Ahsoka stood on the walkway to the landing pad, staring out over Coronet.

“I’m coming. I just need a minute,” she called back.

“Hey, Tano?” said Karrde. “I’m... I’m sorry about Skywalker. Never met him, but I saw him in the news like everybody else. He seemed like a good man.”

“Yeah. He was,” Ahsoka said, walking around the smuggler to her ship.

Heavier footsteps approached came up behind her, and Ahsoka decided to stop and let Vrask get her piece in before leaving.

“Tell me, your relationship with Skywalker, what was he to you? Close mentor? Father? Brother?” Vrask asked casually.

“Jedi relationships don’t necessarily line up with blood relatives, but... we were family,” Ahsoka said.

“Hm. Fair. Non-Trandoshans don’t often understand our perspectives on family, either,” added Vrask. “Particular since we let the infants of a clutch of eggs eat each other. Other societies simply don’t get it.”

“...You do what?” asked Ahsoka.
“Ugh, all you blunt-fingered aliens react like that,” Vrask said, going from sympathetic to annoyed at getting the usual response yet again. “We lay six eggs on average for each mating, if we cared for every one that hatched, Hsskor would be overpopulated in a few generations. Or we’d have to impose extreme methods of population control that would limit who was permitted to reproduce. I was the first to hatch out of eleven eggs, which became my first few meals. Mother likes to joke that’s how I grew so big.”

“What does this have to do with Anakin?” asked Ahsoka, now more understanding of the extreme cultural and biological differences at work, if still somewhat disturbed by the necessity and the amusement derived from it.

“My father was killed ten years ago. He lived his life well, raised me and three other offspring with our mothers, and was held in high esteem by our community. Those who caused his death celebrated their victory and insulted his memory in doing so. Before leaving home for the wider galaxy, I killed them all, with this,” Vrask explained, as she drew a knife from her back pouch, offering it to Ahsoka. The knife was serrated metal with a color and composition Ahsoka didn’t recognize, fixed to a carved wooden handle with many colored beads having from it, with what appeared to be a worn-down Trandoshan claw extending from the pommel. It was well-balanced, though the carved wood didn’t fit well into Ahsoka’s hand, being made for a wielder with three large fingers.

“Some rival hunters killed him, I take it?” suggested Ahsoka.

“Rival hunters? I grew up on an aleudrupe berry orchard. Father was killed by some thugs from a third-rate crime syndicate, some kind of protection racket they were running. What’s important is I killed them and served the roasted body of their leader for a family dinner the day after father’s funeral,” said Vrask, licking her lips as she recalled the Falleen’s tender meat. “Mourn Skywalker’s passing and absence as you wish, but do not forget to celebrate his life. And to bring devastation to those who would harm to you, your master, your mate, and your fellow Jedi. I have little faith in your Force, but perhaps it truly is pushing you into a confrontation with the inquisitors. Should the opportunity present itself, you would honor this blade by spilling imperial blood with it. I brought it out of storage for you, should you desire it.”

“You really want to give me this?” Ahsoka said. Vrask’s heart was in the right place, she thought, but Ahsoka wasn’t entirely sure she wanted to accept this grisly present.

“I have no need of it now. That knife is an instrument of retribution, and Karrde’s preferred methods of dealing with adversaries make violence rather impersonal,” Vrask answered, with a slightly bored-sounding tone. “Regardless, my time for grieving is over. I prefer to life my life and remember father teaching me to sharpen my claws, or how to pull off the most frightening snarl, or fixing the landspeeder. Ah, warm memories.”

“Thank you, but revenge isn’t the Jedi way,” Ahsoka said, returning the knife to Vrask, who respectfully took it back without judgement.

“Very well. Be safe, Ahsoka Tano. And remember: do not spend your life lamenting those who have lost theirs. You are alive, so claim your survival in their place.”

“So, he’s really dead,” said Revan. “You’re certain?”
“Imperial records are clear,” said Barriss. “Skywalker was killed along with masters Windu, Kolar, Tiin, and Fisto.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Revan said, stopping Barriss from explaining any further. “You said there was a Jedi master named ‘Fisto’? Really? That sounds like the name of a sex droid. Not a well-built one, either, or even one made for the job, more like some repurposed maintenance droid that says stuff like ‘Please assume the position’ when you turn it on, and it has jury-rigged power drills with rubber caps on the ends that it uses to—”

“Stop that,” interrupted Barriss. “The records state he was killed with the masters in an attempt to assassinate then-Chancellor Palpatine shortly before the attack on the Jedi Temple.”

“The Emperor was involved?” asked Revan. “Personally? Why?”

“As I said, they intended to kill him,” said Barriss. “And all were killed in the attempt. The reports are quite clear. Why are you so persistent about this?”

The hologram of Revan appeared and loomed over Barriss’s datapad, staring fixedly at the file describing Skywalker’s fate.

“...It’s not what I’d expected, but I don’t have any hard evidence contradicting it.”

“What were you expecting?” asked Barriss.

“Obviously, I suspected he was alive.”

“How would he have survived?” asked Barriss. “Even Skywalker would’ve had little better chance of escape from a clone army than any of the other masters and knights in the temple or spread across the galaxy. Given his temperament, I’d expect him to charge headlong into danger and finally suffer the consequences. The only reason Ahsoka and I remain is because she had left the order, while I was imprisoned at the time of the purge.”

“I had a hypothesis. I didn’t want to discuss it and risk giving Ahsoka false hope by talking about it without facts to back it up. Doesn’t matter now, since apparently I was wrong,” said Revan, sounding uncharacteristically confused. “It makes no sense for the Empire’s own encrypted records to be falsified, especially not to conceal the existence of someone like Skywalker. Not when there was no reason to expect them to be stolen like this. I guess he really is dead... How’s Ahsoka taking it?”

“As well as I had feared,” said Barriss. “Your advice has been helpful, by the way.”

“Well then, go spend some time with her. No need to waste time on me when your girlfriend needs you.”

“Of course,” Barriss said, getting up to prepare the ship for departure. “I have everything well in hand.”

Listlessly working her way to the cockpit, Ahsoka tried to focus on the immediate concern of getting the ship ready, only to find Barriss buckled up in the pilot’s seat.
“I thought I should get some more experience flying the ship,” Barriss said as she began the start-up sequence for the engines and hyperdrive. “Have a seat and relax. I’ll have us on our way to Tatooine in short order.”

“Oh. Okay, thanks,” said Ahsoka, sitting down in the copilot seat, buckling herself in and leaning back to think about things.

Anakin was gone, and she wasn’t processing it, she just wanted to stop everything. Padmé, she’d known Padmé was gone, and she’d handled that. Ahsoka needed to keep moving, needed to keep fighting. Obi-Wan was still out there, probably. It wasn’t the same. He wasn’t Anakin.

She was so lost in thought for several minutes she didn’t even notice the jostling of the ship as it lifted off, and the blue sky had faded into starlight blackness when she started paying attention to her surroundings again. “Barriss, when you found out Luminara was dead, how did you deal with it?”

Gripping the control yoke tighter, Barriss paused, then pushed the lever to send the *Eclipse* into hyperspace along their charted course to Tatooine before turning her chair to address Ahsoka directly.

“Well, that’s a complicated issue. I’d already known she was almost certainly dead, and because of what I’d done, I wasn’t particularly eager to see her again even if she wasn’t. My relationship with her was... poor, in retrospect. It still hurt, knowing she was gone. For the most part, I didn’t want to think about her any longer, and I had other concerns occupying my attention. While you were unconscious and recovering after the incursion on Serenno, I, well, I spent several hours crying over her while also regretting having felt attachment to her. Then I saw that vision of her on Myrkr I told you about, which concluded with my berating her for everything that had gone wrong in my life. That constituted the majority of my grieving process, now I simply... try not to think about her,” replied Barriss, realizing how bad that all sounded and trying to come up with something that Ahsoka would find helpful in dealing with her own mourning. “You and Skywalker, in spite of the teachings of the Jedi, loved one another very much. Perhaps it would help to be thankful for the time you had together.”

“And now that he’s gone, everything hurts,” Ahsoka murmured. “I wonder if this is part of why the Jedi discouraged attachment.”

“For what it’s worth, I would consider my feelings for you well worth the risk... Are you certain Master Kenobi is the Jedi who was seen on Tatooine?” asked Barriss, looking to put Skywalker out of mind and focus on reuniting Ahsoka with Kenobi as expediently as possible.

“It’s likely. He’s listed as alive, he’s one of only a couple adult human male Jedi left, and he might have reason for going to Tatooine. It’s the best lead we have right now,” said Ahsoka.

“Why would he be there?”

“It was Anakin’s homeworld. All three of us have been there at different points. Maybe he went to inform Anakin’s family, if he has any relatives left,” said Ahsoka. “I’ll be sure to ask him about everything when we find him.”

“You believe he knows how Skywalker died?”

“The two of them were never apart for long,” said Ahsoka. “If anyone knows how Anakin died, it would be Obi-Wan.”
As the light of hyperspace swirled outside, Barriss’s back pressed against the wall of the cabin with her arms wrapped around Ahsoka’s torso, the two of them crammed into her bunk. Lazing around, not really wanting to get up, Ahsoka felt Barriss’s cheek pressed against her rear lekku.

Attempts to find a more elegant solution hadn’t gone anywhere: the bunks were welded to the walls and couldn’t be pushed together, while the mats were too wide to be fit next to each other on the floor in the narrow cabin.

After the last time, Ahsoka was certain this couldn’t be comfortable for Barriss, but the latter was insistent and being together like this was definitely nice. Barriss was toasty.

“You awake, Barriss?” Ahsoka asked, barely above a whisper, hardly awake herself.

“Yes,” Barriss replied in an alert tone that said she’d been fully awake for some time now. “Is something on your mind?”

“I was thinking about meeting Obi-Wan, and how I’m going to explain, y’know, us,” said Ahsoka.

“You could practice by explaining it to me,” Barriss said, trying to write off the very serious topic as a joke. “I still don’t completely understand myself.”

“You’re nice, you’re cute, you’re smart, and...” Ahsoka took a moment to come up with the most inoffensive, succinct phrasing she could. ”...you’ve proven I can count on you.”

“Then that’s what you should tell him.”

“I know. That doesn’t mean I’m not dreading it.”

Ahsoka rolled over to wrap her arms around Barriss, not really wanting to do anything else. Just wanted to hold onto her for a little bit longer.

Falling half asleep again, Ahsoka wasn’t sure how much time passed until the bunk jittered with the slight pulse of pseudomotion as the autopilot delivered them to their destination, and she grudgingly pushed away the blanket and got to her feet. Out the small window at the back of the, on the starboard side of the ship, the light of twin suns shined on her.

Time to get to work.

The Eclipse traced a path over the barren planet, as Barriss kept them flying steadily while Ahsoka sat next to her, eyes closed, meditating. Just like they’d been doing for the past hour.

“I don’t feel anything,” Ahsoka said unpleasantly. “I don’t suppose you feel anything?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t. What should we do?” asked Barriss.
Obi-Wan had to be here, Ahsoka had been drawn to this place, he couldn’t have gone. If he was gone, there must be a trail to follow.

“Keep flying for a while,” Ahsoka said after a long look out over the endless tan landscape, returning to her meditation.

For several more hours, the Eclipse zig-zagged over the Dune Sea, covering a path of thousands of kilometers.

“Have we picked up anything interesting on sensors, Cici?” asked Barriss, as the astromech had been kept plugged into the sensor array to comb the desert.

“We ain’t found shit,” said Cici. “There’s nothing noteworthy down there outside the settlements except for some Sand Crawlers, and Jawas don’t care much to give people rides. I can’t find some Jedi master like this. Even if I pick up some new life signs, there’s no way of knowing which one’s him.”

Ahsoka rubbed her temples, feeling tired and bored from sitting in the same spot for so long trying to focus while finding nothing. The Force had led her here, actual hard data had led her here, and nothing was telling her to go somewhere else, there just wasn’t anything for her to find.

What if he’s dead? Ahsoka wondered. Maybe Obi-Wan had come here and been killed. But that inquisitor report hadn’t mentioned him being killed, and he wasn’t killed by clones or stormtroopers. What on Tatooine could’ve killed Obi-Wan? Some third-rate criminals? Tusken Raiders?

No, he was alive.

“Ahsoka, perhaps Kenobi doesn’t wish to be found,” suggested Barriss, supplying the first plausible explanation Ahsoka had to go on, unappealing as it might be. She hadn’t come all this way just to turn around, and refocused on sensing the flow of life around her. If Obi-Wan was closing himself off for some reason, trying to avoid being found, she’d just have to be the one to get his attention.

“If Obi-Wan doesn’t want to be found, he can tell me that himself,” said Ahsoka as she shut her eyes tightly. “I didn’t come all this way to turn around. I know he’s there.”

Hey. It’s Ahsoka. I’m up here. You there? she thought idly to herself. An actual verbal response wasn’t expected, but she and Obi-Wan had a connection, he ought to be able to sense her, especially if she was actively reaching out to him.

There was nothing.

“If Kenobi is here, we’ll stay here as long as it takes to find him, or to find another lead,” said Barriss, as she took the ship down. “For now, let’s find a place to land where we can rest.”

After half an hour of searching for a good place to land, Ahsoka settled on the top of a tall, dark mesa near a settlement the local transmissions called ‘Sorssttoc’. Not too small that they would stand out, not large enough they would run into anything significant and get themselves noticed.

Beneath an outcropping of sandstone at the mesa’s edge, Barriss and Ahsoka considered their options for how to find Obi-Wan. There were about two kilometers from the settlement, taking the
safety of the ship a bit more seriously now that it had been hovering in place inside an imperial hangar in plain view. If the Empire hadn’t gotten a clear visual on it before, they had now, so it was best to keep out of sight for now.

“It’s an entire planet,” groaned Ahsoka. “How are we going to track down one man on the whole planet?”

“It isn’t as dire as it appears. Tatooine is sparsely populated, there are only so many population centers he could be in,” said Barriss.

“He’s not necessarily living near other people,” noted Ahsoka.

“He will still require food and water to survive.”

“He’s a Jedi master with plenty of experience and survival training. Even though he’ll never admit it, I know he’s the one who taught Anakin to eat live bugs. He didn’t pick that up on his own,” said Ahsoka.

“...Perhaps,” began Barriss, not wishing to delve deeper into that topic, “However even if he can grow or hunt enough food, water is scarce, and he must be supplied by one of the moisture farms. Or he’s somehow come to be in possession of such a farm, which will make him even easier to find. Either that, or he’s joined up with a tribe of Sand People and uses one of their secret oases.”

Ahsoka stepped out from the ship, looking off into the endless desert before her. “Any idea how many people live on this planet?”

“Given the inadequate water supply, and the size and number of settlements, there can’t be more than a few hundred thousand. Emigrated species that is, I can’t be sure of the native population.”

A few hundred thousand. That was manageable. It wasn’t like Obi-Wan had hidden on one of the galaxy’s ecumenopoli. Barriss was right, there were only so many settlements, and if she had to search them one by one, that’s exactly what Ahsoka would do.

The suggestion that Obi-Wan didn’t want to be found gnawed at Ahsoka as she considered her options. It made sense he’d stay somewhere far from the Empire, somewhere isolated, but they should be able to sense each other, especially given Ahsoka was actively seeking him out, that singular intent driving all of her actions. Was he closing himself off from the Force?

Obi-Wan had known Anakin almost as long as Ahsoka had been alive, been his master. Maybe Anakin’s death had hit him even harder than it had hit her. It was certainly a valid reason to cloister himself. Maybe he didn’t even realize she was nearby.

Maybe he believed she was dead, too.

One way or another, she was getting answers to all of this. She wasn’t leaving the planet until she did. Taking a walk around their makeshift landing pad to check the stability of the ground, Ahsoka considered what kind of supplies they’d need to brave the environment on foot, since flying around in the ship wasn’t getting them anywhere. They had plenty of portable rations, but the thermoses they had wouldn’t carry enough water for more than a few hours out in the desert. Their clothes offered little protection from the sun, the sand, or the heat. It was so hot, Barriss had been forced to take off that thick navy-blue coat of hers, not that her grey long-sleeved shirt was much of an improvement in this environment. They had no speeders, either, so if they traveled around, it would either be a painfully slow and dangerous walk, or they would have to take off and land the ship every single time they saw something interesting.
Then there was the issue of the droids.

Naberrie, the most outgoing of the droidekas, confidently scuttled down to the edge of the ramp while the others hesitated and stayed inside, body tilting forward to provide a good look at the unfamiliar terrain. Raising his right leg, he delicately set it down into the sand, getting a solid balance as he prepared to venture forth.

Then a gust of blind blew at him, leaving many grains of sand stuck inside the crevices of his claw foot. Alarmed, Naberrie retreated back onto the ramp, stomping his foot on the metal plating to shake the sand out before clambering back up to his fellow droids, only Cici daring to venture out.

The diminutive astromech rolled out off the ramp, and got herself buried and stuck in several centimeters of sand, her wheel assembly unable to propel her out her attempt only digging more sand out from under her and making her sink.

“Wait, wait, I’ve got this,” Cici said, increasing power to her wheels, a cloud of sand erupting from behind her and up the ramp, spraying the droidekas above her with more sand as she only sunk further into the mound of silica.

The droidekas noisily protested what was happening, complaining of the coarse, rough sand getting everywhere, all of them too concerned of wearing down their joints and servos to risk moving out of the way. From the back of the group, Droideka #5 yelled for someone in the front to blast Cici immediately and make this torment stop. Naberrie was seriously considering it.

“I don’t believe the droids are suited to this environment,” Barriss said as she raised her hand over Cici and the droid leapt straight upwards into her palm. “Not without some modification.”

“The local shops must sell components to sand-proof their droids,” Ahsoka said, handing her a pad with a list of items written up. “There are some supplies we’re going to need to survive out in the Dune Sea. Can you get everything?”

“Yes. Yes, of course,” Barriss said without even reading the pad. “What will you be doing?”

“First, I’m going to clean the sand out of the ship, and out of the destroyers,” Ahsoka said, heading up and back into the ship, squeezing her way through the immobile droidekas. “Then I’m going to keep meditating. Try and come up with a new lead to follow.”

As Barriss and Cici walked off and up towards the settlement, Ahsoka sprayed down the interior of her ship with blasts from the ship’s air hose, trying to keep her distance from the concentrations of sand and not accidentally blast it further inside.

_I should be making Cici do this_, Ahsoka thought as it dawned on her what a mess this was. It had nothing to do with Cici being a droid, this was completely her fault. On the plus side, cleaning the sand out let her once again affirm her status as Queen of the Destroyer Droids, because they could not be happier with her blasting all those awful grains removed from their servos and out of the ship.

Back in the cockpit, the twin suns shining through the canopy, Ahsoka reached out with the Force, feeling the flow of life through Tatooine’s ecosystem, looking for a single life among all those present.

_Maybe he's asleep_, Ahsoka thought hopefully.

The planet was more alive than she’d given it credit for. All manner of simple bestial minds were out there in the wastes, clinging to life in the harsh wasteland. Images flashed into her mind, bits of landscape, knowledge from the minds she was passing by. A Tusken tribe, a Jawa sandcrawler, a
herd of banthas, the sarlacc pit.

And she saw nothing of Obi-Wan.

Then, she felt herself being drawn forth. Kilometers from the mesa, there was a canyon, a deep, rough cut in the terrain too narrow for the *Eclipse*, and within it branched out countless underground caverns extending deep into Tatooine.

Each time she tried to begin again, to approach things from a new angle, the Force always led her back there.

The first thing Barriss needed to take care of was getting the necessary money. An easy task, and one she was certain the local economy would appreciate once she’d spent it obtaining the items Ahsoka wanted.

“Where did you get this?” the rare mineral shop owner asked Barriss as she presented him with the smallest Kyber crystal she had from Dantooine.

“Something I won in a game of pazaak,” she said. “Considering the loser’s reaction upon my victory, I estimate its value to be no less than 80,000.”

“Even were that a fair price, I am but a small shop, and do not even possess enough credits on hand to pay such a sum,” he said, carefully inspecting the quality of the crystal to be sure he wasn’t being cheated.

“In that case, in addition to the available credits, why not throw in some of your other gems?” suggested Barriss, trying to find a fair deal. Even though she knew no deal here would be completely fair. She had dozens of crystals superior to that one, but only wanted to sell one to avoid drawing too much attention. If word got around there were millions of credits worth of kyber crystals in the *Eclipse*, they could easily be fighting off an army of thieves. Better that everyone believe she had just the one, but she also didn’t want to be taken for a fool who would trade the gem for a paltry sum.

“Very well. I shall pay 50,000, and you may select items which total more than 25,000,” he said with a phony smile, though Barriss didn’t feel like arguing the point, choosing to look around the shop.

*Would Ahsoka like this?* Barriss wondered to herself as she inspected a gemstone. Ahsoka had spent the past few years moving from place to place without any dead weight or useless trinkets, if Barriss brought her something, it needed to serve some kind of purpose besides looking pretty.

*Or perhaps you’ll offer her something which she will keep, for the first time, simply because it’s beautiful and not because she can’t afford anything that won’t help her fight.*

*Or, you’ve cluttered up the ship with a piece of useless junk she feels obligated to keep and say nice things about because it was a gift from you, even though she doesn’t care for it.*

...*There must be something of practical use in this place.*

“Excuse me, what is this crystal?” she asked pointing to a small, bright green orb.

“Ah, that is a krayt dragon pearl. One of the smaller ones, though still quite valuable, and difficult to
obtain. Only the mightiest hunters can bring down such a beast to retrieve it.”

Little did the shopkeeper know a suitably polished pearl supposedly had refractory properties which could enhance the power of a lightsaber.

“I’ll take it,” Barriss said, pocketing the pearl and her money.

Trudging out through the sandy streets between the sandy buildings, Barriss wondered to herself if coming here was worth it. Ahsoka was certain Kenobi had come here, but why? There were far better places to hide than there. Tatooine had little in the way of natural resources, but it was at the intersection of several major hyperspace routes. Without any other powers interested in claiming the world, the Hutts were effectively in control, and with them came organized crime.

And with organized criminals came bounty hunters.

In the center of town, new bounty postings being displayed, eagerly looked over by the local hunters. The postings including three new ones. Or rather, one new, two updated.

**AHSOKA TANO: 700,000 CREDITS**

WANTED DEAD OR ALIVE FOR TREASON AGAINST THE EMPIRE, DESERTION, AND JEDISM. KNOWN ACCOMPLICE OF BARRISS OFFEE. ARMED AND EXTREMELY DANGEROUS.

**BARRISS OFFEE: 800,000 CREDITS**

WANTED DEAD OR ALIVE FOR TREASON AGAINST THE EMPIRE, JEDISM, THEFT OF MILITARY PROPERTY, TERRORISM, IMPERSONATION OF AN IMPERIAL OFFICER, AND DESTRUCTION OF MILITARY PROPERTY IN EXCESS OF 2 BILLION CREDITS IN VALUE. KNOWN ACCOMPLICE OF AHSOKA TANO. ARMED AND EXTREMELY DANGEROUS.

**ORIBUYCE KIHKOVID: 50,000 CREDITS**

WANTED DEAD FOR TREASON AGAINST THE EMPIRE AND IMPERSONATION OF AN IMPERIAL OFFICER. SUSPECTED OF THEFT. KNOWN ACCOMPLICE OF BARRISS OFFEE. MINOR THREAT.

The last one showed a rather inaccurate rendition of Karrde, looking older, with a much fuller beard and the wrong eye color. A pair of Mandalorian hunters were chuckling at the name, for reasons Barriss wasn’t sure of.

If they had any doubts their ship hadn’t been definitively ID’d by now they could stop, as the imperials got several highly-detailed images of the *Eclipse* and were distributing them along with the bounty postings. That freighter wasn’t just one of a million now, its paint job was quite distinctive and now everyone had a close look at it.

Seeing the bounty hunters prowling around, Barriss reached into the pocket of her trousers and activated her disguise matrix, turning away from the crowd to keep anyone from noticing the flicker of the hologram asserting itself. Now with a human face, one without any bounty attached to it, Barriss continued with the shopping trip. They already had plenty of equipment back at the ship, first aid, tools, flashlights, but it wouldn’t be enough to withstand the desert. The local shops provided everything they needed, there being a long history of prospectors, scavengers, and hunters preparing for expeditions out into the Dune Sea.
Tinted goggles for protection from sand and sunlight, check.

Desert cloaks, including one with a hood sufficient to cover Ahsoka’s head, check. Barriss donned hers right away, glad to get into something with more coverage that was breathy enough not to give her heatstroke.

Local maps, check.

Additional water bottles and food, check.

The weight of the new items was starting to add up, though Cici was showing admirable awareness of Barriss’s physical limits and wasn’t complaining about being saddled with the heavier items.

As when they went down an oddly deserted street to look for someplace they could buy a decent speeder bike to carry all this back, Barriss saw a part of scout troopers several buildings down. Barriss ducked back around the corner, wondering if she and Ahsoka had been tracked, then figuring the Empire must have some small presence on this planet to keep the local scum in line, and to expediently issue bounties to all the hunters in this system.

That still didn’t mean Barriss wanted to get anywhere near them, and she was about to leave when a human girl, maybe fourteen years old, sneaked up behind the troopers and placed an unknown device on the imperial speeders. Switching it on, their bikes were covered in a holographic shroud that appeared to be an extension of the wall they were standing in front of.

When the troopers turned around, their bikes appeared to have vanished.

The girl was safely out of sight, watching the troopers wander around and away trying to find their missing vehicles, probably figuring their bikes had somehow been stolen as opposed to noticing the wall had expanded over a meter. Then she walked through the illusive wall and retrieved her device.

Barriss, failing to see the reason such a person might want to avoid notice by others, imperial or otherwise, approached the girl and got her attention, which sent her running away down a back alley.

Or she tried to. Without anyone else around, Barriss could act out in the open, too, and a moment later the girl was hovering several centimeters off the ground and being pulled towards the former Jedi.

“Hello,” Barriss said in a cheerful tone, trying to make up for how unnerving she’d been acting. “What’s your name?”

“Esicuo,” the girl answered automatically, bewildered and still without a firm contact with the ground.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Barriss said reassuringly, lowering the girl to the ground and displaying her pocketful of high-mark credits. Fixating on all that cash, Esicuo suddenly didn’t seem the least bit frightened. “Your little prank on those troopers was very impressive. Where might I obtain one of your holographic devices?”

“Mr. Rakstolin!” shouted Esicuo as she led Barriss into a shop, past rows of varying pieces of dingy-looking equipment with purposes Barriss wasn’t sure of. “We’ve got a customer!”
After a moment of disillusionment with the state of the store and the likely quality of the products it sold, Barriss and Cici went to catch up with Esicuo as she approached her boss.

There, at the counter of the shop, sat a Chistori, whose small eyes focused on Barriss from the top of his large, saurian head, their pale blue color standing out amidst the his counter-shaded scales, tan on his lower half, rippled maroon on top. In his right hand, he held a large slab of raw meat, still on the bone, and opened his jaws to reveal a mouth of sharp teeth and a long, slathering tongue. He took a bite not only of the dripping meat, but effortlessly tore through the bone with a sickening crack, staring unblinkingly at Barriss as he idly chewed the piece a few times before tilting his head back and swallowing it mostly whole, his neck bulging as it went down.

Then, he bellowed an approving, hearty chuckle and rubbed his smiling assistant’s head with his big, clawed hand, the left one, careful not to let the long black claws get caught on her hair.

“Glad to see you’ve been doing something besides getting into trouble on your break, Esicuo,” Rakstolin said with a deep, soothing voice as he wiped the raw juices from his fingers, set aside his lunch, and licked flecks of meat from his teeth as he addressed Barriss directly. Rising from his stool to his full height, Barriss found he stood even taller than Vrask, though much slimmer. With his long, protruding jaw, sharp teeth extending up from his species’ natural underbite, he needed to tilt his head to look at Barriss with his left eye as he loomed over her. “So, what can I do for you? Specialty ship modifications are my main trade, though if you’re looking for upgrades for this astromech of yours, I believe I have some items that are compatible with a CC model.”

“If you have anything that can help me get around in all this sand, that’d be great,” said Cici.

“Hm. Your astromech can speak Basic? That’s a rare capability,” said Rakstolin.

“What?” asked Cici, momentarily confused until she remembered she wasn’t supposed to talk. “Oh, right. Beep boop beep ah fuck it I haven’t remembered to keep up the pretense since we were on Myrkr. Being able to talk is nowhere near as illegal as half of the shit I’ve gotten into the last few months anyway. Name’s Cici, nice to fuckin’ meet you.”

“Er, same,” said Rakstolin, who was presently covering Esicuo’s young, innocent ears to protect her from such coarse language as the girl tapped his hands to get his attention. The towering mechanic knelt down as his young assistant whispered something into his ear. The Chistori then looked at Barriss suspiciously and rose back to his full height, giving a mild snarl.

“My dear customer, I’m going to provide you with one warning,” he said, his voice deep and threatening as he took a step closer to Barriss, “If you exploited my young assistant in some foolhardy attempt at uncovering details of my enterprises, you won’t find what you’re looking for. And if you persist with this inquiry, or bring more unwanted attention to my business, I should also remind you that you interrupted my meal,” he said, unhinging his jaw to a span more than large enough to encompass Barriss’s whole head, displaying many more teeth than before.

“Don’t threaten her, it’s true!” Esicuo shouted, pulling on her employer’s hand, keeping her voice low as if she expected stormtroopers to appear at any moment, all while still attempting to shout. “I saw one of her wanted posters the bounty hunters were looking over! I don’t know what she did to the Empire, but she’s got one of the highest bounties there! She needs help disguising her ship so the Empire and bounty hunters won’t spot it so easily. Apparently it stands out, and she needs this fast, because all the hunters know what it looks like.”

Rakstolin pulled back and snapped his mouth shut, doubtfully looking down at Barriss, who was sweating even more now from the fear on top of the heat. “There are plenty of mercenaries who’ll fight injustice one moment, then sell people with real morals out for some fast credits. How can I be
“Sure you won’t tell the local garrison about me once you have what you want?”

For a moment, Barriss was going to go into a speech, something about trust and conviction and unity in the fight against the Empire. Instead, she pulled out her lightsaber and slammed it onto the counter. Not only was it faster, it did the job much more effectively as Rakstolin recognized what it was, his vertical-slit irises widening with surprise.

“I have no interest in cooperating with the Empire,” she said, her holographic disguise vanishing as she turned it off. “You may be certain of that.”

“Well, then, what can old Rakstolin do for you?” he asked, as he huffed approvingly at her guts. “And how will you be paying for my services? I don’t work for free, not even for one such as you.”

Barriss reached into her pocket, and pulled out a five-thousand credit chip, dropping it beside her saber. “There’s more where that came from.”

“What do you need?” Rakstolin asked, now thoroughly interested and getting into work-mode.

“I saw your apprentice possessed impressive holographic technology,” said Barriss. “I assume you can produce more such items. Do you possess anything capable of disguising a ship?”

“Probably. How large?”

“A G-class light freighter,” said Barriss.

“G-class? Hm... holographic coverage for a twenty-eight meter average diameter... Let’s see...” Rakstolin said to himself, tapping a series of buttons built into the counter that caused several wall panels to slide up, revealing all manner of impressive, advanced, and likely illegal pieces of technology. Walking up to them, he inspected and selected a rack of eight holographic emitters while Esicuo selected various pieces of scrap metal and conductor to begin arranging them together.

“Hmm... Need to space them radially to completely encompass the ship, need an adaptor to connect to the power supply, they’ll burn through power cells too fast covering something that big, also must add on a connection to the ship computer so it can be turned on from the cockpit, should arrange it with a flat silhouette to blend in with the surrounding external components and stay inside the deflector shield coverage, hmmmmm...”

“We can probably cut down on space if we use the low-res projectors,” said Esicuo. “All she really needs this for is camouflage, ‘cause the ship’s paint job is so distinctive. I’ll bring up the 3D schematics for the emitters.”

“Good, good,” Rakstolin said as he tinkered with the design. “Warm up the composite printers as well, we may need some simple custom parts.”

The newly-installed holographic field emitter activated, turning the black-with-white-rim of the *Eclipse’s* paint into a solid navy blue.

“Kinda takes the allure out of the name, though, doesn’t it?” asked Ahsoka. “I mean, the ship is round and painted black and white to look like an actual eclipse. Now it’s blue.”

“*Navy* blue,” Barriss added lamely. “Would you prefer our easily-noticed ship attract more attention?
And it can do other colors! The holoprojectors can cover the ship with several common color palettes for disguise, and several camouflage patterns, including...” she said as she touched her datapad, turning the entire surface of the ship into a finely-textured tan, “sand dunes!”

“Okay, that is pretty useful. What other settings does it have?”

Barriss began pressing buttons, switching from the fake paint to various textures.

“Let’s see, there’s a cloud, snowy, ocean, arboreal, volcanic, grassland, barren, and-” Barriss and Ahsoka covered their eyes as the ship suddenly produced an eye-strainingly bright green glow until the projectors were switched off, “whatever that was. It was listed as ‘moon’. Evidently there’s a glowing green moon somewhere. We can also supply it with images it will use to produce patterns, allowing it to blend into new environments.”

“Wow. You’ve been busy,” said Ahsoka, suitably impressed by everything. “You did get everything else we needed, right?”

As if on cue, Cici rolled out and down the ramp, honking what were presumably new curse words in the language of the Sand People. Her tires were replaced with thicker ones patterned to better grapple the sand while keeping her elevated above it, and her vents were covered in fine meshes to keep the heat flowing out and keep the sand from getting in.

Refusing to take the bait and ask what the heck that snorting meant, Ahsoka took a seat on the speeder bike Barriss had purchased and took it for a few low-speed laps around the *Eclipse*, in both directions, getting a feel for the handling and acceleration. It wasn’t going to win any races and some of the maroon paint had been worn off, but Barriss had made a pretty good choice. With the amount of cash she’d been waving around, getting a quality vehicle on this sandy rock wouldn’t take long or require much paperwork.

“Well?” asked Barriss. “Where should we go on our search? Did you come up with anything?”

“I did. There’s a canyon nearby that leads to a network of caverns. I want to check it out,” said Ahsoka. “It’s the closest area that isn’t just more sand dunes. If we’re investigating the surrounding lands, it’s the first place we’d look anyway.”

“You believe Kenobi is there?” asked Barriss.

“I don’t think so,” Ahsoka admitted. “He may have been there at some point, I don’t know.”

“We’ll stay here as long as we need to, Ahsoka,” Barriss said with an nod, opening the cargo compartment on the speeder’s rear to load it up with rations, water bottles, and two bedrolls. “Whatever’s out there, I’m certain we can handle it.”

An hour later, the two of them had gathered up all the supplies they had around the ship, donned their brown cloaks, powered up the speeder bike, strapped Cici into the back, and were ready to go. As Ahsoka took her seat, she noticed Barriss trying to find a comfortable way to carry a holocron around in the side pocket of the robe.

“You’re bringing Revan with us?” asked Ahsoka. “Why? The holocron will just be dead weight out here.”

“First of all, I weigh less than a kilogram,” retorted Revan. “I’ve been to Tatooine before, and can probably offer you some survival advice on how to deal with the local wildlife, not to mention the Sand People. Cici, you’ve got a translation program for them, right?”
“Yeah, I can interpret just about any Sand People dialect we come across,” replied Cici. “Though I think we should avoid them if we can. They don’t really care much for droids.”

“Cici may know the words, but I know how to talk to them,” said Revan. “Take me with you. Plus, I’m dying to meet this Obi Juan Whoever The Fuck He Is.”

“Also, considering the dangers of the planet, having someone else around to keep alert while we sleep will always be helpful,” added Barriss.

“Okay, I guess that’s fine. All right, everybody hang on,” Ahsoka said, getting a firm grip on the speeder bike’s handles. Barriss wrapped her arms firmly around Ahsoka’s torso, and she drove them out and away from the mesa and out into a sea of sand.

Chapter End Notes

Important writing note: only Cici and Revan use real-world swears, everybody else says stuff like “kriff” and “kraytspit”, though I recall Ahsoka thinking “crap” once. I would take this to mean real curses exist in Star Wars, but they're really fucking bad and those two are the only ones who care so little that they'll throw them around.

Rakstolin and Esicuo are named for Mark Klastorin and Kath Soucie, the voice actors of the Chistori Dark Jedi Desann and his stupidly-dressed apprentice Tavion Axmis. The Dark Forces saga doesn't exactly have brilliant writing, but I really like the design of that evil eight-foot-tall dinosaur man and his refreshingly non-black wardrobe.

I’d initially wanted Esiculo to be Miara Larte, a mechanically-skilled girl from the Ahsoka novel. But bringing in her older sister Kaeden, Ahsoka’s quasi-love interest because Disney has no serious intention of giving her a girlfriend, would've just added a plot thread I had no plan for and irritated everyone with the prospect of a love triangle. I didn't want to ignore her if I included Miara, so they're both still farming on Raada, I guess. At least until their lives are uprooted in about six months and Ahsoka isn't there to help. I'm sure they'll be fine, probably.
At the top of a sand dune, Ahsoka paused the speeder and saw their destination, a massive crack in the desert terrain, the shadows within it standing out in sharp contrast to the bright light reflected off the sand. Electrobinoculors and Cici’s sensors didn’t pick up anything on the surface, no structures, no people. They’d have to get down inside.

Heading towards the closest entrance, Ahsoka took them down into the canyon, their brown cloaks rippling in the wind as the speeder descended. The place was bigger than she’d expected, its branching paths extending for at least a hundred kilometers. It looked like this place used to be a riverbed sometime in the past.

“What’s the name of this place, again?” asked Ahsoka. Holding onto her with one arm, Barriss pulled out the pad with all the local maps loaded onto it.

“Beggar’s Canyon,” said Barriss, shouting over the slipstream. “One of the largest canyons on the planet.”

“One of the largest?!” yelled Ahsoka.

In her vision, Ahsoka hadn’t comprehended not only how large the canyon was, but how complex, the jagged, crack paths branching off ever few hundred meters. She took the speeder down path after path, reached a dead end, stretched out with the Force, did a sensor sweep, found nothing, went back to the main path. Again and again and again and again and again and again and they’d only explored a few percent of this place. They’d brought enough food and water to last days, but this wasn’t getting anywhere.

“Let’s take a break and get our bearings,” said Ahsoka, taking them into a defensible nook in the canyon wall. She eagerly took a long drink from one of their canteens, suddenly becoming aware of how dehydrated she was with the hot, dry air rushing past her.

“Oh, before I forget, there’s something I got for you,” said Barriss. In her hand she held an odd greenish orb that Ahsoka didn’t recognize. “This is a krayt dragon pearl I picked up at along with the other supplies. I was going to give it to you to upgrade your lightsaber, as it can supposedly increase the containment field’s stability and make the blade more intense.”

“Wow, thanks. I’ll put it together when we have a proper place, I don’t want to get sand in my saber’s internals,” said Ahsoka, marveling at the pearl for a few moments before pocketing it and taking one last drink of water.

Then, Ahsoka and Barriss froze. Somewhere in the distance, there was the unmistakable echoing of the Sand People. It sounded close, too. Nothing was visible, and neither Ahsoka nor Barriss could sense anything, but they were definitely out there, and the two instinctively gripped their lightsabers for safety as they watched their surroundings.

“We can sneak around them,” said Ahsoka.

“No, you can’t,” said Revan, prompting Barriss to pull the holocron out. “Those are experienced Sand People warriors out there, and you’re on their home turf. They probably heard your speeder coming a kilometer away. Making noise, leaving footprints, you’re not going to get around unnoticed. At best, they’re going to see you and decide you’re not worth the trouble of killing.”

“We have Cici equipped with a translator,” said Barriss. “We could approach them directly.”
“If you do, I have a recommendation,” said Revan. “Go barefoot, and walk.”

“How will that help?” asked Ahsoka, not liking the idea of putting her feet on the hot ground.

“I know a few things about the culture of the Sand People, and one thing I learned is the reason they hate outsiders is because they consider us ‘disconnected from the land’ because of how differently we live. Connection to nature isn’t an uncommon cultural ideal, but they seem to take it more literally than most,” Revan explained. “They detest vehicles like repulsorlifts and starships because they elevate you over the ground. They consider only a connection of flesh, like their revered bantha mounts, to be acceptable transport, and their robes are considered sacred and suited for the task of walking. Go barefoot. Connect to the land. The awful, hot, irritating land.”

“Do you really think that will work?” asked Barriss.

“Maybe. By the time I’d learned about this, I’d already earned their confidence enough that it wasn’t necessary to try,” said Revan. “At the very least, it should give them a moment’s pause and give you the upper hand if they attack.”

“I simply wish doing this wouldn’t inevitably result in sand infiltrating our boots,” lamented Barriss.

“Too late for that,” Ahsoka muttered as she felt the sand grains rubbing between her toes. For a long time, she hadn’t understood why Anakin hated sand so much. Now she did. She hated it, too. In honor of Anakin’s memory, Ahsoka decided to hate sand forever.

“Could our use of the Force impress them?” wondered Barriss.

“I don’t think so. When I used my abilities against them, none of them were fazed by it,” said Revan. “They’re familiar with pieces of advanced weaponry and anti-gravity tech like repulsors, they’ll probably assume any power you show them is some form of blasphemous technology. If you encounter any of them, use as little technology around them as possible, it’s hard to tell what they may take offense to. And while they’re around, I’ll be keeping quiet.”

“That’d be a first,” remarked Ahsoka.

Looking down at her feet, Ahsoka shrugged and decided to give Revan’s suggestion a shot and put her boots in the speeder’s cargo compartment, Barriss following suit. At least most of the canyon floors was in the shade so it wouldn’t burn their feet. Barriss put the speeder in neutral, gently pulling the hovering vehicle behind them while Cici rolled along next to her.

Ten minutes of walking later, Ahsoka knew they were coming up on the enemy group. Even though they weren’t in sight yet, she could sense them, unfamiliar minds separated from her by some sand and rock. There were five of them, plus their banthas.

Ahsoka motioned for Barriss to stay where she was, then hugged the canyon wall and worked her way around the corner, careful not to make the smallest sound. Getting a look at the Sand People might tell her about how well they were armed.

Peaking around the corner, all five of the locals were already staring right in her direction, knowing exactly where she would come from. Two of them had primitive slugthrowers loaded and ready... but they hadn’t fired on sight. That was something.

Dropping the pretense, Ahsoka stepped out from around the rock wall, raising her arms to show she wasn’t holding any weapons. In unison, they growled at her, clutching their weapons as their banthas quietly watched the scene and chewed on some desert plants. Ahsoka growled right back, sizing them up like she’d planned.
Four of the warriors were dressed more or less identically, but the fifth was different, wearing a sash that appeared to be made of some scaly animal’s hide with teeth, claws and other hunting trophies hanging from it. The lenses of his goggles also had a more ellipsoid shape instead of the circular ones the others wore. Definitely the leader. He raised his gaffi stick, and readied himself to let out a war cry, then stopped himself, staring intently at the strange newcomer. Then, he turned to his fellow and said a few short phrases, getting their attention.

“Cici, what’re they saying?” asked Ahsoka, waving for the droid to come forth, quietly so as not to interrupt the Sand Peoples’ discussion of them.

“They’re talking about how you’re connected to the land. They’re talking about whether or not they should kill you anyway. Apparently they have all the supplies they need, so there’s no point in killing you both and looting your corpses. That lead guy says it’s best not to risk a fight in case you can best one of their less experienced warriors, then they’d have trouble with their task,” said Cici. “He didn’t say what the task was, I guess the rest of them know what he’s talking about.”

“Then let’s go,” Ahsoka said, keeping an eye on the Sand People as she and Barriss pulled their bike around them and went on their way. Slowly, though. The warriors watched them intently, waiting for any sign of aggression as the outsiders passed them and off around the next bend.

“That went well,” Barriss said encouragingly, looking back to make sure they weren’t being followed.

“That went great,” said Revan. “As far as first encounters go, tense silence followed by complete disinterest is better than what most people manage when dealing with the Sand People. Also, I told you the ‘connect to the land’ thing would help. Don’t think I didn’t notice that.”

“Yeah, yeah, thanks. Let’s keep moving,” Ahsoka said, considering which path would lead to a section the speeder could traverse.

“Ahsoka, on your left!” Barriss shouted as her saber activated. Out of a low cave in the canyon wall, a pair of bright red eyes glowed in the darkness, emerging from the cave to reveal some kind of large, snarling rodent.

Eight others filed out after the first one.

“What are these things?” asked Ahsoka, as she backed away from the pack and sizing them up. They weren’t much bigger than two meters. Teeth and claws were a threat but they clearly hadn’t evolved as pure carnivores, no armor plating, tails were flexible but weren’t meant to be used as weapons. The problem was how many of them there were, and one of the creatures started going around to Ahsoka’s left, trying to surround her and Barriss.

“Visitor’s guide says they’re womp rats,” said Cici.

Ahsoka was going to ask how much of a threat they were when the rightmost one lunged at her, only to get stopped midair as Barriss flung it onto its back into a nearby boulder, stunning it.

The other rats scrambled around, attacking from all directions as Ahsoka and Barriss got back-to-back, the lunging creatures getting knocked back with the Force or losing one of their limbs to a lightsaber swing. After losing three their number, the survivors scurried off and up the canyon walls, retreating to another cave. Except for one, who looked down at the would-be prey from atop its ledge, then leapt down at Ahsoka.

The last womp rat soared over her head as she ducked and was split into two pieces, the smell of
burnt hair spreading out from it as she deactivated her saber, still shaking a bit from the adrenaline.

Sensing activity behind her, Ahsoka turned around to see that lead warrior again, as he’d somehow snuck up on her. He was looking over the dead womp rats, and seemed curious about them at first, kneeling down to examine the burnt flesh where they’d been cut. Then he stood up sharply, storming towards Ahsoka, and angrily shouting at her, gaffi stick in hand.

“Why is he so angry at us?” demanded Ahsoka, still keeping her distance from the leader as the other warriors followed behind him, weapons ready.

Cici rolled in front of the leader and started barking her own questions at him, drawing his attention away from Ahsoka. After a bit of back-and-forth, he lowered his voice and the novice translator explained things to Ahsoka.

“Okay, their leader here, the best pronunciation your vocal cords can manage would be ‘Qurorskra’, is demanding to know what your weapon is,” Cici said as Ahsoka turned off her lightsaber. “He says he’s seen the kinds of wounds it inflicts once before, at someplace called the ‘dead tribe’.”


Cici barked the question at the warriors, then translated the response. “About three years ago, a rival tribe near a settler community, they don’t know its real name so I don’t know where it was, got slaughtered. No survivors, not even children. The other Sand People still talk about it. Some think it’s an evil spirit, especially since some passing Jawas said they saw mysterious flashes of light in the distance.”

“Wouldn’t that have just been caused by some blasters?” asked Ahsoka. “What happened to them sounds horrible, but this was probably somebody going in heavily armed and gunning down the village.”

Cici asked the warriors about this. “Qurorskra here investigated and saw the remains personally, and he’s a bit annoyed that you seem to doubt his intelligence. None of the wounds were caused by common blasters. They know what blaster burns looks like, these were different, longer, like slashes, and some of the bodies were in pieces. Exactly like the wounds you inflicted on these womp rats.”

The description did sound like lightsaber strikes, but Ahsoka couldn’t think of anyone who used lightsabers and would want to kill the Sand People. Maybe if there was a Jedi here and they were attacked, they’d fight back. It was mostly thanks to Revan’s prior experience that Ahsoka and Barriss hadn’t gotten into a fight. But slaughtering a whole village? The only person Ahsoka could think of was Ventress, she’d been here about three years ago during that attempt to draw the Hutts into the war by manipulating Jabba. Even back then, she wasn’t that evil. Something like this seemed beyond what Ventress would be willing to do. What was the point, what was the goal? If it really was her, what had she been doing there? Maybe it was Dooku, but that raised the same questions. The Sand People had no role in that conflict, fighting them at all was a waste of time.

“Barriss, do you have any idea who could’ve caused something like that?”

“None at all,” said Barriss, who looked like she was as aware of the implications here as Ahsoka was. “What do you think we should do?”

“We tell them the truth,” said Ahsoka. “Cici, answer his first question. Explain to him what a lightsaber is, in broad terms.”

The warriors listened carefully and seemed slightly eased at being given an explanation for what had
occurred, at least knowing now that his people were not at risk of incurring some spirit’s wrath, but still enraged at the latest cruelty visited upon them by off-worlders. He also didn’t seem inclined to fight Ahsoka over it, fully lowering his gaffi stick.

“He has another question for you,” said Cici. “He wants to know how common lightsabers are.”

“Not very. These days, the number of people in the galaxy who use them is in the double digits. Why?” asked Ahsoka.

“He’s seen another one recently, though he didn’t realize what it could do. A blue one in the hands of someone he describes as a ‘hair-faced meddler’, ” translated Cici, and suddenly, this whole stupid trip became worth it.

“Hair-faced meddler? That has to be Obi-Wan!” Ahsoka shouted excitedly, beaming at Barriss, who was happy for her but highly aware this wasn’t a solid lead yet. He was alive. He was here on Tatooine and he was surviving. She impulsively put her arms on Qurorskra’s shoulders and felt like hugging him, she was so relieved, until a restrained roar of anger told her that was a bad move. She was so happy she’d run into this horrible, snorting warrior. “Barriss, I think this is why I was being drawn here. Okay Cici, how did they meet? Where is he?”

Cici relayed the newest information. “Qurorskra was tracking a group of other offworlders who were trespassing on his tribe’s land, some Gran by the description, and saw the lightsaber-wielder fight them before he could take them down. The lightsaber apparently never cut through them, but it deflected their blaster bolts to kill them.”

“Tell him we’re searching for the meddler, and want to take him off their planet. They don’t like settlers, so they’d approve of that, right? Where was he?” asked Ahsoka, as Cici got into a back-and-forth with the warrior, trying to get the necessary information. It was odd how long it was taking, they couldn’t just be discussing directions.

“We’ve got a problem. Your master was seen in a mountain range that’s... I don’t know the exact conversion for their unit of distance, but it’s far. The Sand People name for the place also has no translation in Basic, so I can’t be sure where exactly it was according to any of our maps. They also did not bring their own maps of the particular region he was seen in, either,” explained Cici, as Ahsoka’s excitement died away as the logistics became clear to her.

“Cici, find out what it’ll take for them to give us those maps,” said Ahsoka.

Cici explained the request, as Qurorskra listened carefully, clearly considering his options. The four other warriors noisily voiced their objections to cooperation, clustering around Qurorskra and demanding the either fight Ahsoka, or get back to their own business. Talking to an outsider to this extent was wearing on what little tolerance they had.

Ahsoka noticed that Qurorskra also had his own a krayt dragon pearl embedded in his sash up near his right shoulder, rings of muted blue fabric sown in to drawn the eye to it, so she reached into her pocket and pulled out the one Barriss had given her, holding it up so it gleamed in the sunlight. From the stunned reactions of the lesser warriors, Ahsoka having her own pearl made her deserving of a similar level of respect as their leader, and all their objections stopped immediately.

“Thanks for the present, Barriss,” said Ahsoka, grinning as she clutched the pearl. “It really did come in handy.”

“But you didn’t actually kill a krayt dragon, that pearl was for your lightsaber! I bought it in a shop!” Barriss quietly yelled.
“I fought battle droid armies, Trandoshan hunters, and Sith. It’s not like they’ll be overestimating me,” Ahsoka said.

“So, Qurorskra has a deal for you,” said Cici. “The reason he’s out here is to find out who- or what- has been draining water from one of their underground lakes. You use your skill as fellow warriors to help them deal with that, and display your ‘light-blade’ to his chief to dispel notions of evil spirits restricting their movements, and he’ll escort you safely back to his tribe and direct you to where your master is.”

“They won’t be returning home until they’ve dealt with this, so we might as well help them,” Barriss noted. “Doing so will also make them more accepting of our presence.”

“Right,” said Ahsoka, taking a step towards the group of warriors. “Tell him we have a deal.”

The journey was stalled as the Sand People insisted on stripping the dead womp rats of as much meat as could be carried. After inspecting the cave they’d emerged from, the warriors put the remains in and covered the entrance with stones. They’d come back for the useable hides, bones, and teeth later when they weren’t encumbered.

“Hey, Barriss, do you think we can put our boots back on?” Ahsoka asked after a short hike, following behind the single-file line of banthas. The terrain was really starting to irritate her, and they hadn’t hazarded to try riding their speeder, but she didn’t want to tick off the Sand People. Not when they were her best lead to Obi-Wan.

“We shouldn’t risk it,” Barriss said, clearly no happier. “Regardless, we seem to have arrived at our destination.”

At the mouth of the cave, the Sand People took the lead, checking for signs of trespassers, whether animal, alien, or rival tribesmen. Ahsoka and Barriss had their own flashlights attached to their wrists, while the warriors all lit up torches to see by, and Qurorskra stopped to explain something to the newest addition to the party.

“You are to keep the location of this place absolutely secret,” said Cici, repeating what Qurorskra said verbatim. “If you attempt to take water from this place, or imply any intention of sharing its location with the other outsiders, the agreement is null.”

Ahsoka nodded and walked alongside Qurorskra, his warriors following in behind them. She sensed they took umbrage at her proximity to their leader, but he didn’t seem to care. With Cici rolling between them and acting as a direct translator, she decided to try striking up a conversation.

“Why did you want our help? If these caverns are such a closely guarded secret, why risk that on an outsider?” she asked. It was a risk to start poking holes in his reasoning, but she couldn’t ignore how oddly willing he was to work with her and Barriss. What little she knew about his people always said they were universally hostile.

“When he learned of the water shortage and took this task upon himself, he said he had ‘a bad feeling about it’. He felt as though whatever had taken the water was no ordinary foe, so he asked a shaman for counsel. The shaman said that the land would provide for him if his faith was strong, so Qurorskra meditated, connecting to the life-giving land and praying for its aid in the coming challenge. When you arrived, with your strange weapon and dragon pearl and the spirit of a warrior,
he suspected you were that aid, that you had been guided here to help their tribe. He decided to give you a chance.”

“The spirit of a warrior?” said Ahsoka, a bit flattered. “He noticed that, huh?”

“Yes. While he wasn’t expecting an outsider, he sensed you may be the difference between life or death for his group. You exude a strength around you. He could see it when you first appeared, and your defeat of the womp rats confirmed it...” Qurorskra whispered instructions to the group, keeping his voice low, something which wasn’t easy with his language’s harsh vocalizations. Ahsoka had no idea what his species looked like under those wrappings, but their biology must produce a whole lot of phlegm. “Okay, we’re getting deeper into the cavern, he says we need to be quiet from here on,” said Cici, as Ahsoka nodded and tried to sense any hostile intent from whatever was waiting for them.

Her connection to the Force told her nothing, but her sense of hearing did. Somewhere in the distance through all these intersecting tunnels, there was a faint noise that made Ahsoka’s skin crawl. The sound of flesh dragging against stone. Down in the dark, something was slithering beneath Tatooine.

Saber in hand for the sake of readiness, Barriss’s attention was less focused on preparing for a fight than on the geology of Tatooine. This cave was a natural wonder, in contrast to the harsh environment outside.

The deeper they went along the Sand People’s path, the more water appeared. Various interconnected pools of water throughout the cave all had lowered waterlines, clearly visible in the different colorations of the stone. It was too cool here, out of the suns, for this to be simple evaporation, and many of the stalactites were dripping water. No signs of geological activity that would cause water to be lost through cracks.

“Any idea what’s in here, Cici? Or signs of what’s been taking their water?” asked Ahsoka.

“I’m not getting anything,” Cici said as her long-range scanner retracted back into her head. “The caves is too winding and has too high metal content, and the acoustics are messing with sonar. I can’t distinguish anything more than ten meters in any direction.”

The winds and sandstorms wore down everything on the surface in the space of years, but these underground regions of the planet had been formed by the much slower process of evaporating and condensing moisture. Barriss wondered if the Sand People knew of the geological significance. Dawdling as the examined the smooth, multi-colored stones and crystals, Barriss only ever moved when it seemed Ahsoka was getting too far ahead, not wanting to get separated. The Sand People warriors were fanning out, but keeping close enough to check in with each other as their language tended to carry through the tunnels.

“Hey, uh, Barriss? What do you know about sarlaccs? There’s one on this planet, right?” asked Ahsoka. “Do you have any idea how they reproduce?”

“Yes, I believe there is one on Tatooine,” answered Barriss, who was still preoccupied with the cave formations, studying magnificent streaks of blue and green across a pearly-white wall, like a natural painting. “Sarlaccs reproduce by launching spores into space to seek out livable planets, which travel
between systems over the course of millennia.”

“What are the odds of two ending up on the same planet?”

“Not bad at all. If the spores come from the same source, they may follow the same trajectory,” said Barriss. “Though they may arrive ages apart after drifting over such a distance at slightly difference speeds, and on a desert planet like Tatooine it would be a struggle for more of them to find sufficient amounts of... water...”

Barriss spun away from the cave wall and met up with Ahsoka at the entrance of a sunken chamber, cracks at the top allowing rays of sunlight to shine onto a fleshy blob at its bottom. Dozens of tendrils extended out from the central mass, spreading like plant roots, reaching into the many puddles of groundwater throughout the cavern and through cracks in the walls to other sections of it. The branching tissue flexed as the creature hoisted itself up, peeling off the ground and allowing the newcomers to see the gutted, dried carcass of the krayt dragon it had been feasting on. Flexible appendages emerged from between the creature’s many rings of teeth, stripping the pieces of meat and bone from its prey and shoveling them into its maw. It hadn’t quite grown large enough to swallow one of Tatooine’s apex predators whole.

Ahsoka winced as she and Barriss both thought about how they were going to have to fight that thing, then quietly took a few steps back to regroup with the Sand People. Things were fine until Barriss felt an odd squishing feeling and stopped. Cringing as she looked down, she saw a small tentacle poking out of a crack in the ground beneath her foot.

The eyeless creature stopped eating as its mouth, it’s only distinctive feature, turned up and towards the pair, tentacles writhing as it prepared for a fight.

The proto-sarlacc swelled as it took in air, its teeth splayed outward, and let out a shriek that shook the cavern.

“Okay, I think we’ve figured out what’s been siphoning all that water!” Ahsoka said as she and Barriss activated their sabers, shaking slightly as that shriek continued to mess with her montrals. From back in the other direction, the sarlacc’s roars were met by the battle cries of the Sand People, who were coming in with their weapons drawn, and the group began spacing themselves around the proto-sarlacc, avoiding its mouth and attacking it from all sides.

The slugthrowers and gaffi sticks were doing little. Those weapons were designed to hunt local wildlife, to break bone and crush skull. The flexible, distributed, redundant biology of the sarlacc was impervious to the weapons, the small punctures they created only bleeding for a few seconds before clotting.

Tentacles emerged out from cracks in the ground, grabbing at the attackers’ feet, trying to trip them up at they tried to surround the new sarlacc and avoid its mouth. One of the Sand People nearly got caught, only to be saved by Cici cutting the tentacle up with her buzz saw. Another of its thicker tentacle lifted up to flatten them, only for the strike to be brought down directly onto Qurorskra’s gaffi stick, the force knocking him down but driving the weapon all the way through the appendage. It became stuck, and as the tentacle pulled away Qurorskra was left unarmed.

Another of the creature’s tentacles reached out and grabbed the nearest warrior’s leg, unaffected by the beating it took from his gaffi stick as it pulled him to the ground and dragged him towards its waiting mouth.

The warrior grasped at the ground, trying to get some kind of hold and avoid getting pulled in and
devoured. Barriss sliced through the tentacle to free him, then had to pull him back as the proto-
sarlacc’s beaked tongue emerged from within its mouth and tried to bite them only to get stabbed
with a lightsaber.

That did little to deter the monster as its tentacles pulled its lumbering mass towards Barriss, who
retreated into a hole in the cave wall along with the warrior she’d saved. The sarlacc’s mouth was
just slightly bigger than the opening, but it was flexible, and trying to force its way in to swallow the
trapped prey.

With its ‘neck’ extending to try and get the pair, Ahsoka ran towards it, and with a few swings of her
saber, the sarlacc’s fanged mouth fell to the cave floor, its body rearing back with agony.

A moment taken to admire the feat nearly cost Ahsoka her life as the wounded creature smacked her
with one of its bigger tentacles, sending her across the room and landing less than a meter from a
cluster of stalagmites. If the sarlacc had any kind of centralized brain, she hadn’t hit it. Getting to her
feet, Ahsoka looked and saw the creature continuing to crawl towards her, blood oozing from the
spot where its mouth used to connect to. Tentacles writhed around the opening, intent on pulling
Ahsoka into its stomach even if it didn’t have any teeth lefts. It needed biomass to regrow the ones
she’d cost it.

Ahsoka leapt through the tentacles and onto the top of the creature, then plunged her saber into it as
the creature thrashed and shrieked at the pain of its insides being burned, while she got solid enough
footing to move her saber in a line and leave a meter-deep cut all along its back. With a cut in its skin
extending half the length of its body, plus all the other wounds and punctures it had suffered,
something in the sarlacc’s body ruptured. Its skin cracked and broke, hundreds of liters of alien blood
draining out onto the cave floor. Some of its stomachs and intestines followed.

Undigested meat and bone spilled out of the sarlacc’s insides, and the tendrils grasping at the
attackers collapsed onto the hard ground.

The Sand People didn’t call it quits merely at the ‘water-thief’s’ death, taking time to thoroughly
remove every tendril and leaving them to slowly dry out in the cave air without draining into their
drinking water, letting the moisture recondense into the underground sanctuary. The young sarlacc’s
body was stripped of all its teeth, which the warriors intended to bring to their settlement for use as
tools, along with whatever usable bones could be found in its guts.

Qurorskra approached Ahsoka and Barriss, bowing his head and offering two of the sarlacc’s long,
curved teeth to them, then returned to assist his fellows.

“You can have mine, if you like,” Barriss said, handing over the slightly-damp trophy while the Sand
People weren’t looking.

The sarlacc teeth were rather beautiful, looking a polished white, their curves fitting easily into
Ahsoka’s hands. They were also quite light, and she suspected they were strong for a biological
substance. Hard to believe something so elegant came out of something so horrifying. Maybe
Tatooine wasn’t all bad. After all, Anakin had come out of this place. So, she’d hang on to these.

With their water supply now once again secured, the warriors prepared to head back home, loading
their banthas with water, along with the unexpectedly helpful outsiders, per the agreement.
Unfortunately, Revan’s description of the Sand People’s odd loathing of repulsor technology proved accurate. Despite what they’d done, Qurorskra absolutely refused to allow them to ride alongside them on their speeder, demanding Ahsoka, Barriss, and Cici each take a seat on a bantha. The best compromise they could manage was to set the bike in its neutral hover mode and have one of the banthas pull it along so they could leave the settlement with it when it came time.

The caravan trudged out of the canyon at a slow pace, beginning the journey back to the Sand People village. They knew where Obi-Wan was, so Ahsoka was willing to put up with the five-hour long trip back to the settlement, which wouldn’t have taken one with the speeder, even though it was really taxing her patience. At the front of the single-file line of banthas, Ahsoka watched the suns setting.

*Just a little bit longer.*
After leaving their speeder parked outside the perimeter of the Sand People village, as the locals refused to allow the blasphemous machine any nearer to their homes, the small group of outsiders cautiously entered the camp with their escort.

The quartet of lesser warriors kept close around Ahsoka, Barriss, and Cici as Qurorskra led them through the village, making it very clear that they were there under special circumstances and weren’t hostile. All manner of masked and bandaged heads turned their direction. Warriors stopped sharpening their gaffi sticks, banthas bellowed complaints that they weren’t getting tossed more treats by their distracted riders, groups of playing children stopped in their tracks to see what was probably their first sighting of someone outside their species.

The chieftain’s room was as sparse and utilitarian as everything else, no luxuries or dead weight beyond some trinkets and hunting trophies. There wasn’t even any kind of chair for the village’s leader to sit down on, just a ring of flat, identical, portable cushions. Qurorskra and his warriors all bowed to the chieftain, Ahsoka and Barriss doing the same though they were probably messing something up with the exact pose. The chieftain, adorned in dull brown robes and flanked by a pair of guards, beckoned Qurorskra forward, and the latter sat down beside his superior.

“Cici, what are they saying?” Ahsoka whispered to the astromech, who was luckily only a matter of centimeters from her head and could speak without drawing attention.

“Our guide is recapping the whole situation. Blah blah prayer blah blah great warrior blah blah the land has been cleansed, now he is honor-bound to uphold his side agreement,” explained Cici. The chieftain let out a gravelly rumbling that sounded like a long sigh, then spoke for the first time, the two of them continuing to talk. “There’s some internal power structure stuff going on. It sounds like Qurorskra’s a strong candidate to be the next chief, and he’s jeopardized his standing by bringing an outsider here. He’s defending his actions as being guided by the will of their land, and he brings ‘truth’. Ahsoka, I think he wants you to go over there.”

Noticing Qurorskra was waving for her to come closer, Ahsoka stood up and approached, receiving what sounded like a lukewarm but nonthreatening greeting from the chieftain. Cici rolled in front of her, barking a short phrase at the chieftain, probably letting him know she would be translating. Even with all expression obscured by those bandages and metal coverings, the chieftain’s slow, silent, unimpressed head turn towards Qurorskra made it clear that bringing this foreign technology into their enclave was not easing his concerns. The younger warrior sat stiffly, focusing on Ahsoka and trying desperately not to look directly at the disappointed chief. With a sharpness in his voice that sounded a bit desperate, Qurorskra said something to Ahsoka.

“He wants you to pull out that krayt dragon pearl of yours,” said Cici.

As she reached into her pocket for the requested item, Ahsoka asked, “I thought he was more interested in my lightsaber?”
“I think he’s just trying to butter up the old guy at the moment and convince him his time isn’t being wasted.”

Ahsoka pulled out the pearl, presenting it to the chieftain, who took and inspected it closely. With a grunt of begrudging approval, he handed it back. A now-relieved Qurorskra waved to one of the warriors, who approached, bowed, and offered the sack containing dozens of sarlacc teeth, an excellent haul and physical proof of the kind of monster they’d faced. Nodding, his mood improved considerably, the chieftain studied one of the teeth, admiring their strength and sharpness before handing it back. Ahsoka sensed a surge of relief from Qurorskra now that he’d worked himself back up from his potential loss of status, and the elite warrior launched into a long discussion.

“He’s reemphasizing that their mission to secure their water source was a success because everybody there, including you, are a bunch of badasses... Now he’s going into the stuff with that tribe that got wiped out,” said Cici. “Saying it was nothing more than an outsider with an exotic weapon who killed them. Says there’s no need for them to avoid seizing extinct tribe’s lands, and they can search for their oases and wells without risking the wrath of spirits or the other tribes.”

“Seizing land?” asked Ahsoka, who was realizing she hadn’t really asked why that area was so interesting, she’d been willing to agree to anything that would get her the information she needed.

“Yeah, there’s some kind of geopolitical and resource stuff going on here. Them and all the other tribes consider that place taboo, so they don’t salvage anything from it. Offering assurances that they can absorb that territory without spiritual repercussions is a pretty big boost to Qurorskra’s standing, he’s not just trying to dispel superstitions,” Cici said as the chieftain growled another sentence. “He wants to see your lightsaber.”

Slowly so as to avoid provoking the Sand People, Ahsoka pulled out her saber and ignited it, bathing the camp in green light. Qurorskra took a sarlacc tooth from one of his pouches and held it out, and understanding the intent, she effortlessly cut through it. The surprised chieftain studied the smoking, broken tooth, unnerved by the power of the lightsaber. Then he rumbled as he thought about the situation, then stood up and headed out of his tent, the whole group following.

“What did he say?” asked Ahsoka.

“He said you’re to be provided the guidance you seek, and may stay here for the night,” said Cici.

“Tell him thank you,” Ahsoka said, turning to smile at Barriss, who’d been keeping quiet this whole time.

With a bow, Qurorskra said one last thing to the chief, who replied positively after a moment’s consideration.

“Hold on, there’s something else,” said Cici. “In recognition of your might, you’re also to be told the history of the Sand People.”

“Why are we doing this, exactly?” Ahsoka as Qurorskra and several other Sand People warriors gathered around the fire, the tribe ‘storyteller’ standing before them to recite their history. “We only came here to get directions.”

“I asked them about that, and they said it’s almost night and you don’t want to be out there with the
nocturnal predators,” explained Cici. “You think the womp rats were bad, if we leave now the wildlife will get increasingly hostile the closer to the mountain range we’ll be traveling to.”

“It’s also a sign they respect you enough to learn about their people,” Barriss said diplomatically. “I’ve read transcripts of their history, but being told it in person is a rare opportunity. Do you really want to offend them now?”

“They’re the Sand People. How interesting could it be?” Ahsoka said as she sat down on the mat provided for her, the storyteller facing them despite so many other warriors being present. Even though Ahsoka still didn’t feel they were completely welcome, the guy clearly knew who the first-timers were and was putting in the effort to make an impression.

Barriss was rather excited despite everything. This was an incredible chance to directly learn the history of another culture, one not many people heard. She knew from some studies of primitive cultures in the galaxy that the Sand People history was only recorded and recited orally, that they believed recording it elsewhere ‘cheapened’ the value. Records of who originally learned their history and repeated it to other offworlders in violation of this policy became lost to time. Perhaps the Sand People had a point about the effectiveness of their method.

“It begins with the ancient times,” Cici began, speaking between pauses in the storyteller’s recitation. “They were not Sand People, for there was no sand. The land was green with life, and they walked without wrappings. Though the land was beautiful, they lived apart from the land. They built their walls high, and saw beyond the horizon. They dared to reach to the stars. There are no words for how long ago this was. It was before the outsiders, before the abduction, before the cities fell. Before the Builders.”

“The arrogant people touched the stars, and this sin drew the attention of the Builders. The Builders did not touch the stars; they lashed them to millstones. Great demons of metal stripped the world of its riches, until all that was left was the green of the ground. The great cities were lifted away. Those that had used the wealth were taken along with it; transgressors abducted to serve past the sky, seeding the stars with penitent, adaptable slaves.”

“There came a time when the Builders were also judged for their crimes. After generations, a plague weakened them, and the time of the great war began. The Builders faltered, and his people realized why they had been punished: so that they understood the crime, and would now strike down the greater offender. They worked chaos in the machines so they destroyed themselves. The Builders fought back, laying waste to the green that had been misused with fire from above. Soil became glass, grinding to sand, but the fight was long-planned, and his people were safe. Deep in cave-homes carved from valley wall, they were free...”

For hours, Ahsoka and Barriss listened patiently to the tale of the Sand Peoples’ history. Barriss was alert and attentive despite the history devolving from a tragic tale of enslavement and oppression in the early history of galactic civilization to various territorial disagreements and arguments over who had the biggest bantha. It was late in the night now, too, and if they really couldn’t leave until the morning, Ahsoka would rather be getting some sleep right now.

Unlike Ahsoka, Barriss didn’t mind the duration of the history in the slightest, finding the rare opportunity to learn about another culture firsthand incredibly fascinating.

“Then came the Stealer of History,” Cici translated. “After the machines fell from the sky once again, the noble warriors of the past battled the corruption and disrespect of the land wherever they found it. Many trespassers perished in the battle. But there was one outsider, cunning and clever and duplicitous, who succeeded in earning the trust of one tribe. The Stealer of History deceived the honorable chieftain, convincing him that it was a warrior worthy of hearing the history, but little did
the chieftain or the ancient storyteller realize, the thief intended to repeat the words in error. Now the history is known to many defilers, recorded even by the machines the righteous reject, cheapening its value and corrupting its truth.”

“Revan?” asked Barriss, noticing the holocron’s oddly fluctuating color in her pocket. “Revan, are you all right?”

THE DUNE SEA, 3937 YEARS AGO

“So, have you got the whole history recorded, HK?” asked the human whom history would remember as Revan, who was feeling unexpectedly satisfied by this whole ordeal. Sure, getting the Sand People to recite their history had required killing a krayt dragon to impress them as a warrior, but Revan was going to blow that thing up with land mines anyway, so it worked out in the end for everybody.

Except for the krayt dragon.

And the Sand People killed by Revan in order to get this far by stealing their robes as a disguise, which several hours ago had been revealed to be even worse a defilement of the dead in their culture than in most others.

Also there was the pack of those ‘wraid’ things that got killed on the way here for the unforgivable crime of being in Revan’s line of sight.

“Confirmation: Yes, master. Every detail of that truly engrossing recitation has been stored in my memory core,” the tall, dull red assassin droid replied with a decidedly uninterested tone. “Opinion: The ancient history of these desiccated meatbags appears of little value to me, master. But if you truly wish for me to waste my precious uncorrupted memory space on the wanderings of superstitious primitives through a barren desert, I shall comply.”

Unlike HK, Revan hadn’t minded the duration of the history in the slightest, finding the rare opportunity to learn about another culture firsthand incredibly fascinating.

Despite all the problems the language barrier had caused, Revan felt thankful for it, otherwise the Sand People would understand what their not-altogether-welcome guests were doing and attack them over the sacrilege they were brazenly committing. Also, despite the frustration at finally encountering a language too alien to pick up as easily as all the others, Revan wasn’t too keen on trying to speak to the Sand People personally.

Their language sounded like a congested rancor having rough sex with a trumpet.

“Fan-tastic,” said Revan, ignoring HK’s frustration, then noticing a certain young Twi’lek’s absence. “Hey, where’d Mission go?”

That girl was astonishingly quiet to be able to slip away unnoticed like that, especially around a Force-sensitive. On a floor of sand, no less. Revan wondered what she might be getting up to, then became worried that she’d unwittingly start an incident with the Sand People and have no backup to protect her. Carth would not be happy if Revan brought her back the Ebon Hawk with a gaffi stick lodged in her stomach. Then again, it would be an excuse to use up some spare medpacks. Ever since Revan had learned Force healing techniques, there was no need to use them and they were just
The Sand People had better hope Mission didn’t provoke them, because Revan would slaughter their warriors without a second thought if they hurt her.

“Answer: The miniature blue meatbag mentioned to me she intended to explore the compound to discover wherever they are holding her sibling meatbag. Apparently she found this little cultural exchange as interesting as I did. Desperate hope: Perhaps the primitives will not be so willing to give up their prisoners without a fight,” said HK-47, eagerly brandishing his blaster. “Envy: I would have gladly assisted her, in the interest of finding a reason to engage in violence of course, had my skills not been required in translating this waste of processing power.”

“I want to go over the history again later, okay?” Revan said sternly, quietly leaving the tribe storyteller’s presence to find Mission, eyeing the various baskets and resisting the temptation to rummage through them. “If your translation is accurate, the Sand People have definitely had contact with the ‘Builders’ who created the Star Forge before the formation of the Republic. Some detail in there might be important, even if I’m a bit doubtful of how accurate an oral history that old could still be.”

“Mollification: If you say so, master.”

“Knowing more about their culture might help to build a lasting peace with these people. We also can’t expect everyone who wants to understand and communicate with the Sand People to kill a krayt dragon just to get details about their culture. The context the history provides could help everyone, and it’s not like we’re going to come back here. What’s the worst that could happen?” said Revan, putting the potential consequences out of mind in favor of finding Mission and her brother. “Now, where is that girl?”

Seriously? the holocron thought, baffled by the sheer implausibility of this latest instance of history coming back to remind the former Sith Lord of past wrongs, and irritated by how this offense had earned the hatred of the entire Sand People culture despite all the effort made to make peace.

Whoops and roars filled the air as the Sand People warriors uttered their curses unto the Stealer of History, wishing the vile creature the despair it deserved for betraying their trust, hoping it suffered endlessly in whatever miserable corner of the desert it had eventually found itself in.

Oh, fuck all y’all.

I coughed up thousands of credits for the supplies, lugger moisture vaporators across half the desert, lured a krayt dragon into a mine field and cut open its gullet to get those pearls, spent hours standing in a single spot with no breaks listening to your history, forgave the NUMEROUS occasions you shot me and hit me with sticks, all to find a way to coexist.

I don’t deserve this kind of treatment!

From the Sand People, at least. There are plenty of other people from whom this would be completely warranted. Just not the Sand People.

Well, I guess I can’t question the accuracy of their oral histories anymore...
The storyteller brought his recitation to its conclusion, and the accompanying warriors settled down.

“The tribes spread far, distant from each other, but all as Sand People, and all cherished the land that remained. The sand would not be misused. Then, machines fell from the stars again. Outsiders, like you, that brazenly walked apart from the land. And greater still was the insult to come. These outsiders reminded them of their past transgressions, of the time when they too walked apart from land. The outsiders - your kind - look like their ancient abducted. So it is to the current suns, that the Sand People hate all outsiders and give them no footing. You come again, time after time, adaptable slaves to the machine... And that concludes the meatbag history,” Cici said, much to Ahsoka’s relief. She kept a straight face as the storyteller left to do whatever it was he normally did, but she was glad this was over and wanted to finally get some sleep. First thing tomorrow, they were moving on. Barriss didn’t seem tired at all, the last five hours not boring her in the least.

After a quick trip back to their speeder to get their bed rolls and leave Cici to keep her eye on it, Ahsoka and Barriss settled down for the night in their accommodations, which consisted of a small, roofless, fenced-in area at the edge of the village. It looked like some kind of storage room for bits of salvage the Sand People wouldn’t care about abandoning in it came down to it, but were hanging onto just in case they proved useful.

After such a long day, and the history lesson stretching late into the night, Ahsoka was asleep and drooling onto her bedroll almost instantly, while Barriss was lying next to her, restlessly staring up at the stars.

With the additional resources offered by the new territory, stepping in to destroy the proto-sarlacc had significantly altered the balance of power in the region. Then there were the sarlacc’s fangs. Not much of an issue by the standards of the wider galaxy, but judging from the chief’s reaction, that many durable, sharp objects represented a significant booth to their tribes armaments.

Moral quandary of the day: had they done the right thing here?

Had they not gotten involved, the warriors likely wouldn’t have been able to kill the sarlacc, definitely not without casualties. It they didn’t, it would’ve continued to drain their water supply and forced them to relocate or die out, and there would be another sarlacc around to devour the local animals.

They had helped, and now some of those lovely sarlacc teeth were eventually going to wind up cutting open the stomach of some hapless moisture farmer. It didn’t feel great to think about.

Still, Qurorskra’s tribe seemed noticeably less hostile than expected, and had even scorned the other tribes for their barbarity. Even if relations with settlers remained tense, giving them more power was an improvement over the current situation.

As Barriss proved unable to sleep, and since they had been left in what was more-or-less a room for junk at the edge of the village, she got up, stretched her legs, and leapt over the wall to get some privacy. Seated in the sand, her back to the village, she pulled out the holocron.

“Ah, Tatooine. It’s been a long time. At least this time I don’t have to worry about heatstroke,” remarked the holocron. “Why does the whole galaxy seem to revolve around this dustball?”

“It’s at the intersection of many of the Outer Rim’s hyperspace lanes,” said Barriss. “It seems all
kinds of creatures and items of interest arrive here, one way or another.”

“So we saw. What did you say that thing in the cave was? A sarlacc?” asked Revan.

“Yes. There’s another, rather infamous one here on Tatooine. You never heard of it?” she asked.

“I don’t think it was here when I was.”

“Sarlaccs live for tens of thousands of years, it must have been alive and established already.”

“Maybe, but it wasn’t discovered by outsiders. Trust me, if there was a gigantic, fanged orifice somewhere out in the desert, I would’ve been all over that. I’d’ve brought tons of stuff to chuck into it,” said Revan. “Explosives. Sewage. The rotting corpse of the albino kath hound. Canderous. He probably would’ve jumped in just to see what’d happen, and I’m curious as to how long Mandalorian armor can withstand that stomach acid.”

“Hm. Revan, do you believe this world was green once, like the Sand People claim?” asked Barriss.

“Almost certainly. I believe their claim about once being a spacefaring civilization, and the ecosystem as it is now couldn’t support the population necessary to reach that point,” said Revan. “Although, it’s also possible their species didn’t originate here, that they’re the descendants of Rakatan slaves from another planet entirely.”

“Do you think this world could be rehabilitated?” asked Barriss.

“It could be, but good luck getting anyone in power to care and commit resources to it,” Revan said.

Looking up at the night sky, with two of Tatooine’s moons shining brightly, Barriss thought about what it would take to recover this planet’s ecosystem. Those moons were too small to support an atmosphere, but if there were regions of frozen water which could be extracted and launched at the desert planet, life for everyone on Tatooine could be made much easier.

Barriss lost track of time as she stared at the stars, unobscurred by the scattering light of cities. She considered whether there were any she could identify, but realized she didn’t have the necessary astronomical knowledge. It wasn’t even clear if Tatooine was facing towards the galactic core at the moment.

“Barriss, there’s something I want to ask you,” said Revan. “Why were you so eager to have me helping you?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You know plenty about my chequered past. You hate violence, and staunchly upheld Jedi ideals for a long time, but you were downright giddy when we met. Why were you a fan of mine?”

Barriss looked away from the stars and down at the sand, idly pushing at it around with her feet. “I thought you could help me. That if anyone could do so many wonderful and horrible things, and provide the guidance I needed, you could,” she said, growing slightly more cheerful as she thought about it. “It turns out I was correct. You exceeded expectations in some respects.”

“Such as how obnoxious I could be? I think I established a good baseline back then.”

“Who would you rather get help from?” asked Barriss. “Someone well-intentioned but whose advice ranged from ‘useless’ to ‘made the situation worse’, or someone hypercompetent, dedicated to helping you, and who may have done some horrendous things in the past and acts a bit odd?”
“You don’t know the half of it,” Revan said, voice devoid of any humor. “Barriss, there’s something I did a long time ago that I think you deserve to know about. It’s... not good, but I want to let you know.”

Barriss stared at the oddly quiet holocron for a minute, pondering what she’d heard from the storyteller. “If you’re referring to your infamy as the Stealer of History, I already suspected as much.”

“No, not that. It’s something more relevant to the state of the galaxy.”

“What are you talking about, Revan?” Barriss said, staring at the holocron on her hand and wondering what Revan could be referring to.

“It’s my fault,” said Revan. “The rise of the Sith, the fall of the Jedi. I should never have talked to him, never should have encouraged those ideas of his.”

“How is it your fault?” asked Barriss, her voice growing uneasy. “Who did you talk to?”

“My first attempt at teaching, a thousand years ago on Dantooine. Inspiring the creator of the Rule of Two. The man who would become Darth Bane.”

Chapter End Notes

This was probably the most subtly foreshadowed bit so far, but it's been the intention ever since Revan first appeared.

The Sand People's history is copied directly from how it was presented in Knights of the Old Republic, and that game made them one of the most interesting species in the franchise. There cultural stagnation is adamantly self-enforced out of a belief that any change will bring devastation to them as they're already struggling to survive, and they hate settlers on their planet because their use of local resources makes their struggle even harder. Unlike some sources that treat them as barely sapient, they once had the technology to form an interstellar civilization of their own that predated the Republic, making them one of the few species in Star Wars stated to have developed faster-than-light travel completely independently. Then their planet got glassed by the Rakata, which failed to wipe them out, and they adapted to the new environment. They're organized, intelligent, and tough as nails.

Here's a detail of my writing process: every time I notice some flaw in the writing, I hear the Cinemasins Guy's voice in my brain until I fix it.

Original text: TATOOINE’S DUNE SEA, 3937 YEARS AGO
Cinemasins Guy: Not to be confused with the Dune Sea on Mon Calamari. *ping*
Me: SHUT THE HELL UP!
DANTOOINE, ONE MILLENIUM AGO

“The Sith on this world are all rallied under my control. I have journeyed far and grown powerful in the Force through the deaths of Jedi. I will embrace the full, limitless power of the dark side! To reach new heights of power, I demand your knowledge! You will find no worthier student!” proclaimed the young Sith, adorned in ornate black armor, face covered by a mask with glowing yellow eyes, breath hissing between the slits in the metal over his mouth.

“All I asked was your name!” yelled the holocron. “And you didn’t even tell me!”

This is going to be my whole week, isn’t it? thought Revan.

I’ve spent three thousand years alone in a cave doing absolutely nothing of relevance, yet somehow THIS seems like a bigger waste of my time.

“Forgive me. I am Bane,” the young man said, bowing his helmeted head to the holocron.

“And whadya you want from me, Bane?”

“As I said, I seek your knowledge. You were once the greatest of the Sith, and your power must be passed on, rather than lost in a cave on a farming world amongst the ruins of the Jedi,” said Bane.

“I was also once a Jedi. Do you remember that? Or do you like to pick and choose your history?”

“I do,” Bane replied calmly, very sure of himself. “I’m quite familiar with the events surrounding your rise and fall. I’m not convinced you’re as reformed as the Jedi version of events likes to present. Despite being touted as proof of their path’s superiority, you were never truly one of them ever again. Am I correct? Do you, Darth Revan, truly hold no contempt for the useless and decadent authorities who shackled your mind?”

“...Huh. Observant, incisive, and cocky as anything,” Revan said with mild intrigue, hologram orbiting around Bane. “Okay, you’ve proven yourself just barely interesting enough to be worth my attention. Why are you on Dantooine?”

“This world was once a refuge of the Jedi, and many kyber crystals reside here. Now, I intend to claim them for the Sith and use their power against my enemies,” said Bane. “You are a find of far greater value, and I seek your counsel.”

“You want advice, let’s start with this: don’t waste my time with longwinded spiel. The fact I have a potentially unlimited amount of it doesn’t mean I don’t care about using it efficiently. And take that stupid mask off,” said Revan.

“You wear a mask as well,” Bane objected.

“My mask is a symbol of my commitment to action. Yours is an ill-advised fashion statement you wear because you think it makes you look intimidating.”

With some hesitation and embarrassment, the young Sith took the holocron’s advice and took off his helmet, revealing a pale human in his twenties, his head shaved, black markings encircling his eyes.
“Huh. Better look than I’d expected. Not many people really pull off the shaved head look,” Revan said approvingly. “Alright, it’s not as if I have anything better to do. You want my advice and guidance, sure. Show me what you can do, Bane.”

Not long afterwards, a simple remote topped off with a wide plate carried the holocron alongside Bane as he walked, guiding Revan out to the surface where several bulk freighters sat in the expansive plains of Dantooine. Landspeeders of various classes shuffled to and from the freighters offloading what had been carefully dug up out of the caves. For several weeks, the slaves and droids toiled digging up kyber crystals to ship off to help the distant Sith war machine to bring down the Republic and the Jedi.

During that time, in utter futility, Revan tried to teach Bane.

This guy was the fucking worst. All he ever did was act like a whiny brat who thought being able to wield the Force meant he could do whatever he wanted. It wasn’t like there were long-term consequences, wasn’t like the things he did were pointlessly cruel and undermined morale, wasn’t like treating all your subordinates like expendable tools was counterproductive and made them resentful, no, keep Force-choking people, that’ll solve all your problems. Bane maintained a stoic demeanor, acting so above it all even though he operated things like an idiot.

One day, a container of the volatile kyber crystals exploding, severely damaging one of the freighter. The explosion left the freighter unable to take off until it was repaired, and the cost was enough that Bane decided to personally investigate the state of things. Sorting out who was doing what at the time, the list of people responsible was narrowed down to a single slave and her overseer.

“What happened?” asked Bane. He’d made a habit of issuing punishments in public, and in doing so didn’t mind the many other Sith personnel and enslaved workers to slow their work to observe what he did to these two.

“This slave destroyed the container,” the overseer said. “I believe that based on her being a native to the Republic, she deliberately did poor work to impair our crystal supply.”

It was quite plain to Revan that the overseer wasn’t telling the whole truth. Maybe the slave was partly responsible, but it definitely wasn’t entirely her fault. She was just an adolescent, didn’t and she was being made to work offloading hazardous cargo, apparently.

From what Revan could see of her jittering movements, it looked like some of the electrical ‘motivational tools’ the Sith used to get their slaves to work was causing her nerve damage, and was making her accident-prone. As she shifted uncomfortable, Revan could see electrical burns on her arms. Or she was also so scared she couldn’t hold her hands steady, and now all she could do was look pleadingly between her masters.

What was even the point of developing droids if everyone just enslaves flawed meatbags to do the work anyway?

There are literally combat droids over there guarding the exits. I can see them. Make THEM load up the explosive crystals! I CAN’T BE THE ONLY PERSON IN THE GALAXY WHO THINKS ABOUT THIS!

“Please, my lord, have mercy, I didn’t mean to damage your vessel,” the slave pleaded to Bane.

“Those who ask for mercy are too weak to deserve it,” Bane said as he reached for his saber, and the overseer relaxed noticeably as he found himself out of harm’s way, content to watch the slave take the blame.
“Please, have mercy on her,” said Revan.

“...What?” hissed Bane, confused and annoyed by the interruption. The slaves looked equally stunned, and perplexed as to what the holocron was and what it was doing. Revan’s avatar appeared between Bane and the slave, groveling in an even more pathetic, prostrating position than she was in, hands clasped together and shaking with mock fear.

“You told me I was the greatest Sith. You also said those who request mercy don’t deserve it. So, I’m requesting the mercy on her behalf,” Revan said, rising back into a solid stance, arms crossed, standing between Bane and the slave. “You were either wrong about your stance towards offering mercy, or wrong about your judgement of me, but which one? Tell me. Tell everybody how wrong you were. Oh, and keep in mind that if you say I wasn’t really that powerful, it doesn’t change that I outflanked you just now, so then what would that make you?”

The whole environment became completely silent, as for a moment, everyone who could hear what was happening stood still. A few slaves were smart enough and at the right distance to slip away rather than risk being in close proximity to Bane.

“You are indeed a clever one,” Bane said, quietly fuming, his grip on the holocron tightening, not that it would do anything against that hardened exterior.

“And you didn’t answer the question. You’re trying to appeal to my ego so you don’t have to. You failed,” Revan said mockingly, watching Bane’s amused smile falter for a second. Apparently the holocron had hit a nerve. Perfect. “Tick tick tick, Bane, you had two options for publicly admitting your fallibility over what are really trivial matters, then showed how easily flustered and evasive you get when faced with a simple question. No taking that back. Wait too much longer, you’ll add ‘indecisiveness’ to the list of flaws everyone you claim superiority over knows you have. Show some magnanimity, this girl is clearly suffering from some issue with her nerves, how about instead of killing a potentially useful slave, you get her medical treatment so this doesn’t happen again, huh?”

*Why did I ever think this was the winning side?* Revan thought, considering the current state of the Sith Empire. *Oh, right, because I was the one leading it.*

*At least the Jedi seem to be giving them a good ass-kicking this time around. Again, I’m not in charge anymore.*

“You would ask me to waste my strength protecting the weak?” asked Bane.

“Is your strength in such short supply you don’t have any to spare?” countered Revan, as Bane grimaced and shot a hateful look at the cowering slave.

“There is wisdom in your words,” Bane admitted after a moment. With an angry grunt, Bane called to one of the medical officers and demanded, “See to her injuries and get her back to work immediately.”

After everyone rushed back to work now that the show was over, Bane walked away to his chambers with the holocron in tow, returning to his chambers to ruminate on what had happened.

“Why do you hate your own servants so much?” asked Revan.

“There’s no hatred in my actions. I’ve found my methods effective in ensuring their compliance. They’re inferior to me, and I can treat them as I wish,” said Bane. “It’s a shame you rejected control of the Star Forge. The dregs of the galaxy would have been fortunate to have you rule over them.”

“No, they wouldn’t. The galaxy, the Force, life, it shouldn’t be controlled by any single person. I
wanted to make things the way they should be so badly I only made everything worse trying to make it a reality. I wanted a unified galaxy, a unified understanding of the Force. The more you tighten your grip, the more planets will slip through your fingers. You can’t hold on to it all, and you definitely can’t beat it into obedience,” objected Revan. “Someone like you isn’t good enough, and never will be.”

For another week, Revan continued to torment Bane, who absolutely refused to admit listening to Revan was a bad fit for him, instead choosing to grit his teeth and endure.

“How... HOW did someone like YOU become Lord of the Sith? Defeat the Mandalorians? Bring the Jedi to their knees? All you do is try to irritate me, and create these damned holographic vermin!” Bane yelled, on the verge of completely snapping, resigned to the fact that he couldn’t use the Force to dispose of the dozens of holographic gizka Revan was projecting. The illusive amphibians continued to hop and coo incessantly around Bane, affectionately licking the enormous, black-clad Sith with their long tongues.

“Don’t you talk that way about my children,” Revan said while protectively cradling a gizka.

“Would you cease these games! Why do you bother to act as though your holograms are real? Your displays of sympathy for the frail are bothersome enough, now you show attachment for creatures which aren’t even alive!” Bane yelled. “They only act as a distraction!”

“Ha! Finally decided to point that out, huh?” Revan said as the gizka all vanished. “Took you long enough. Fine, no more holographic props.”

“How can someone with your accomplishments as a brilliant strategist and innovator be so obnoxiously childish?” asked Bane, who’d taken a deep breath now that he couldn’t hear the gizka noises like he had for the past three days.

“I’ve never been limited by false dichotomies and binaries,” said Revan, as the chime to Bane’s meditation room ringed.

“Enter!” Bane said as one of his subordinates approached them, a typical snobbish Sith officer. The expression on his face made it clear he was not bearing good news, and seeing Bane’s angered state was not encouraging him to come any closer than he had to. “What is it?”

“Master, the latest skirmish on Ruusan was lost. We’ve received a missive from Lord Kaan, summoning all available forces to assist in the counterattack,” he said, unsure of how to process the most recent loss in their war against the Republic and the Jedi.

“I see,” Bane said quietly. Revan didn’t have enough information to fully grasp the state of the war Bane was in, and had never heard of any planet called Ruusan, but there was enough information to extrapolate the consequences. This ‘Kaan’ guy was the current leader of the Sith, if he was calling everyone to one place, Bane had no choice but to obey.

“In that case, prepare our ships for departure, and execute the protocols I devised to conceal our activities here,” said Bane.

Gathering all their forces to recover from the latest defeat, even those occupied with other projects related to the war effort. The short-term prospects are bad enough that Bane’s mining of kyber crystals is less important than winning the next battle, Revan thought, studying the two.

Oh, they’re not saying it, but whatever’s happening on Ruusan will make or break them.

“What of the chamber with the Rakatan artifacts?” asked the officer.
“We can’t waste time recovering them all. Place the juvenile terentatek we have there to guard it for our return, then seal it in with some of the slaves. We wouldn’t want it’s growth to be stunted,” said Bane, as the officer went off to see to his assigned tasks, relieved to have gotten away from his superior with life and limb.

Taking some time to himself as his people prepared his fleet for departure, Bane walked with the holocron back into the caves of Dantooine, finding the darkness conducive to thought. Brutal as he was, Dantooine had been his home for some time and he seemed to find something relaxing about these caves.

“This is quite an opportunity, is it not?” he asked. “With our power structure as precarious as it is, and Lord Kaan fighting on the front lines, I could soon become the new leader of the Sith.”

“You think you’re worthy of that title?” asked Revan, careful not to sound condescending for once. The question was a genuine one.

“I believe so. With no others of greater skill, I have the chance and the drive to do so.”

“Okay, then what? Conquer the Republic? With your diminished, demotivated forces?”

“Eventually.”

“Why? Why do you even want it? What would you even do with it? You have ambition, but no goals.”

“No goals? I offered myself to receive your teachings to learn how to become powerful like you were!” yelled Bane.

“You’re not interested in learning a damn thing! ALL YOU EXPECT FROM ME IS TO BE TOLD WHAT YOU WANT TO HEAR!” Revan yelled louder.

“There are some things which I am certain of! The weak should be removed, to make the whole stronger,” said Bane.

“Removal of weakness isn’t the cultivation of strength,” said Revan. “If you’re not satisfied with your upper body strength, sure, you could cut your arms off, but your problems will start multiplying rapidly. It’s how the Jedi will defeat you. How they’ve already defeated you. You won’t say it outright, but you don’t think Kaan can defeat the Jedi at Ruusan, do you?”

“We were not defeated by the Jedi! We were defeated by ourselves!” roared Bane. “More Sith clamored for power at the cost of our empire! So many losses occurred due to internal betrayals, making it easier for our enemies to gain victories.”

“Hm. Well, then, the solution seems rather obvious to me,” said Revan, voice steady to really sell this terrible, stupid idea. “If more Sith leads to more infighting, the logical solution would be to have as few Sith as possible, don’t you think?”

Bane’s eyes widened slightly, surprised at what Revan had said. Not because it was a new idea, but one he was already familiar with.

“Always two. A master an and apprentice. One to embody power, another to crave it,” Bane whispered. “I’ve wondered about this possibility before. The Rule of Two.”

“Well, it seems recent events have proven you right,” said Revan. “And the gathering of Sith on Ruusan will give you the opportunity to take your place as the lone Sith Lord.” You moron.
“But what of the Jedi and our other enemies? If we are so few in number, we will be vulnerable…”

“Can’t do worse than you are now, and if you hesitate, the opportunity will be lost,” Revan said, deflecting and careful not to acknowledge the validity of Bane’s concerns. “Once you’ve got the new system—your new system in place, what will you do?”

“I want to create something better than what came before,” Bane said. “A Sith Order which can only become stronger, rather than rotting from within.”

Watching Bane declare his intentions, something about Revan’s attempt at manipulation felt wrong, somehow. This young man was so determined to become the strongest Sith ever, and Revan was going to screw that up if at all possible. And yet...

“Why do you even care, kid?” asked the holocron. At this point, Revan didn’t even feel condemning of Bane, only confused by his persistence in the pursuit of things he had no plan for. “What would you do with that power?”

“Power alone is reason enough,” said Bane. “Those without strength will always be victims. It is the way of the universe, and has been proven endless times. And I have become strong.”

“...Who used to have power over you?” Revan asked, suddenly feeling a great deal of pity for Bane. Certain things were making considerably more sense to Revan now, there might be something salvageable here. “Family? Slavemasters? A regime? Who?”

“It doesn’t matter. The experience was instructive, and I grew stronger from it,” Bane repeated.

“Strong enough to do to other people what was done to you?”

Bane paused. Revan must’ve stirred up some memories, and it looked like he was struggling to keep himself composed. “I’m going to become the new lord of the Sith. I’m not who I was.”

“Yes, you grew stronger, I heard you, that doesn’t mean you weren’t still weak once. It doesn’t mean the people you look down on can’t grow more powerful, too,” said Revan. “Being powerful means you have a choice. You can be better than what you think the universe says you have to be.”

“No. It is the fate of the weak to be ruled by the strong, it is the truth of the universe,” Bane said, much to Revan’s disappointment. His confidence was rapidly returning to him as he recited his personal philosophy. “Like that slave you showed such concern for. I’ve grown tired of your disrespect, Revan. If you continue to irritate me as you have, I’ll have her killed.”

“Are you threatening me?” asked an unamused and suddenly furious Revan.

“I’m threatening her. You have allow yourself to be made weak by your attachment to someone so useless. It proves the truth of what I believe,” Bane said confidently, and with a bare hint of mocking as he had Revan backed into a corner.

Or so he thought.

You were close. You were so close to being someone I wouldn’t want to die.

Then you blew your chance.

How incredibly unfortunate for you.

“Hold on, if you’re so annoyed by me, then fine. You’re dead set on rising up and becoming Darth
Bane, so I’ll treat you as I would treat any Sith Lord,” Revan said while charging up the holocron’s electrical countermeasures. Bane must’ve sensed the attack coming as the instant before Revan could electrocute him and roast his corpse to a cinder, he released his hold on the holocron and threw it back as the electricity arced around the cave.

The arcs struck the puddles of water around the holocron, and the electric current split the molecules. Water turned to hydrogen and oxygen and back again, the energy of the arcs turning to heat and pressure as Bane was engulfed in flames, shielding his face with his arms as he screamed and the attack burned much of his scalp.

The Sith Lord’s armor was up to the task, protecting the rest of his body from the heat as he tried to Force-push the holocron away, only to find he couldn’t budge it no matter how hard he tried. It remained, emitting a bright and increasingly intense violet glow.

“Nobody moves me unless I allow it,” said Revan. Holoemitters amplified and focused their light on Bane’s eyes, intent on burning them right out of his skull, only making contact with the left one for an instant and making Bane reflexively cover it. Speakers let out a burst of high-frequency noise, echoing around the stone surroundings. Bane’s ears bled from the rupturing it caused, and Revan’s voice didn’t help things. “Thanks for taking off your helmet like I asked. Very considerate of you.”

As the future Sith Lord cried in pain, he levitated some loose rocks and threw them at the holocron instead, knocking it back into the cave. The impact sent the small device into a stone wall above a thin chasm, where it fell back down into the caves of Dantooine, spiraling in the air as it collided with wall after wall, plunging at least a hundred meters and splashing into a puddle at the bottom.

Defensive systems primed and ready, the holocron waited for Bane or one of his minions to come down to retrieve it. After a day of patiently keeping watch, it appeared no one was coming. They probably didn’t even know where Revan had landed in this labyrinth.

Revan’s thoughts turned towards the surface, and that slave, worried Bane might kill her when he returned to his ship. If that brief fight didn’t significantly harm Bane, he probably wouldn’t be concerned enough with the issue to even remember she existed, but if any lasting vision or hearing loss had been caused, she’d probably be killed out of spite.

_Hopefully all those gamma rays I was blasting into his head give him brain cancer_, Revan thought while taking stock of the situation.

This was just fucking perfect. A fall like that was 600 years of progress through this damned cave lost. At least now, thanks being moved in and out of the caves by the Sith, Revan had a more complete map and knew the quickest path out. Depending on the activity of any animals the holocron could hitch a ride on, Revan could get out in maybe 1200 years.

No, wait, it would be a 700 year setback, 1300 to go. Revan recognized a nearby rock face from around that time, the one that sort of looked like the faces of the _Ebon Hawk_ crew arranged into a nice grid if you used your imagination.

“Don’t you give me those looks, I did the best I could,” Revan said to the wall, the holocron lying immobile in the puddle, gentlybobbing in the shallow water. It wasn’t crazy to talk to rocks if you knew they weren’t alive, that was how sanity worked, right?

Revan hadn’t thought about them all in a long time, and had been avoiding doing so ever since realizing they had all died. As had the real Revan. Long ago, after spending the first two hundred years in this cave, Revan thought about how to find them all again after reaching the surface.
Then the reality of the situation hit.

“I really miss all of you.”

Nothing to do now but wait for this section of the cave to flood like last time so the water level could raise the holocron up to the next section and Revan could get back on track. No matter how long it took. And if after all those centuries Darth Bane’s Sith were somehow still out there, they could be dealt with then.

Revan knew they’d be waiting.

They wouldn’t know Revan was coming.

“Then I carried on as usual until you found me,” said Revan. “The Sith must’ve left the planet without bothering to recover me. Sorry I didn’t fill you in on the details sooner, but I didn’t realize just how far-reaching the consequences were, and when I did, I hesitated to bring it up.”

“...It doesn’t matter,” Barriss after taking a moment to process that. “There was an entire millennium of people making choices and taking action, none of which stopped the Sith and much of it aiding in their plans. You made a deliberate effort to sabotage them, and it failed. It isn’t your fault. Also, there were several skirmishes on Ruusan, and as you predicted, it was where the Sith were finally defeated and the war ended. You may have aided that in some way.”

“With everything I’ve done, it’s pretty rare for anyone to tell me something isn’t my fault. Rarer still is for me to actually be convinced by their reasons,” said Revan. “Thank you, Barriss.”

“Considering everything that happened since and the number of available opportunities to stop the Sith, I believe the rise of the Empire is, at most, 0.05% your fault. That’s less than others I could name or knew personally.”

“...’Kay,” Revan said gently, trying to get Barriss to quit while she was ahead.

“I’m surprised you took that attitude with Bane,” said Barriss. “I can tolerate your prying well enough, but it seems unwise to treat a powerful Sith in the same manner.”

“When confronted by the embodiment of evil, the best thing to do is laugh. Laugh in its stupid face. The Sith aren’t scary, Barriss. They’re people. They sleep in weird positions, they choke on their own spit, and they poop. Don’t let the black robes and masks and rotten flesh fool you, it’s all for show.”

Barriss covered her mouth trying not to laugh, not wanting to wake up Ahsoka since there was only a tarp between them.

“It’s unfortunate you were forced to spend so much more time alone in that cave,” said Barriss.

“It’s only a fraction of what I deserve,” said Revan. “And waiting all that time turned out to be worth it.”

“How so?”

“I got to meet you.”
Barriss clutched the holocron a bit tighter as it rested in her lap. “Are there any other features of the modern galaxy you’re secretly responsible for?” she asked.

“You know how your astromech sometimes calls people ‘meatbags’?” asked Revan. “I’m probably the root of that.”

“You’re joking.”

“Am not. It originated with an assassin droid I created, HK-47, though whether I programmed that into his vocabulary from the beginning or if he came up with the word on his own is unclear. Thanks to our mutual memory loss, that detail is lost to time.”

Barriss thought about Revan’s companions, the various history texts she’d read discussing them in widely varying levels of detail. Revan had already told her about Bastila, Carth, Juhani, that Mandalorian fellow, the older Jedi Jolee...

“Anyone else of interest?”

“I don’t think I’ve mentioned T3-M4 at all lately. He was a good droid, didn’t say much, though,” Revan said, projecting a hologram of an antiquated astromech unit, then switching to a young Twi’lek. “Then this was Mission, a younger friend of mine. Tough, sassy, resourceful, hung out with her Wookiee friend Zaalbar, he’s a whole other story. Good kid.”

“She sounds quite interesting,” Barriss said, studying the hologram of Mission with great interest. Especially her arms.

Revan chuckled at Barriss’s lingering gaze. “Wow. Somebody has a type.”

Barriss was about to object to the assertion, then mustered up the nerve to say, “You know what? Have it your way. I am attracted to tough, sassy, clever, cute girls who don’t wear sleeves. Are you satisfied?”

“Yes. Yes, I am,” said Revan. “You seem to have a thing for lekku, too.”

“That similarity is purely coincidental,” said Barriss. “Do you really think it was wise for you to be traveling with a teenager considering what you were doing?”

“I didn’t really like it, but since the Sith put a bounty on her along with the rest of my merry band of heroes and she had nowhere else to go, it was better for her to travel with me. As for her role in my mission, long before meeting me her life in the lower levels of Taris had left her... ‘unaffected’, let’s say, by most of the things she saw. I looked out for her as best I could,” Revan explained, concerned by Mission’s hard life. “I’d considered leaving her at the Jedi Enclave on Dantooine, but I had feeling she wouldn’t be safe there. The orbital bombardment that came later confirmed my fears, so yes, I’m confident it was a wise decision.”

“Orbital bombardment?”

“The Sith attacked the enclave that way, though I wasn’t there for it. The most effective method of dealing with powerful Force users you don’t like is blowing them up from a safe distance. Like Malak did to me! I’m not even mad about it,” Revan said, then added with a whisper, “Now that I’ve had my revenge.”

“That’s not exactly the Sith way, is it?” asked Barriss. “He should’ve fought you directly if he wanted your position.”
“I don’t care about the Sith way, I care about not dealing with problems like an idiot. Malak had no chance against me one-on-one. Attacking me with a turbolaser barrage was the best idea the guy had ever or would ever have. I’d have done the same thing in his position, if I somehow encountered someone stronger than me,” said Revan. “Plus, even if he was a distant second to me, whoever was in third was even farther behind. Malak didn’t get overthrown because the guy was legitimately tough. Nobody’s powerful enough to murder my awful best friend except for me!”

“I think the Jedi systems of training and advancement are more practical,” said Barriss.

“That’s what the Sith don’t care to think about. Yes, the dark side is a quicker, easier path to power, requiring less practice and precision in its use. That doesn’t mean the light isn’t also a valid path,” explained Revan. “Once you start seeing diminishing returns making use of your emotions as a driving factor and killing your way to the top, it’s time to get serious and start mastering self-control. Pursuit of raw power without discipline itself isn’t always useful. To become powerful, you must abandon power.”

“Or, at least be capable of doing so?” suggested Barriss. That caveat seemed more Revan’s style.

“No. Not good enough. Anyone can claim they could stop, they just don’t want to. The thing about the dark side is how easy it is, but people don’t often think about why. It’s not that it’s easy to do horrible things. It’s that it’s easy to stop caring,” explained Revan. “There were hundreds of times I could’ve just taken the easy option. Like mind-tricking those attendants instead of paying the landing fee, or mind-tricking that Selkath policeman into arresting somebody I didn’t like, or allowing a competing student to be electrocuted to death in front of me rather than take a hit of Force lightning myself, or murdering a hunter for extra krayt dragon pearls I could use to upgrade my lightsabers, or selling medicine that would’ve saved countless lives to organized criminals, or destroying the ecosystem of an entire planet because I didn’t want to solve a puzzle.”

“I’m hearing a large number of examples, and a concerning lack of explicit statement as to whether or not you did any of them,” noted Barriss.

“Not the point. It’s easy to do nothing. It’s easy not to care,” said Revan. “It’s easy to remain unattached from everyone. You don’t have to think about the consequences of those feelings.”

“I know... and I understand. Thank you for being honest with me, Revan,” Barriss said, rubbing her eyes. The late hour was finally starting to get to her. With effort, she leapt back over the boundary, laid down close to Ahsoka, and finally went to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

A large part of the inspiration behind Revan's characterization, aside from me knowing practically everything about KotOR, was "The Truth" from Fullmetal Alchemist. This faceless, illusive, omniscient entity whose personality, and appearance in Barriss's case, change to reflect who's interacting with it, primarily by forcing them to confront their shortcomings. And the only facial feature they possess is a big smile. To Barriss, Revan is an intelligent mentor instantly comprehending of her doubts and confusion and prods at her perfectionism and absolutism. To Ahsoka, they're much more aggressive than usual, acting as an overwhelming power her strength is useless against. To Bane, they constantly tarnish his image as an indomitable übermensch by using his own seriousness and self-confidence to make him look (and feel) like an idiot. Revan can do it so easily
because whatever other people are going through, Revan's been there.

"I am all, and I am one, and so, of course, this also means that I am you."

Though I knew it wasn't likely, I was really hoping for Revan to show up in the World Between Worlds to greet Ezra in Truth's fashion.

Ezra: Who are you?  
Revan: Oh, I'm glad you asked that! ...So, I hear you want your parents back. I can help, but it'll cost you an arm and a leg!

Then Ezra would become known as the Fullmetal Revanchist. It's a word.

And upon hearing how Luke dealt with his father compared to how almost any other Jedi would:

Revan: You've done it! THAT'S THE RIGHT ANSWER!

There also might be just a little bit of Bugs Bunny messing with the opera singer mixed in.

I never read the Darth Bane novels, but I looked up a bunch of his quotes and excerpts to get his voice and personality right. Turned out that was unnecessary because Bane in basically just a typical Edgy Asshole Evil Overlord who thinks might makes right and I could've written him as such with no research. He just happened to have just enough of an intellectual advantage to realize maaaaaaybe everybody constantly killing each other is counterproductive. Trying to make him interesting was the main reason this chapter took a few weeks. But as I read about him and why people like the character, the concept of him being the Sith equivalent of Luke Skywalker provided more to work with.
The light of Tatooine’s rising suns woke Ahsoka up, their combined intensity illuminating the cloudless desert after only a few moments of dawn.

There was sand in her bedroll. And her clothes.

Working her way out of the bedroll and shaking off as much sand as she could, Ahsoka flinched with slight pain as she started walking, noticing that all that walking around barefoot in the desert and those caves had given her a few blisters on each foot. Because the Sand People hated other people’s shoes.

Tatooine was the worst.

Why couldn’t Obi-Wan have hidden out on Bakura, or Manaan, or Chandrila? Something with an environment that wouldn’t literally wear you down?

Okay, time to get moving. We still have plenty of daylight to move around with fewer predators, time to get the Sand People’s map. Barriss is... Ahsoka glanced down to find her still dead asleep. There’s Barriss. Cici’s out with the speeder, I’d better go get her for translating.

Making as little noise as possible, Ahsoka decided to take the route of avoiding contact with the Sand People until she had Cici with her, leaping over the fence and walking around the village perimeter until she reached her speeder bike.

There, she found the droid engaged in what appeared to be a civil conversation with one of the Sand People’s night watch, who returned to his duties as Ahsoka approached.

“Everything alright, Cici?” asked Ahsoka.

“We were continuing a discussion I had with him on the way here. He doesn’t think droids, or ‘machines’ as he tends to categorize us, are actually alive. I’m explaining stuff like cognitive theory and the flawed distinctions between organic and synthetic ‘machinery’ as a basis for the understanding of consciousness,” explained Cici, exchanging a friendly goodbye with the warrior in his language.

“So you really expect him to understand that?” asked Ahsoka.

“He’d been picking stuff up with surprising speed. They actually seem to understand stuff like biological evolution from how they breed hardier crops, and the diversification of local wildlife where populations in separate areas can’t breed with those in others.”

Ahsoka thought she shouldn’t have been as surprised as she was. Last night she’d learned of how the species that became the Sand People supposedly once had interstellar space flight. They were as intelligent as any other species she’d encountered. Possibly more than some.

“I’m surprised you didn’t end up offending him by questioning the Sand People’s origin myth.”

“I do know how to use tact when I want to. Aside from being given weird looks by the locals, I was fine,” Cici said, rolling up alongside Ahsoka as they walked back to find Barriss, who was groggily
getting up now that the surrounding light had become too bright to ignore.

“Rough night?” asked Ahsoka. “Was the bed roll okay?”

“The accommodations were fine. It took some time for me to get to sleep,” Barriss said, glancing around the village at the Sand People, many of whom were already getting to their daily routines. “Do you have any idea who we need to talk to get directions?”

“Let’s find Qurorskra,” Ahsoka said, heading towards the center of the village where she’d last seen their host.

The Sand People’s maps were shockingly sophisticated, organized by region and by length scale with numerous annotations detailing water sources, landmarks, and paths followed by prey animals and other tribes. It was all color-coded and labeled with a wide variety of pigments, including a few that appeared to have sand mixed in with the paint to make it glitter. Barriss loved the artistry of it, though she was afraid to touch them and risk damaging them in some way. No sense risking their hosts turning on them now.

“Okay, so this is the distance between us and where we left the Eclipse,” Cici said, scanning the map and doing some calculations. “From these distances, there are about 0.85 kilometers in one ‘hnkgrnk’, putting Kenobi’s last known location 37 kilometers to the west.”

“That’s it?” said Ahsoka.

“Remember, that’s not a residence,” Barriss said, tempering Ahsoka’s optimism. “It’s only where he was last seen. Approximately.”

“Good enough. Cici, take images of all these maps,” said Ahsoka.

“Wait, Ahsoka. Sand People don’t care for recording devices. Remember how they felt about others copying their history? Do you think this is all right with them?” asked Barriss. Ahsoka didn’t really think it was necessary to explain, but if it made Barriss more comfortable...

“Cici, ask them if it’s okay for you to record the maps,” she said reluctantly.

The droid communicated the request to Qurorskra and the Sand People cartographers, who weren’t concerned at all by this.

“I thought they refused to allow others to record history in error?” asked Barriss.

“Seems to be a translation issue. Maps, even ones that record climate and seasonal information, don’t constitute ‘history’ to them. It doesn’t have that level of cultural relevance, it’s just data,” said Cici. Then let’s go already.

Ahsoka was itching to leave, standing at the map room’s exit and resisting the urge to pull Barriss out of here. They finally had what they’d come for, now it was time to go.

Finally out at their speeder, the outsiders prepared to head back out into the desert, with a few onlookers watching from a distance. Only Qurorskra seemed interested in a proper farewell, though maybe there was some nuance to their behavior Ahsoka didn’t get.
“Qurorskra has a gift, to thank you for assisting him. He’s not certain he and his warriors would have survived without your aid,” Cici said, as the warrior presented Ahsoka and Barriss each with a pair of brown boots that looked like they were made from some animal hide. “These can be worn without impairing your connection to the land, unlike your normal ones.”

With some reluctance as she studied the primitive materials, Ahsoka tried them on and wow, they were comfy. Whatever they were made from, it was like the inner lining grabbed the sand grains right off her feet. They probably weren’t all-terrain like her regular boots were, but for a desert, these were probably better than what she could buy on most markets.

Smiling at her new boots, Ahsoka climbed aboard the speeder, ready to go in peace. Then, Qurorskra reached down to the ground, threw a handful of sand onto the pair, and bid them farewell.

“How did he do that?” Ahsoka sighed as she felt the grains drizzling into her clothes. She’d probably still be finding bits of silica in this outfit months from now.

“He says if you won’t remain connected to the land, you should carry it close to you at all times,” said Cici, keeping as far away from Ahsoka and Barriss as the limited speeder space allowed to avoid the sand that was falling off them. “I believe he’s blessed our journey, so don’t try shaking that off. At least until we’re out of sight.”

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The speeder flew gracefully over the desert to the west, the bright light of the low-hanging suns casting long shadows ahead.

A hologram of the map was projected over Ahsoka’s shoulder, and Cici’s accelerometers kept careful track of their movements to guide them where they needed to go. Only 37 kilometers, covered via speeder bike? They could be there in minutes.

She could find Obi-Wan in minutes.

What would she say to him? What would he say to her?

As the wind rushed past her, Ahsoka tuned out the endless sand around her, lost in thought, her body on autopilot.

“Ahsoka, watch out!” Barriss screamed as Ahsoka snapped out of it and slammed on the breaks, turning hard right as the speeder bike’s repulsors brought them to a halt and settled into a gentle hover never to the obstacle she’d nearly run into. Of course, kilometers of gently sloping sand, and she’d spaced out and nearly hit the one solid object lying in her path.

There was some kind of Sand People shrine built there, a loose semicircle of engraved sandstone, adorned with offerings of food and water to appease evil spirits and keep them at bay. The trinkets and statues inside it all faced hard right from where she was going, and as she checked that area out on Cici’s map, she realized what it was meant to ward off.

That ruined village. The one mysteriously destroyed by someone with a lightsaber.

Whatever it is, I can check it out after finding Obi-Wan, Ahsoka told herself.

Right?
It’s been a few years, there probably isn’t anything left.

Despite wanting to keep moving, Ahsoka couldn’t help staring off to the north, curious about what had happened.

“I want to check it out,” Ahsoka said, and no one voiced any objection as she revved the speeder bike and turning it towards the remains of the tribe.

After a few years of sandstorms, there was little left. Ahsoka had nearly flown right past the remains. Tents were broken and overturned, mostly buried in sand. Not much remained of the Sand People themselves. The other tribes didn’t want to come here, but scavenging animals had no such restrictions, and all that was left of the residents was tattered robes and gnawed bones.

Ahsoka couldn’t help but notice how some of the skeletons were smaller than the others.

Dismounting, Ahsoka walked off, inspecting whatever she could find. A few intact skeletons, and as she’d been told, they’d been cut cleanly at various places. The wear was considerable, but it wouldn’t surprise her if this really had been done with a lightsaber. It still didn’t answer who, or why.

Even with the twin suns beating down on the sand, it felt so cold here. Looking up at the sky, it was growing darker, a few stars appearing in the blackness above.

It was night. How was it night? She’d woken up an hour ago.

Torches that hadn’t been there a minute ago lit up. The whole village was alive again, and Ahsoka suddenly felt very exposed and unsafe.

This couldn’t be real.

*Don’t be afraid, this can’t hurt you,* Ahsoka though, clenching her fists and steeling herself, then getting a grip on her saber just in case.

Cries of alarm cut through the air as another lightsaber activated, warriors attacking and being sliced apart without effort. Ahsoka followed a group trying to see who was attacking them.

The blade that pierced the final warrior’s chest wasn’t red like she’d expected, and as the lifeless body fell to the sand, the shadowy assailant approached her, coming more into focus with each step.

The flash of blue swung at her eyes.

Ahsoka woke up a second later with her arms wrapped loosely around Barriss’s torso as the latter drove them away from the village as fast as she could without Ahsoka falling off.

“Are you feeling all right?” Barriss asked, accelerating when she noticed Ahsoka was awake and could hold onto her better. “You passed out not long after you walked away. What happened?”

“Stop the speeder,” said Ahsoka, letting go of Barriss as they slowed to a stop so she could get off and pace in the sand. Her head was pounding, but she had gotten a clear look. “It was Anakin.”

“Skywalker? What was him?”

“That!” Ahsoka yelled, pointing back at the village. Barriss understood what she meant and looked almost as confused and horrified as Ahsoka was. “Why. Why would he do that?”

“Um, perhaps they... um...” Barriss trailed off.
“You don’t need to say anything, I know you can’t answer any more than I can,” Ahsoka said, pacing frantically to use up all this fearful energy she had, and continuing to voice her thoughts. “Those were children he killed back there. Who else knew about this? Did anyone in the Council know? No, he never would’ve been knighted if they knew about this, Anakin’s relationship with them was rocky enough. Did Obi-Wan know? Did Padmé?”

“Maybe he just really hated them,” the holocron said, voice completely serious, which in this case was somehow even worse than the typical, obnoxiously-amused tone. Ahsoka looked up to see Revan’s avatar appear next to Barriss. “The Sand People are a persistent, constant threat to colonizing species on Tatooine. Maybe he just wanted them dead, and armed with the power of the Force, decided to make it happen.”

“He wouldn’t do that,” objected Ahsoka.

“Apparently, he would. If you’re so convinced he wouldn’t, that the vision you saw was incomplete, then you should go back. The dead aren’t going anywhere. Take another look, see what the real reason was, the reason you think exonerates him of wrongdoing,” Revan said calmly. Ahsoka looked back in the direction of the village, considering whether she wanted to try it, and she really didn’t. “Unless, you know you won’t see anything new? Maybe Anakin wasn’t the person you believed him to be.”

“Don’t act like you know anything about Anakin!” Ahsoka shouted back.

“I know he was a general during the Clone Wars. I know you two must’ve been very much alike. You fought at his side, didn’t you? This would’ve happened before you met, right? Before the Clone Wars? Is it that inconsistent with what you knew of him?” asked Revan. “What you saw, that was your master at his absolute worst. But it was still him. It’s horrible to look at, to see that familiar face there, to know whose fault it all was... and at the same time, to hear the voice in the back of your mind, disparate thoughts and memories suddenly connected into a pattern, telling you how it all makes perfect sense. That it’s the truth.”

“Why don’t you mind your own business?” Ahsoka said, kicking a flurry of sand at the hologram and watching Revan fade away silently.

When she’d started out as Anakin’s apprentice on her first mission, she’d found his hatred of his home planet odd, silly even. Especially how intense he was when speaking of it, like the desert was out to get him personally.

‘The desert is merciless. It takes everything from you.’

This wasn’t funny anymore.

Ahsoka walked off away from the speeder, clenching and unclenching her fists as she moved as it felt like her muscles were shaking. Once she got a few meters away, Barriss left the holocron with their speeder and began following after her, maintain that distance but not letting Ahsoka get out of sight. Ahsoka walked faster, Barriss let her gain some distance before speeding up herself. Neither of them had any idea where Ahsoka was going, since there was nothing but sand dunes in every direction.

“Wouldn’t you rather talk about this?” Barriss yelled from ten meters behind Ahsoka.

Don’t get mad at Barriss, don’t get mad at Barriss... Ahsoka told herself as she finally stopped.

“The last thing I want right now is to talk about this,” Ahsoka said back. “You can go ahead and
start if you want!”

“Ahsoka, I know how you feel.”

“Not likely!”

“Like nothing makes sense because someone you admire has done things you don’t understand and can’t reconcile with who you believed them to be. Nothing makes sense, you have no idea what’s to be done, you have no ability to remedy the situation, and you’re in all likelihood thinking of various counterproductive options.”

Ahsoka stopped in her tracks. Right. This was Barriss she was talking to.

“How did you deal with it?” asked Ahsoka.

“I was able to deal with my emotions because you were there. You helped me. And you did so persistently,” Barriss said, straightening herself up and smiling to look confident, and extending her hand out to Ahsoka. “You’ll be perfectly all right, in time. Because I am here.”

Taking that outstretched hand. Ahsoka walked back past Barriss and to their speeder, taking their usual positions.

“Are you sure you would’ve prefer I drive?” asked Barriss.

“I’m sure,” Ahsoka said with a frown, her grip on the handlebars tightening as she took control. Barriss wrapped her arms around Ahsoka’s torso, pressing herself against the latter’s back. Taking a slow, deep breath, Ahsoka moved them forward.

Here it was. The rocky area the Sand People maps had directed them to. Nothing tall enough for be a mountain range, no passages low or long enough to qualify as another canyon. Ahsoka could feel they were getting closer as she drove the speeder around the rock formations, looking for some sign of sapient habitation.

The next fork they came to showed Ahsoka showed an easy path up to the highest cliff she’d seen so far, a good vantage point to view the area beyond, while there was a wide, flat space to the south they could take the speeder around.

“He has to be somewhere nearby,” Ahsoka as she got off the speeder yet again. “We’ll cover more ground if we split up. You take the speeder left, I’ll head up—”

“Absolutely not,” Barriss said as she stuck close to Ahsoka, pulling the speeder along in neutral mode. “The last time were separated prior to meeting one of your associates, there was a misunderstanding, and I was shot.”

“You were stunned.”

“I was shot! What do you expect will happen if I encounter Master Kenobi unescorted?”

“...Yeah, okay, fair,” said Ahsoka as the two of them marched upward.

*Just keep going a little longer,* Ahsoka told herself. The physical effort required helped her block
out... unwanted concerns, and once at the overlook, with visibility extending kilometers, she could see absolutely nothing of note. Great.

“Hey, I’ve got something,” Cici said, her sensor array whirring rapidly as she verified her scans. “I’m picking up what sound like low-frequency vibrations from about one kilometer east of us, probably a moisture vaporator, and there are no marked settlements in that area.”

“You do?” Ahsoka said, looking off in that direction. Nothing was visible with macrobinooculars, but Cici’s instruments were better than hers. They’d already been strung along from one distracting layover to another, one more wouldn’t hurt. “Let’s go.”

“Actually, Ahsoka, a thought occurs,” Barriss began. “Wouldn’t you prefer to have time to speak to Kenobi without me present? To have time to reconnect without an additional source of tension?”

“I’m not going to pretend you didn’t come with me, Barriss.”

“I’m not suggesting you do. I can take the speeder back to the Eclipse, then move it near Kenobi’s residence so we have access to the rest of our food and water, and can depart without retraversing the desert when the time comes. Your hope is that he’ll leave the planet with us, correct? The speeder is already close to being overloaded. What if Kenobi doesn’t have his own transport?”

As usual, Barriss had a point, even though Ahsoka suspected she was more than happy to have an excuse to avoid Obi-Wan, not that she could blame her.

“All right, just be careful on the way back. Cici, you know the route, right?”

“Yeah, I’ve got navigational data from the whole trip, and there’s no need to go back through the canyon,” said Cici.

Unloading a few bottles of water and emergency supplies into a pack for Ahsoka, Barriss gave her a hug, then a kiss, and left her to reach her destination in peace as the speeder’s whining faded with distance.

Alone in the middle of a rocky gorge, unwelcome thoughts entered Ahsoka’s mind as she headed out on her own. The various tricks she’d learned for focusing and centering oneself weren’t doing very much at the moment, and every time she so much as blinked she could see a blade, Anakin’s blade, about to cut through her. Naturally, she kept her eyes shut anyway, determined to face this, only to hear the sound of that lightsaber’s hum growing louder and louder as it pounded the inside of her head. The thought of smacking her own head a few times to make it stop was becoming interesting.

Finally, she opened her eyes again, and in the distance, smoke rose out of a small, blocky, tan building. For a moment, Ahsoka stopped, then picked up the pace again, noticing nothing else except her goal.

As she approached, she could see the dwelling’s door slide open, a solitary figure exiting and waiting for her at the top of the ridge, hooded brown robe protecting him from the bright suns. Ahsoka knew who it was, and ran to embrace him, feet kicking up the sand beneath her as she rose up the ridge. It was with some hesitation the embrace was returned.

It had only been months since the end of the war, but the time in the desert looked like it had aged him years. Ahsoka was just as tall as he was now, and his beard was flecked with grey.

“Come with me,” Obi-Wan said quietly, maybe even regretfully, leading her back to his new home. “I’m sure there’s a great deal you’d like to ask about.”
I'd been thinking about how to handle this chapter for a while because I knew, as long as they were on Tatooine, I had to get Ahsoka to the site of Anakin's massacre. The problem was I didn't know what to have happen that would warrant the detour. Some vague vision would be boring and wouldn't get any interesting reaction, but I couldn't give her enough information to figure out Anakin had betrayed the Jedi.

Then I realized Ahsoka though he was dead, that would never occur to her.

She can know all about it.

Writing this, I may have accidentally worked out another reason Obi-Wan was never found besides "Vader hates Tatooine that much". In Legends, it was established that Dagobah was home to nexuses of dark power, and they acted to obscure Yoda's presence. Obi-Wan had something similar on Tatooine, thanks to Anakin. Good job, dude.
“Tapping into that kind of energy takes more than connection to the Force on its own. More than simply affecting and moving the external the way pushes and mental tricks do, but drawing and expelling energy from within yourself. You have to channel and direct your intent, creating a pure manifestation of that intense power,” explained Revan, as Barriss stood in the Eclipse’s cockpit, trying to get in the right frame of mind. “That’s the key to creating Force lightning.”

“Isn’t this a technique preferred by dark side worshippers?” asked Barriss.

“That’s never stopped me before, and it hasn’t stopped you since Pantora. It’s really not as difficult to learn as the Jedi like to act,” said Revan. “Though I’m not sure you quite have the intense will you’ll need.”

“Really...” Barriss grumbled, working to muster up the same grim determination, the coarseness in her throat she’d felt back at Mitoth. “I have plenty of will.”

“Ooh, sweet, you can do the scary voice!” Revan shouted giddily. “If you can manage that, I think you can figure this out, too. Give ‘em a fistful of lightning! I like to stun people with it, then go in with the lightsaber. The old one-two.”

“I’ll try,” said Barriss, steeling herself to attempt this.

“Not in here you won’t,” objected Revan, waving around their surroundings. “Yeah, go ahead and try creating arcs of electricity into the open air right next to the ship’s control panels. That’ll be smart.”

“I suppose I’ll take it outside, then,” Barriss said, getting up and approaching the holocron to take it outside the ship.

“You could do that, though there’s something else that should take priority.”

“That being?”

“STOP PROCRASTINATING AND GO TO FACE KENOBI.”

Barriss stared stone-faced at Revan, forgetting to blink, rolling her eyes around as she pretended to consider this. Then, she pulled off her brown desert robe, threw it over the holocron to muffle whatever words of outrage it was saying at her, and briskly walked out of the cockpit.

Vigorously petting Snoots, Barriss thought about what the best course of action here was.

Honest route: get moving, show up outside Kenobi’s residence, explain everything.

Route that didn’t make her nauseated: create a disguise from whatever’s available, invent a new identity on the flight over. She still had that holographic disguise- no, even better, quickly run into town, buy some bandages along with some kind of breath mask, and pretend to be a Sand Person. She could make convincing honking noises. Kenobi probably wouldn’t even question it after she snorted at him enough times. Carry Snoots around with her so he couldn’t sense her, pretend the ysalamiri was a completely normal Sand People pet. This could work.
No, Ahsoka wouldn’t let her do that. She didn’t want that.

*Think: what’s the worst case scenario?*

*We could end up fighting.*

*He’s an experienced Jedi master, but he’s also been here for several months and hasn’t been in combat. How powerful is he?*

*How powerful am I now? I defeated the Inquisitor without injury.*

There wasn’t any clever little trick that would get her out of this.

Barriss kept petting Snoots harder until the ysalamiri whined in protest, and she had to face the fact that more petting would not result in proportionally more stress relief.

It’d been over an hour since she’d gotten back to the ship. With atmospheric cruising speed, it’d only take about fifteen minutes to reach Kenobi’s residence now that they had a location. She could simply tell Cici to fly them there. And hide under the covers of her bunk like the gutless coward she was.

There was no getting out of this.

“Feeling better?” the holocron asked as Barriss recovered her brown robe and sat down in the pilot seat. Revan didn’t seem to be holding a grudge over her abrupt exit. “Ready to go to the in-law’s house?”

“Not particularly, but that’s not the issue,” Barriss said, sitting down in the pilot’s seat and warming up the engines.

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Obi-Wan’s house was about as nice as was possible in this environment. Mostly one large room with a few alcoves for storage, cooking, and eating. Made out of something called ‘synstone’, as Obi-Wan explained, he’d found it abandoned and moved right in. It was secure and secluded, and contained all the equipment he’d need to survive here in the desert.

This was where he intended to stay permanently.

Seated as the small table, clutching their mugs of water, Ahsoka and Obi-Wan tried to keep a conversation going that wouldn’t make them both depressed. It wasn’t going very well, and after running out of objects in her surroundings to ask him about, Ahsoka decided to get to the first of many concerns.

“About twenty kilometers or so from here, there used to be a village of Sand People,” said Ahsoka. “I was there only an hour ago. Obi-Wan... Anakin killed all of them.”

“...How long ago did this happen?” he asked, looking as shocked as she’d felt.

“Three years, maybe a little more?”

“I never knew,” said Obi-Wan, looking more afraid than Ahsoka had ever seen him. The knowledge he’d been in the dark for so long must be recontextualizing so many things. “I think there were many
thinks about Anakin I failed to recognize. Now, it’s too late.”

“Like what?”

Obi-Wan paused, and Ahsoka sensed a twinge of regret, and uncertainty, like he wasn’t sure what he should say to her. “I often felt as though I was losing him. Something like this, that happened so long ago, only confirms what concerned me.”

There were so many things Ahsoka wanted to ask, so many things Obi-Wan knew that she didn’t. He’d been with the Jedi, in the middle of the war, up to the very end. She didn’t want to press him on anything, not yet at least.

He hadn’t known. If he hadn’t known, neither had anyone else. There was nothing more for her to ask on the matter. There wasn’t anything she was missing, at least nothing anyone else could provide for her.

Anakin had done it, Ahsoka knew this, and she desperately wanted to talk about anything else.

“Have you ever heard of a planet called ‘Myrkr’?” asked Ahsoka, looking for a diversion that was also something the two of them could talk about. “I’ve been wondering if the Jedi Council knew anything about it.”

“I don’t believe I’ve heard that name,” answered Obi-Wan. “Though it wouldn’t be the first time I’ve lost track of a planet.”

“There were animals there called ‘ysalamiri’ that can inhibit use of the Force. I thought maybe the council might’ve known about them.”

“Inhibiting the Force isn’t possible. I’ve never heard of such creatures.”

“Apparently it is, because those things were a real pain while I was there,” said Ahsoka, as Obi-Wan kept quiet. Guess they weren’t going to talk about that, either. The two of them kept sipping their glasses of water, Ahsoka particularly savoring hers. All the water in her bottles had heated up so much you could probably make tea with them. “Obi-Wan, did Anakin ever go on a mission near the Unknown Regions after I left?”

“Yes, I believe he did,” Obi-Wan said, his forehead scrunching up as he tried to recall. “He and Senator Amidala destroyed a Separatist factory on a planet called Mokivj.”

“Was it just them? Did they have help?”

“That’s- Well, I suppose there’s no need for me to keep the information classified now,” Obi-Wan admitted. “Yes, they received assistance from an alien who claimed to be from a civilization in the Unknown Regions. His name was... how did she say it... ‘Mithranordo’, I believe. Padmé seemed to be the only one who could pronounce it properly, Anakin kept to the shortened version.”


“Yes...” Obi-Wan said worriedly. “You know about him?”

“I met him. He’s an officer in the imperial navy now... also, I punched him in the face,” Ahsoka said, considering what this meant now that she’d confirmed Thrawn had been telling her the truth. Or at least some of it was. “Do you think Palpatine’s going to expand the Empire into the Unknown Regions? If he’s allying with or conquering more systems, the Empire will only get harder to demolish.”
“I don’t know,” said Obi-Wan, growing quiet. “It’s not a problem I can help to solve.”

So much for trying to get a strategy session going. That was it? He wasn’t even going to try, or offer any suggestions to her? It was so difficult to get Obi-Wan to really engage with her, to ask her something himself instead of waiting for her to come up with another topic. All he seemed to want to do was sulk.

“Um... I saw Yularen,” she said, trying to keep the conversation going.

“Oh,” said Obi-Wan, with a bit of surprise. It didn’t sound like he’d given the admiral much thought since the war ended. He was probably low on Obi-Wan’s list of concerns. “How is he?”

“I’m thinking not too great since-” Ahsoka paused slightly as she remembered she didn’t want to mention Barriss quite yet. “-I destroyed his command ship. And probably his career.”

“Hm,” Kenobi replied as he took another sip, possibly unconcerned with Yularen, possibly noticing that pause.

Ahsoka was running out of things to talk about, at least ones that didn’t involve Barriss in some way. There was one thing she wanted to know, but she’d also been hoping that he’d bring it up first. That he’d want to involve her. If he wouldn’t do it on his own...

“Obi-Wan, what are you doing here?” she finally asked.

Obi-Wan wanted to tell her. There was no one in the galaxy he wanted to help him more. And he knew he couldn’t.

Ahsoka was a fighter, she’d made that much clear from what she’d been up to since the war. He couldn’t ask her to give up on fighting the Empire to remain here on Tatooine for years. She’d never be convinced to stay, and he wouldn’t keep her here. She’d go off to fight the Empire, knowing what he knew.

There were so many ways it could go badly. If she was captured, anything she knew could be tortured out of her. Sidious might rip the knowledge from her mind personally.

Ahsoka was no fool. If she knew why he was here, even a partial truth, then one way or another she’d learn who the Emperor’s apprentice was, she’d go to him hoping she could save Anakin, and then, two of their best hopes for the future would be lost.

The only option he had was to accept that their paths had diverged irrevocably.

Maybe he could tell her, she’d grown even stronger than the last time he’d seen her, maybe he could allow her to face the Empire regardless...

_It won’t be enough._

“I came to escape the Empire,” Obi-Wan said. “Tatooine seemed as good a place to hide as any. Close to Hutt space, lacking any resources the Empire would come looking for.”

The time he’d taken to say that guaranteed Ahsoka wouldn’t find it convincing.
“I saw Padmé’s funeral procession,” said Ahsoka, clearly not sure how to follow up on the statement. “She was pregnant. I don’t know if you saw it, or when the last time you saw her was.”

“I’m afraid I don’t get any transmissions out here,” Obi-Wan said, ignoring the issue of the last time he’d seen Padmé.

“I needed to be sure it had really happened,” she said, her sadness detectable through the Force as she thought of Padmé. “Anakin was the father, wasn’t he?”

Kenobi froze for a second, trying to figure out what to say. What he should tell her.

I can’t lie to her.

“Yes,” admitted Obi-Wan. “Anakin was the father.”

“I’d known for a while that he and Padmé had a relationship, but I had no idea how far it went.”

The more she knows, the more she’s in danger.

“Neither did I,” said Obi-Wan. “I don’t know much about their love, but even if the council wouldn’t have approved, I do regret they never got to become a family.”

It was the truth. He had answered her questions.

From a certain point of view.

“Do you have any idea what happened to Anakin?” asked Ahsoka, her tone cautious, but hopeful, as if maybe he could tell her something she didn’t already know.

“Anakin Skywalker is dead,” he said, watching that hope die.

It would be best to get this over with quickly.

“I know,” she began, shutting her eyes in an attempt to fight back tears. “I thought maybe you- I don’t know what I thought.”

The two of them sat in silence for a while, now that the worst of the conversation was over. Neither of them felt like talking, and neither of them were bothering to think of a new subject.

Suddenly, Ahsoka straightened up attentively and looked towards the door. It took a moment, then Obi-Wan also heard the sound of a starship coming in for a landing.

“Expecting someone?” he asked, hand on his saber, prepared for a confrontation.

“Yes, actually. It’s nothing to worry about. Don’t bring out your saber,” Ahsoka said in a reassuring tone that was trying a little bit too hard, getting up and keeping a step ahead of her host.

From the air, Kenobi’s blocky house stood out sharply amidst the irregular, natural formations of the Jundland Wastes.

Did they pass it by during that extended flyover? Barriss couldn’t remember.
There was just barely enough flat space next to the house for Barriss to land the *Eclipse*, settling it down into the sand facing the front door, then turning on their fancy new ship-sized holographic matrix so the black paint wouldn’t stand out among the tan.

Nobody had come out yet.

No, wait, the door was opening. Barriss ducked down below the controls so she wouldn’t be seen through the canopy, then crawled out of the cockpit and reluctantly worked her way to the exit.

“Um, okay, promise me you won’t make this weird,” Barriss heard Ahsoka say as the ramp lowered, positioning herself between her former master and the ship.

“Ahsoka, what are you talking about?” asked Kenobi, growing increasingly wary of whatever she was keeping from him. With palpable skepticism, he added “I’m not promising that.”

“This might seem weird, but I need you to trust me-”

“Enough, Ahsoka,” said Barriss, pulling down her hood and walking down the ramp to finally get this over with. She was momentarily surprised by Kenobi’s appearance, the months spent in the desert having been rather unkind to him. Not that she was concerned with such judgements, nor had she been in any better condition after a few months in an imperial prison.

Kenobi was just as surprised as she was, wearing an expression similar to those of the senators back on Pantora. For a second his fingers lingered over the lightsaber hidden in his robes before pulling away.

“Ahsoka, may I speak to you alone?” Kenobi asked, walking back to his home and expecting Ahsoka to follow.

At first, it appeared Ahsoka might tell Kenobi that no, he could not speak to her alone, until the latter turned his back and Barriss waved for her to go on.

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*If you felt you had to track me down, why did you have to do it with her following along?* Obi-Wan wondered to himself.

“So, you’re working with Barriss Offee,” prompted Obi-Wan as he shut the door behind them. “Not the partner I would have expected for you.”

Ahsoka was suddenly standing even more rigidly than she had been before. “I couldn’t let her stay in imperial hands. Who knows what they’d do with her?”

“Who knows what she’d do to you?” he countered.

“What would she- Barriss has been nothing but helpful to me for months! If anything, I’ve been the one dragging her into danger all over the galaxy. It hasn’t been very fun for her, but she puts up with it,” explained Ahsoka, though Obi-Wan wasn’t convinced.

“I can understand freeing her,” Obi-Wan admitted. “I’m not sure I understand wanting her as a traveling companion.”

“Why not?”
“Because at face value, it’s absurd. She betrayed the order and nearly got you killed. That’d be like me showing interest in, hm,” he began, trying to think of an example.

“Asajj Ventress?” Ahsoka suggested with a slight grin, quickly deflecting the older Jedi’s criticism.

She’s got me there.

“Ahsoka, think about this,” he said, even though he could see Ahsoka’s anger with him increasing, balling up her fists, trying not to glare at him. Why was she acting like this? “Barriss attempted to frame you for mass murder.”

“And the entire council sat back and let it happen, but I’ve still been running all over the galaxy trying to find YOU!” she screamed.

Realizing what she’d said, the two of them stared at each other for a long time, until Ahsoka stormed out of the house and back into her ship.

“I don’t get it. He isn’t dealing with some kind of breakdown, he’s here for a reason, but he won’t tell me,” said Ahsoka, head lying on Barriss’s chest while the latter caressed a lekku with one hand and read a datapad in the other. Droidekas kept peeking into the doorway, checking on Ahsoka and generally acting befuddled as they beeped to each other until Ahsoka finally closed the door. At least Ahsoka was feeling relaxed laying down here like this, though she couldn’t move too much. Had to be careful not to move her head up with those horns pointed at Barriss’s cheek.

“Have you considered the possibility that Kenobi himself doesn’t understand why he’s here?” suggested Barriss.

“What do you mean?” asked Ahsoka.

“We came here based on intuition you felt. Guidance from the Force. Perhaps Kenobi needs to be here, but has an incomplete explanation as to why,” Barriss explained.

“Well, maybe, but if that was what’s happening, he could still tell me more than nothing.”

“There are known instances of self-fulfilling prophecies caused by incomplete visions of the future. Perhaps he’s attempting to avoid one?”

“Why here, though? I thought maybe it was because it’s Anakin’s homeworld, but there doesn’t seem to be anything important going on, and he’s living a hundred kilometers away from everyone except the Sand People,” Ahsoka said, thinking back and trying to recall if Anakin had ever even told her about his family. She knew he’d come relatively late to the Jedi, he had to remember them.

“If that’s the case, perhaps we should find his extended family,” suggested Barriss. “Kenobi may have spoken to them.”

Ahsoka couldn’t even remember if she’d heard any names. Maybe they had the surname ‘Skywalker’, maybe not. It wasn’t like this planet had any convenient directories. Or did it? She could ask around...

‘Hello, I’m looking for relatives of Anakin Skywalker, famed Jedi Knight and general of the Grand...’
Army of the Republic. Do you know where I could find them? No, I’m definitely not a Jedi or an ally of Jedi. Stop walking towards those stormtroopers. Stop that.’

Yeah, that’s probably not going to work.

“What if he can’t risk any information leaks?” wondered Barriss. “None of us are strangers to the intricacies of military intelligence.”

That was the best explanation Ahsoka had heard, and one she’d considered before. It still left one serious problem: this was Tatooine. Not even one of the planet’s areas of interest. Ahsoka had checked the map, they were at the boundary between the ‘Jundland Wastes’ and the ‘Western Dune Sea’. There was rocky nothing to the east, flat sandy nothing to the west. Obi-Wan wasn’t even busy, there were no ancient relics lying about his house, he wasn’t working on anything when she’d arrived, he had no equipment to contact anyone with whatever he hypothetically discovered.

“Let’s wait. I want to talk to Kenobi some more before we do anything else.”

“As you wish,” said Barriss. “Does he know about… us, yet?”

“No, I didn’t bring it up,” said Ahsoka. “Though he isn’t exactly happy to see you even without knowing that.”

“And I am completely accepting of all that. There is no need to keep him informed,” Barriss said. “It isn’t his business. You don’t even need to-”

“I got it, Barriss,” Ahsoka said, adjusting her head to smooth out the part of Barriss’s shirt she was lying on. This had quickly become her preferred way to deal with anger.

Her eyes shot open when she heard a knocking from outside, and Ahsoka bolted out of bed and to the ramp to see Obi-Wan waiting for her.

“Ahsoka?” he said, like he’d briefly forgotten what he’d come here to do.

“Yeah?” she said back eagerly.

“I’m going to have dinner ready in an hour,” Obi-Wan said. “You and Offee are both welcome to join me.”

Knowing how difficult life in the desert must be, Ahsoka and Barriss contributed their own water, a few flavors of protein bar, and some canned vegetables to Obi-Wan’s meal of roasted desert snake with a side of mushrooms grown in that damp shady patch beneath his moisture vaporator.

The snake tasted fine. It was fine. Ahsoka had eaten worse. It wasn’t clear to her if the skin was edible or not. It looked nice and crispy. Obi-Wan wasn’t eating it, but maybe he was saving it for last? The protein bars had gotten his interest, probably for variety’s sake. Who knew how many nights he’d been eating snake.

The initial silence was long, but not as uncomfortable as Ahsoka had worried it would be. The food made sure Barriss and Obi-Wan both had a convenient excuse not to say anything, both being too polite to talk with their mouths open. And as Ahsoka was sitting right across from the Obi-Wan, he
and Barriss also weren’t required to look directly at each other.

“You mentioned to me you destroyed Yularen’s command ship. What happened?” Obi-Wan asked, finally making an effort to interact on his own, and Ahsoka perked up at the opportunity.

“That was actually Barriss’s idea. I didn’t mention it because I didn’t want to bring up Barriss too soon and-” Ahsoka amended, looking at Barriss nervously, the latter nodding and making it clear she understood how the earlier conversation had progressed.

“We were able to commandeer the bridge and pilot the Star Destroyer into the gravity well of a gas giant. We also used its tractor beams to pull a shipyard down with it,” explained Barriss.

“It was Barriss’s plan,” added Ahsoka, and Obi-Wan smiled. It was hard to tell how genuine it was. His beard was so much scruffier now, it was messing with her ability to read his face under all that hair, a skill she had painstakingly developed by necessity to tell when he was playfully bantering or actually annoyed. “Obi-Wan, do you know of any other survivors of Order 66? Barriss and I have been gathering information, but you’re the first person we’ve found.”

“Aside from us, master Yoda survives. Sometimes I can sense the presence of others scattered throughout the galaxy, but I know of none specifically,” said Obi-Wan. “I’ve been working to remain unnoticed.”

Well, that confirmed what she knew about Yoda. And that Obi-Wan really was just hiding here.

“Obi-Wan, one of the Empire’s agents saw you here. An inquisitor, someone Force-sensitive the Emperor is sending out to hunt Jedi,” said Ahsoka. This planet wasn’t as safe as he thought. Maybe if he knew that, he’d be more willing to ask for her help. “I saw it in one of their reports. You were spotted in one of the spaceports.”

“I haven’t been attacked.”

“But someone saw you. That’s how I was able to figure out you were here. I don’t know why no one else has come, but it isn’t safe,” said Ahsoka. Another bought of silence ensued. “You haven’t told anyone here who you were, right?”

“Oh course not,” Obi-Wan said, sounding a bit annoyed he even needed to make that clear.

“What name have you been giving people?”

“I simply go by ‘Ben’ now,” said Obi-Wan.

“‘Ben’? Ben What?” asked Ahsoka.

“A family name hasn’t been needed. Ben Kenobi, I suppose.”

“You have a generic fake first name, and then you’re sticking with your real last name?” Ahsoka asked incredulously. “How have you been keeping hidden?”

“I’ve been living here alone for months, you’re the first person who’s asked for a last name. I don’t exactly get much socializing in. Ahsoka,” Obi-Wan said defensively. “I doubt anyone would even be concerned if I told them I was a Kenobi. It’s a very common, mundane surname on Stewjon. What’s your alias?”

“Shaak Ashla. Unassuming Togruta names.”
“One of which is shared with a Jedi Master.”

“I was filling out registration form for my old ship, I hadn’t come up with an alias yet, and it worked, okay?” she said as Obi-Wan smirked at her. Fine. Maybe it wasn’t so easy to come up with a pseudonym. Maybe pseudonyms all sounded dumb to people who knew they were pseudonyms.

She’d forgotten how frustrating Obi-Wan could get sometimes.

Ahsoka considered what she could talk to Obi-Wan about, worrying that revealing too much information about the rebellion might put other people in danger. Which she decided was the solution.

“We’ve been rallying allies wherever we can to prepare for a fight with the Empire,” Ahsoka said, carefully watching Obi-Wan’s reaction. “I can’t give names, but I think we’re shaping ourselves into a real obstacle for Palpatine. We could do even more with your help.”

“As tempting as that sounds, it’s unwise for us to keep together,” replied Obi-Wan. “The Emperor and his servants may sense us if we gather too many for too long.”

“Are- are you trying to get rid of us?” asked Ahsoka.

“You said yourself, this place isn’t entirely safe,” said Obi-Wan. “You should leave.”

“If you know it’s not safe, then come with us! Help me fight the Empire!”

“No,” Obi-Wan said shortly. “I’m sorry, Ahsoka. There’s nothing of interest to your rebellion here.”

‘No’. That was it. The most plausible explanation Ahsoka could come up with for why he was shutting her out, and it wasn’t true. He was doing nothing. Ahsoka could hardly really believe it. She didn’t believe it.

“You’ve got to be kidding. Obi-Wan, if you’re keeping something hidden, I understand you might not want to share the details, but... you must be doing something here,” she said.

“Please, forget this, Ahsoka,” Obi-Wan said.

“No,” said Ahsoka.

“Excuse me?” said Obi-Wan, thrown off by the refusal.

“No. I’m not forgetting about this, I’m not forgetting about you, and I’m not giving up on you. I don’t believe what you’re telling me, and I’m going to stay parked right outside your house until you tell me the truth, or the truth comes to us!” Ahsoka yelled as she pulled on Barriss’s elbow and led them out the door and back to the ship. Obi-Wan could clean everything up himself. She paused for a second, realized she’d forgotten something very important, and pulled Barriss by the hand right back to the entrance. “Oh, BY THE WAY, Barriss and I are DATING!” she yelled at the understandably shocked master, slamming the door shut again.

The first day was uneventful. Ahsoka kept the Eclipse’s sensors running continuously, making sure not to miss any transmissions or passing ships Obi-Wan might be in communication with. The second day was much of the same.
The third day, Ahsoka very carefully flew and landed the freighter several meters closer to Obi-Wan’s front door and kept the engines running loudly, just to mess with him, until deciding it was a waste of the ship’s energy.

The fourth day she got to work with that shipboard holographic matrix and created a fake wall of sandstone in front of the door, forcing Obi-Wan to go out the side. When he came around to check, she turned it off so he had no idea how she did that, though he knew it was her.

The fifth day she understood how the holoprojector was built well enough to disassemble and reassemble, then took one of the projectors and blocked off the side door, too. Once he poked at it with his lightsaber, he figured out what was happening and she put the projectors back where they belonged.

The sixth day, Barriss, genius that she was, suggested Ahsoka block off the doors with actual sandstone this time, so they carved slabs out of the environment with their lightsabers. Faintly, thanks to her sensitive hearing, Ahsoka could hear Obi-Wan mutter something as he opened his door, then walked right into the rock thinking it was a hologram.

Through it all, she meditated, reaching out with the Force and trying to find out what made this place so interesting. Nothing revealed itself to her. It only made her feel worse as the time alone made her think about how many people were probably dying elsewhere in the galaxy, how her allies might need her and she wasn’t coming to help.

That determination to stay wasn’t real, and she’d known it. There was so much happening in the galaxy, and unlike Obi-Wan, she couldn’t keep sitting around and waiting.

Even this far away, he’d been found. Far away from civilization on a planet that was far away from civilization. Abandoning all his resources, separated from what few allies of his still lived, closing himself off as much as he could, and Ahsoka still found him. If he could be certain the Empire possessed no one as determined and resourceful and clever as she was, he could still feel secure here.

But he knew they had one.

The last few months had been difficult as Obi-Wan had begun his life here. Gathering materials to rehabilitate this abandoned dwelling, figuring out how to live off the local plants and animals, learning the lay of the land. The inside of his home still left something to be desired.

Nothing like unexpected guests to motivate a person to start cleaning.

Even after several months, it didn’t seem like he’d finished settling in yet, bits of gear and open crates lying around in the open. After three years of war, Obi-Wan had been used to being ready to move across the galaxy at a moment’s notice. It would be many years before he could leave this world behind, he should start acting like it. He moved a few boxes of emergency supplies he hadn’t touched into the closet. Put the spare pump down with the basement hydroponics.

On the table next to him, Anakin’s lightsaber sat amongst the junk. Waiting to be taken by a new wielder. Picking it up, Obi-Wan thought he could feel the heat of Mustafar seeping from it still.

‘I hate you.’
If keeping all these secrets caused Ahsoka to turn her back on him... he’d been learning to live with worse feelings.

There was also the matter of Offee, another reason for him to keep secrets. Though he didn’t expect her to join the Empire, Offee was a variable he simply didn’t know how to deal with, and that only made him less willing to explain himself.

Perhaps he was being too hard on Offee. Ahsoka clearly trusted her.

‘And my attack on the Temple was an attack on what the Jedi have become: an army fighting for the dark side, fallen from the light that we once held so dear. This Republic is failing! It’s only a matter of time.’

Obi-Wan hadn’t given much thought to Offee’s assessment of the Jedi since that day in the courtroom. He’d given her far too little credit. Offee’s ideals weren’t his own, but they were certainly not corruptible. It wasn’t the first time he’d misjudged people.

He’d also need to investigate that decayed village of the Sand People after Ahsoka left. She’d sounded so frightened when she’d told him, what had she seen there?

Anakin, what did you do?

He couldn’t trust anyone. Ahsoka had made it clear he was dangerously close to being discovered as it was, with these ‘inquisitors’ running around. One of them had come here. What if they came back.

Even for Ahsoka, I can’t risk Luke.

It’d been some time since he’d felt so unfocused, so cut off from the Force.

It’d been months since Qui-Gon had spoken to him, and now, he had no idea what to say.

There was an odd knock on Obi-Wan’s door, disturbing his brooding. Over and over the repetitive clanging sound came until he opened the door, jerking back in alarm at the sight of a droideka at his doorstep. He almost ignited his saber right there, until he noticed the black marking on its head.

It must’ve belonged to Ahsoka, though he had no idea where she could’ve gotten such a droid. Or why someone in hiding as she was would put her distinctive markings on her property. His own alias may not have been very creative, but he hadn’t written it in large letters on the side of his house.

Behind that droideka, Obi-Wan could see a few others in the open on the freighter’s loading ramp, with more groups of three red lights peeking out from the darkness inside.

Some kind of astromech rolled out from behind the destroyer, and spoke to him. In Basic, to his initial surprise. “Hey, I’m CC, the astromech on Ahsoka’s ship. I don’t really care about whatever it is you’re doing out here, but you’ve really hurt Ahsoka, and my friend Naberrie here wants to give you a piece of his mind so badly he walked through ten meters of sand to do it, and needs me to translate. So here it goes.”

Surprised by this intrusion but without anything better to do other than getting back to moving boxes, Obi-Wan stood in his doorway, ready to patiently listen to whatever the droideka wanted to say to him.

The destroyer droid launched into what the tone and pace indicated was an angry tirade at Obi-Wan, occasionally pausing to allow CC to update him.
“The Kenobi unit is an incompetent authority whose directives are inadequate in the completion of his goals. It is astonishing to me that the Ahsoka command unit is as functional as she is after years of modifying her program in emulation of the Kenobi unit. The Kenobi is correct in refusing to fight the Empire as his obvious obsolescence would be more a hindrance to his allies than to his opponents. The only reason I do not engage in hostilities against the Kenobi is because it would make Ahsoka feel even worse, which is a difficult feat considering how Kenobi has hurt her, for which he should feel ashamed. Ahsoka is better off without him, and she will realize this in time and forget about him. The Barriss has been noted as having questionable loyalties to Ahsoka in the past, yet stands by her with greater reliability than Kenobi, who says he care for her despite this being inconsistent with his actions. The Kenobi unit knowingly expounds false information to allies. I and the others of my squad hate Kenobi,” the astromech said, cutting off the translation to look at the droideka, clearly surprised by the statement. “I didn’t know you guys could even feel hate.”

The droideka droned in response, red eyes fixed on Obi-Wan.

“What did it say?”

“He said ‘we can now’,” said CC. “Kenobi, buddy, you’ve got to make this right. You’ve failed the people close to you so badly, emotionless killing machines are learning new feelings just so they can scorn you.”

Obi-Wan already knew how unacceptable the situation had become, he didn’t need to hear it from some machines.

“Thank you for your input,” he sighed, staring back at the droideka, which wasn’t going anywhere. “You may leave now.”

The droideka stared at him, its intense, glowing red eyes making him rather uncomfortable as it stood silent and motionless.

“What exactly do you intend to accomplish by staring at me like that?” he asked, as the CC droid slowly backed away from the destroyer.

Then, without warning, its left leg kicked a large spray of sand through the door and into his house. The droideka kept standing there, almost daring him to do something. Obi-Wan knew how protective Ahsoka was of her droids, and decided against escalating things, shutting the door and considering how best to clean up all this sand. From the other side of the door, he could hear the droideka scuttling back to the ships, clicking and buzzing something to its fellows.

Barriss didn’t know what to do about this whole situation. To her, it seemed best to monitor what Ahsoka and Kenobi were doing, be supportive of Ahsoka, and otherwise keep up with business as usual. Spending several days without striking or planning to strike the Empire was almost relaxing, or it would be if she couldn’t sense how aggravated Ahsoka was.

Ahsoka had wandered off early this morning. Barriss wasn’t sure where she’d gone off to, but it was plain that she wanted to be alone. Kenobi continued to be unforthcoming, and it was wearing on her considerably.

The ship sensors and their speeder bike were all ready to be put into action if something happened, though Barriss didn’t expect Tatooine to throw anything at Ahsoka she couldn’t handle. Not after
she’d already torn apart a juvenile sarlacc.

Unless Ahsoka got lost and wandered so far out into the desert she ended up fighting the big one.

*Best not to dwell on that. It will probably happen if I think too hard.*

Which left Barriss alone, which meant more training, this time in a ten-meter wide alcove in a wall of stone out of sight of Kenobi’s home.

Her right arm was extended outward towards a target rock, fingers spread apart as she focused on what she wanted to do, as she had been for over two hours now. The determination she’d mustered up at Mitoth, tapping into her inner strength, trying to bring it out as Revan had instructed.

A spark jumped between her index and middle fingers.

“Alright, you did it!” shouted Revan, hologram blinking into existence and checking out her fingers. “How did it feel? Minor burns aren’t unusual the first time as you learn to control it, and it’ll take practice to make a good bolt on demand.”

“It felt like a jolt of static electricity,” Barriss said, testing out the movements of the affecting fingers, finding her muscles still moved the way she wanted them to. “It’s not exactly an impressive display of the power.”

“You’re not a master, but you’ve added a new ability to your already considerable list,” Revan pointed out. “You’ll get better. You might be able to short out small electronics or stun someone with that jolt.”

“Can we do something else?” she said. This little exercise had taken hours of standing in the same spot, she was willing to end it now that she’d definitively made some small progress.

“Sure. Now that you can use lightning, let’s talk more about power, and I mean that in the literal sense: energy output over time,” said Revan. “Tell me, Barriss, how much physics do you know?”

“I’ve completed studies of kinematics, some particle physics, as well as subjects connected to relativity, astronomy, and hyperspace physics.”

“Have you ever tested out how much mass you can lift? How fast you can accelerate it? Did you know that a bolt of Force lightning can reach over 40,000 degrees?”

“Last I measured, I can support weight of up to 587 kilograms if I commit my full concentration.”

“Oh, wow, you actually did do some tests. I shouldn’t even be surprised by that,” said Revan. “I’ve always been fascinated by physics. Never devoted enough time to make any actual contribution to the field, but I kept up with the science. I tried to make a black hole with the Force once, (it didn’t work) I had a miniature crystal gravfield trap set up to measure spatial distortions and see if Force-pushes worked on the same mechanics as gravity, (they don’t) and tried to control the heat of objects by wiggling the constituent molecules (only worked in a range of a few degrees). Use your imagination. Push your limits.”

“And this will give me a better understanding of the Force?” asked Barriss.

“The Force is many things. The energy connecting all life. Your ally. Your corruptor. A burden. A gift. A shield to protect the helpless. A weapon, to empower the worthy. A whisper. A scream,” said Revan. “There are as many ideas about what the Force is as there are people who know of it. It has no boundaries, only its wielders do. You can’t quantify wisdom, but you can quantify the power it
“Which interpretation do you most agree with?” asked Barriss.

“Yes, I do.”

“...Um...?”

“The Force connects all life. It has as many facets as life does,” said Revan. “Don’t overspecialize. Have more ideas, more skills, more methods to fall back on when others fail. If you reach out into enough areas, you’ll always have something your opponent won’t be prepared for.”

Barriss thought about what Revan said, taking a seat on a rock in the middle of the alcove and practicing with the sand as she’d done on Pantora. Much more of it this time, forming it into a fractal pattern of branching curves, every grain contributing to the overall pattern. See the grain, see the beach.

“I see you’ve found my favorite meditation spot,” came Kenobi’s voice from her left.

“Oh- I apologize, I didn’t realize you used this area,” Barriss said, dropping all the sand into a plume of settling particulate and getting to her feet. “I’ve been here long enough, please, take the spot.”

“There’s no need for you to go,” Kenobi said as he walked closer to her in what seemed a friendly, casual manner. It was difficult for Barriss to tell what Kenobi was feeling. Maybe because he didn’t have a strong handle on the subject, either. If he wanted to talk, this did present an opportunity to make some progress with him. “How have you been?”

“You’re asking about my wellbeing?” Barriss said skeptically.

“These are strange times, and Ahsoka has made it very explicit you two have become close. I thought I should ask,” Obi-Wan said sincerely, taking a seat on a nearby rock.

“I’m doing better, thanks to her,” said Barriss.

“If you don’t mind me asking, how did-”

“She asked me if I wanted to go out for a date. It was only a few weeks ago,” Barriss cut him off.

“Ah. I expected as much.”

“You’re not concerned...” Barriss noted.

“Believe it or not, when I was young, I fell in love with Duchess Kryze of Mandalore. Following the path of the Jedi wouldn’t allow me to continue a relationship like that, and I made a choice to remain and continue my apprenticeship. Ahsoka left the Jedi, she’s not obligated to make that choice,” said Kenobi, much to Barriss’s surprise and relief. “Neither are you.”

“...Oh... I’m glad to hear you say that...” Barriss said. She didn’t know Kenobi very well, and couldn’t tell if he simply wasn’t as strict as Luminara, or if this was a significant development for him since being a member of the Jedi Council. “Perhaps you should explain that to Ahsoka as well.”

“I’ve thought the same thing,” he said solemnly. “Perhaps it would be unwise to foster such attachment.”

Suddenly, watching Kenobi keep Ahsoka emotionally distant from him for no discernible reason despite how desperately she wanted a connection, this situation had became all too familiar for
Barriss’s comfort.

“Tell her you love her, you absolute idiot.”

“Pardon me?” said Kenobi.

“She’s out there alone, believing you don’t care about her, wondering if you ever did care about her, and you’re sitting there deciding that it’s for the best that she feels this way while telling me of all people it isn’t true?” she said through gritted teeth. “Is this the Jedi philosophy of refusing attachments at work, or is this some new form of foolishness you’ve concocted yourself?”

“It would be better if she could leave me here without feeling loss over it.”

“She already feels that loss. She feels it now. You have the ability to remedy it.”

“Perhaps,” Kenobi said with some reluctance as he mulled it over, then studied her intently. “You’re not exactly the Barriss Offee I remember.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” said Barriss, even though she knew it wasn’t really a compliment.

“I don’t understand why Ahsoka would want to travel with you,” Kenobi said absently, like it was a meaningless remark.

For a moment, Barriss felt her limbs going numb, only her will and muscle memory keeping her standing. Once she was confident enough in her stability, she walked away without a word, focusing on any random object she could spot until she could get to the Eclipse. Sand. Rock layers. Boulder. Single cloud in the sky. She needed distractions.

Her pace quickened as she got aboard, and rushed to her pet ysalamiri. The only place on this planet she could deal with this without Ahsoka being pulled into it.

The world was quiet here. Maybe that’s why the ysalamiri had such an uncanny power over the Force, their simple minds were perfectly at peace, their bioengineered bodies efficiently suited to their natural habitat. Here, she could think without any distractions, and be alone with her own thoughts. Not that those were of much comfort right now.

What he said had a point.

You were Ahsoka’s friend, he was her teacher. He knows her better than you did.

Ahsoka deserves better than you.

Here she could start crying without Ahsoka sensing her like this. If she knew how upset Barriss was, she’d come rushing to find out why, and there’d be even more complications with Kenobi.

Barriss could do this one small thing to make sure Ahsoka had one less problem to deal with, to make sure she could take the time she needed and not be bothered with anything else, and she was going to do it.

That’s why you’re the one traveling with Ahsoka while Kenobi stays alone in the sand.

Well. Thinking like that was certainly a nice change of pace.

A lot of the tension Barriss felt suddenly loosened, though the tears continued to come.

Barriss sat alone in the cargo hold, curled up with her hands on her knees when Glow clanked up to
Turning so he was at her side, his left arm unfolded, his legs spread out to gracelessly lower his body down, and he moved the arm lower so the blaster barrels were in contact with the back of her hand. Confused for a moment, Barriss looked between her hand and the droid’s unreadable face, if you could call those three red eyes a face, then decided to turn her hand over so she could grip the barrels. Glow didn’t react, so Barriss held his hand like that for a few moments before releasing.

“Um, thank you, Glow. That was very reassuring,” she said, and the droid chirped something positive-sounding to her as he got up and walked away.

Checking herself over in the refresher’s mirror once she’d calmed down, Barriss had successfully removed all traces of her tears, and with some tricks like blinking rapidly and rolling her eyes in certain ways she’d learned, got the puffiness down so no one would even be able to tell she’d been crying. It took longer than expected given how little time she’d usually needed to prepare like this. Her record for crying her eyes out and then getting back to the briefing room unnoticed was just eleven seconds of prep time. This extended period of ‘being listened to’ and ‘expressing her emotions’ had left her woefully out of practice.

Barriss went back to Snoots, petting him a bit, then studied the construction of the nutrient frame he was perched on. It wasn’t complicated. A flexible membrane a few millimeters thick his porous claws could penetrate, core full of aqueous nutrients, a tube running down to the clear plastic bag storing the solution. A simple support of a horizontal beam attacked to a vertical one that locked into a stand.

The bolts connecting horizontal to vertical looked like they were detachable. So was the feed tube. It took over a week for Snoots to go through a batch, surely he could survive an hour without it.

Snoots perked up and watched Barriss curiously as she dismantled his perch out from beneath him, then fixed him and the remaining pieces he was stuck to onto a backpack. With the ysalamiri’s tail wiggling in the air in the left side of her peripheral vision, Barriss marched out of the Eclipse and back to where she’d left Kenobi.

That man was a member of the Jedi Council, while she hadn’t made it beyond padawan. His knowledge of the Force far exceeded her own, antagonizing him like this could prove ill-advised. Here was one thing about the Force she knew and he didn’t. Something he wasn’t prepared for.

Barriss had no idea what she was going to do, but it was going to be... something.
difficult in the task. He tried the holocron again, and nothing happened, no matter how he focused on it, until it became clear what was going on.

The holocron was resisting him.

“This is the kind of guy who gets a seat on the council these days, huh? Unimpressive, but not exactly surprising,” it said in a mocking tone that told Obi-Wan it knew full well he was trying to move it and failing.

“I don’t recall Ahsoka mentioning any holocrons,” Obi-Wan replied, taking a step back, walking around the holocron, studying its exterior for some indication of where it came from. “Who are you?”

“Someone who’s been dying to meet you. Or I would’ve been, if, y’know, I hadn’t died millennia ago. One of the last remaining members of the Jedi High Council, right?” the holocron said as its infamous, all-too-recognizable avatar flashed into existence in front of Obi-Wan, one that almost made him draw his lightsaber as he recognized the threat posed. “Surprise! Bet you and the other masters thought you’d seen the last of me!”

“Darth Revan,” Obi-Wan muttered. His lightsaber was staying in his hand for the time being. “I’m surprised to see a Sith relic of such importance in Offee’s hands.”

“Please. I’m not a Sith. I’m much worse,” replied Revan.

“I sensed Offee was different,” Obi-Wan said, wishing he’d questioned Ahsoka about how much more intense Offee’s presence had felt. “Your doing, I take it?”

“I’ve been helping her as best I can. That’s to say, pretty damn well,” replied Revan. “That’s a lot more than you’ve been doing for Ahsoka. How’s the stonewalling going? How long do you think it’ll be before you make her pull out her lekku in frustration?”

“Urged on by your machinations, no doubt.”

“No. I hardly even talk to Ahsoka. She has too many hang-ups regarding her masters to be receptive to anything I would tell her,” said Revan. “Though if you keep up what you’re doing, she might ask me for advice out of desperation. You should open up to her, Kenobi. It’s the only way to stop my evil, evil plan of luring in your apprentice by providing useful advice while you shut her out.”

“Is that your goal? To have Barriss seduce Ahsoka to the dark side?”

“She’s not seducing Ahsoka to the dark side,” chided Revan, acting like Obi-Wan was an idiot. “She’s seducing Ahsoka in the conventional sense. I think it’s the dorky charm that’s winning her over.”

Obi-Wan didn’t react. Records and descriptions of Revan were varied, to put it mildly, but he’d always interpreted that as an indication that the ancient Force-wielder was skilled at avoiding topics and supplying incomplete information. Accounts of Revan’s penchant for banter were, if anything, severely understated.

“There’s something I want to ask you about. Something that doesn’t quite add up, despite the evidence,” said Revan. “What happened to Anakin Skywalker? People keep saying he’s dead, but whenever I think about how he was supposed to be this incredibly powerful Jedi, I don’t know, something just. Doesn’t. Fit.”

“I failed him,” Obi-Wan solemnly, turning away from Revan. “And now it’s too late.”
No cutting response came. Perhaps Revan had enough sympathy not to pry more.

“That, I can believe. If you’re so guilt-ridden over losing one apprentice, why are you trying so hard to push another away?” asked Revan.

“Ahsoka and I cannot fight the Empire together,” said Obi-Wan. “It isn’t possible. There are lives I can’t put at risk, not even for Ahsoka’s sake.”

“The truth always comes out, Kenobi. Do you want her to find out with you close by, where you can help her? Or do you want her to discover it when she’s alone? Do you think you’ll be lucky enough to keep this going until she dies?”

“I don’t believe in luck,” said Obi-Wan.

“You should.”

“And why’s that?”

“I’ve heard about you, Kenobi. Bits and pieces, enough for me to piece together a very clear picture of you. I know you were on the Jedi Council during the war. I know you were there during the incident that led to Barriss’s imprisonment and Ahsoka leaving the order. And I can see you’re doing absolutely fuck all to make up for it, assuming you even realize how much pain you’ve caused,” said Revan. “You’re very lucky that I’m just a holocron, because the way you just treated Barriss? The way you’re treating Ahsoka? I’ve killed people for a lot less.”

_It’s only a holocron_, Obi-Wan reassured himself. The projection was lively, but its source, the container storing the facsimile of Revan’s mind, was immobile and defenseless.

“If you intend to attack me, I will destroy you,” Obi-Wan said, thumb over his lightsaber’s activation switch.

“You could try,” Revan said confidently, the bright holographic avatar gradually fading away. “But I’m not your biggest concern right now. It was interesting to finally speak to you, Kenobi. I’ll be sitting this next part out.”

The dissipating hologram revealed Offee was approaching from behind it, emerging out of Revan’s fading image. Obi-Wan was alarmed that she’d gotten so close without him noticing.

_What is that creature stuck to her back?_ he wondered.

Obi-Wan focused on the animal, closed his eyes, put out his hand, and attempted to feel the creature’s presence through this strange haze.

“I wouldn’t do that,” warned Offee.

Opening his eyes, Kenobi saw the creature was now staring at him over Offee’s shoulder with four pitch-black eyes. Curiously to find out the extent of its strange power, he attempted to gently push it.

The animal unhinged its jaw, unsheathed roughly thirty narrow fangs, and snarled at him. Without the Force warning him of its action, Obi-Wan jerked backward in alarm, despite the distance between him and Offee.

“Interesting pet you have,” Obi-Wan remarked. Alarming as it was, he realized that Ahsoka clearly hadn’t been exaggerating the abilities of the ysalamiri.
“I wasn’t aware he would respond in that way,” Offee said, her head tilting away from the creature’s as it slowly returned to its docile state, continuing the eye the Jedi Master.

“You also possess a very interesting holocron,” said Obi-Wan, as Barriss walked to her left and took the holocron in her hands. It was unsettling how unreadable she was to him now. “I wasn’t aware you’d come here accompanied by Revan.”

“What are you doing here, Kenobi?” she asked, deflecting the issue of her taking advice from a former Sith Lord. “You can’t be blind to how this is hurting Ahsoka.”

“What do you want from me, Offee?” he said, deflecting right back.

“I want you to stop being so afraid! What is it that has you so petrified?” Offee yelled, growing closer to him. For decades, the Force had been a constant companion and ally, one he could call upon whenever needed. Suddenly, he felt it being stifled around him. “Is it some dark presence you’re frightened by? It can’t get you in here. Nothing can. You want to become completely unattached, to feel nothing and no one through the Force, I have an easy way of doing so. It’s very relaxing, for a time. And I would never consider remaining like this permanently.”

“I can’t do what you’re asking of me,” Obi-Wan said, backing away from her, his senses becoming disoriented. “I need you to trust that I know what I’m doing.”

“I DID! You were a member of the Jedi Council! You told me I was going to become a force for good, that I could better the lives of everyone in the galaxy, that all the terrible things I did were all for the best, and I BELIEVED YOU!” Barriss yelled, shoving Obi-Wan and knocking him down into the sand. “You all acted as though you knew everything. You all told me I needed to keep myself unattached, so I did. Because I was terrified if I didn’t I would become even worse. And it was killing me.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, ashamed of how he’d been acting. “You were right. About everything.”

Offee’s expression changed from rage to shock as she stood over him, then becoming stern again. “If you’re truly choosing now to begin listening to me, apologize to Ahsoka, not to me!”

“I’m sorry for Ahsoka as well,” he began. “I just don’t know what I should do.”

“Tell her yourself,” Offee said, reaching down and extending her hand to Obi-Wan. “If you’re so sorry about everything that’s transpired, then make things right. This isn’t about whatever you’re doing here on Tatooine. You only need to let Ahsoka know you care about her!”

Obi-Wan lay in the sand, looking at Offee. Gripping her hand, he stood up, and the two of them walked back to his home as he wondered what he was going to say to Ahsoka.

This morning, Ahsoka watched a binary sunrise, the sunlight glittering over the Western Dune Sea. Tatooine could be beautiful, provided you were only planning to spend a couple hours here.

Also, Anakin killed a bunch of children.

She’d been trying to blot out thoughts like that, but that was the kind of knowledge you couldn’t shake off after a week. What could she even do now? All that happened when she thought about
Anakin now was recontextualize events with this new information.

Their first meeting years ago had them working together to save a baby Hutt. Now all she could think about was how he’d flown into a rage and committed mass murder a few months earlier and killed children younger than she’d been.

Obi-Wan’s reaction to the news hadn’t helped at all.

Nothing Obi-Wan had done so far helped at all.

Seated on an outcropping of rock, Ahsoka tried to clear her mind, to connect to the Force, to feel the pulse of all the life that had managed to thrive even in a world like Tatooine. Despite how irritated it made her, now that she’d put some distance between her and Obi-Wan’s new home, she had a feeling, her intuition telling her there really was something important in this desert, but she had no idea where or what it was.

It didn’t help. Her thoughts were all over the place, going from happy memories of Anakin to the creeping terror of that vision, thinking about her relationship with Barriss and her irritation with Obi-Wan, her emotions swinging in all direction while aware she wasn’t getting anywhere with any of this.

What did she think of Anakin now? What could she think? With all the violence and bloodshed they’d experienced in the war, did it even change anything? Did the things he’d taught her, the lessons she’d come to live by, feel empty knowing what he’d done? It was only days ago she’d been mourning his death, now she had to wonder if the friend and mentor she’d remembered was who she thought he was, with Obi-Wan’s behavior adding to her feelings of being lost.

Since meditation wasn’t helping, she thought about whether she should try relieving some stress by screaming into the desert at the top of her lungs for a few minutes. She’d walked at least a kilometer away from the ship, and it wasn’t like there was anyone else around to gawk. It couldn’t hurt.

She wished she hadn’t come here. It wasn’t like she was wanted anyway.

“Ahsoka, come back to Kenobi’s house, please,” Barriss called her over the comm, as if responding on cue to her bitter thoughts of Obi-Wan. Suddenly feeling exhausted, Ahsoka hopped down from her perch and got ready to go back.

After Ahsoka made sure she hadn’t dropped or left anything when Cici’s voice came through shouting “NOW, AHSOKA!”

Running back to Obi-Wan’s house, lightsaber in hand, listening for any indication of approaching ships or sounds of combat, Ahsoka saw all the droidekas arranged in an arc around the front door, with Obi-Wan standing in the center with his saber active, his expression showing his awareness of how little use one saber was against so many blasters. Barriss and Cici were standing safely out of the line of fire, waiting for her.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“The guys told me they’ve found a solution to the ‘impasse’ of you refusing to leave without an explanation from Kenobi, and Kenobi refusing to provide an explanation,” Cici explained. “They’re demanding he either come clean, or they’re going to blow up his house.”

“What?! Everybody put away your blasters!” Ahsoka commanded, all of the droidekas immediately falling into line. “What’s gotten into you guys?”
The droidekas protested that they were frustrated by Kenobi’s treatment of her. They were concerned Ahsoka was wasting her time here, and collectively decided to adopt an abnormal strategy to resolve the situation.

“Of course it’s upsetting, but I’m not going to fight him over it. I just want to take some more time to try and convince him, okay?”

The current situation was unacceptable. Ahsoka had no time frame, and nothing about Kenobi’s behavior indicated any significant change in the past week, while Ahsoka’s wellbeing had declined. They could all see it.

“Hey, don’t worry about me,” Ahsoka said adamantly. “I’ve felt worse than this.”

The Kenobi unit had also caused Barriss to leak a large amount of liquid from her eyes.

“...He caused what?” she asked angrily, looking between Barriss and Obi-Wan, the former’s expression making it clear she knew what the droidekas were talking about. Ahsoka glared at Obi-Wan, who didn’t appear to understand what the droidekas were saying, but knew that look couldn’t mean anything good.

“Obi-Wan, if there’s anything you want to tell me, now would be a good time,” said Ahsoka. “Or, maybe, the last time.”

It was visible in her eyes that he understood exactly what she meant.

“I can’t,” he said yet again.

What am I doing here? Ahsoka asked herself. She continued glaring at him for a second, deeply considering what she should do next.

“...Bye,” Ahsoka said dispassionately with an uninterested half-wave of her hand as she headed up the Eclipse’s boarding ramp. As she reached it, she stopped, struggling with whether or not to go through with this. Barriss stayed where she was standing, looking worriedly at Ahsoka.

Just one more chance. Maybe Barriss’s idea was right the right one. Maybe he just didn’t know.

“You can’t tell me because you don’t really know yourself,” said Ahsoka. “You and I both know the Force isn’t always clear when guiding us to where we need to go. That’s it, isn’t it?”

“I’m glad you understand,” he said. There had been a noticeable pause. The words sounded forced, and a bit desperate. It didn’t sound like he’d really been thinking along those lines.

“You’re lying to me,” Ahsoka said coldly, and Obi-Wan knew he’d been caught. He definitely regretted saying what he’d just said, but not as much as he would once she was through.

“I can’t tell you why I’m here, the smallest risk is too great, but I have a reason, and I haven’t abandoned the galaxy to the Emperor. Ahsoka, I need you to trust me,” Obi-Wan said, his eyes pleading.

“I do trust you,” said Ahsoka. “But you obviously don’t trust me.”

With the droidekas following behind her, Ahsoka ascended the ramp and prepared to leave Tatooine behind, and as she did so, thought about how absolutely relieved she was to be going.

“Ahsoka, wait!” Barriss said desperately, holding Ahsoka’s wrist. “I know you must be furious, but
please think about this. You clearly care about Kenobi, and despite his behavior, I know he cares deeply about you as well. What if he dies in the course of whatever action he’s pursuing? Do you want that to be the last conversation you ever have with him?”

Ahsoka stopped and thought about it. Barriss was right, about how angry she was, her feelings about her old master. With a bit of reluctance, Ahsoka headed back and lowered the ramp, finding Obi-Wan exactly where she’d left him. With an exhausted sigh, she rushed down the ramp and embraced him for a hug goodbye.

“I’m sorry, Ahsoka,” Obi-Wan said, hugging his grand-pupil tightly. “I’m sorry I wasn’t strong enough to save Anakin. Someday, I’ll be able to explain everything. It will make sense then, I promise.”

This was about as good as things were going to get.

“Take care of yourself, Obi-Wan,” Ahsoka said.

“I will.” Obi-Wan looked past Ahsoka and directed an approving nod to Barriss. “You take care of her. Take care of each other.”

A minute later, Ahsoka caught one final glimpse from the cockpit of Obi-Wan waving her goodbye, as the Eclipse arced upwards into the arid sky.

_Could’ve gone better, could’ve gone worse_, Ahsoka thought to console herself. Taken a minute to carefully memorize the latitude and longitude of Obi-Wan’s house, Ahsoka proceeded to delete the information from the ship’s computer as they exited the atmosphere. If the Empire ever managed to get a hold on this ship, no need to let them know where she’d been even if they had no idea what was there.

Thoughts were spiraling around in Ahsoka’s head. There was something she was missing. Something she needed to piece together.

‘Don’t you whine to me about all the improbably convenient stuff that happens. The Force likes to mess with people, okay?’

‘I saw her funeral procession. She was pregnant.’

‘Ahsoka, what do you know about the events surrounding Padmé’s death? The official story is that she was killed by the Jedi, another effort by them by the Empire to stir up contempt for the order. We both know that can’t be true, and I can’t find any verifiable details about where she was when she died, or what she was doing. Do you know anything about what really happened to her?’

‘You’re hiding something from me. You’ve been hiding it from me ever since you brought back Padmé’s body!’

‘She’s adopted, only a few months old now. Our queen couldn’t be happier with the new princess.’

‘Yes. Anakin is the father.’

For a second, as her heart starting pounding with anger and adrenaline, Ahsoka considered turning
this ship right around and landing right on top of Obi-Wan’s house. She still might. Eventually. Right now, there was something else she really needed to investigate. Better to verify things before doing anything rash.

“Ahsoka,” came Barriss's voice. “Ahsoka, you're shaking.”

Snapping out of her daze, Ahsoka let go of the controls momentarily, noticing how off course she’d been steering them as a result of her distraction.

“Is... something the matter?” asked Barriss, confused by the state of her partner, who was still glancing around, thinking, trying to figure out if this hunch really made as much sense as she thought it did.

“The people I trust and respect have been hiding things from me.” muttered Ahsoka, her glare fixed on the space ahead as the computer began plotting a hyperspace route to Alderaan. “Nothing unusual.”

Chapter End Notes

“’You’ve failed the people close to you so badly, emotionless killing machines are learning new feelings just so they can scorn you.” This is it, this is the best line I’ve ever written.

I also had to work in that Bioshock reference after I missed my chance to have someone say "Would you kindly?" to the clone troopers.

I was a bit conflicted over how to represent Force lightning, such as whether it's made of pure space magic or actual electrons, but I think treating it as a pure focus of intent that also happens to affect elementary particles is an interesting explanation that doesn't science it up too much.

It was tricky to find a way to get Revan and Obi-Wan alone together. The initial idea was that the holocron would just appear in his house with no explanation, but if it's implied that the holocron can move around on its own that goes against a lot of previous chapters. Continuity is important, people.

If Artoo is a dog, and Chopper is a cat, the droidekas are a murder of crows. They're smarter than people expect, they probably shouldn't be kept as pets whether they're friendly or not, and they will follow Ahsoka anywhere because she was nice to them and they will remember that forever. Yeah, this settles it, the term for a group of droidekas is a "murder". Or a "conspiracy". Meanwhile, Cici is a feral raccoon that took up residence in the garage and has lived there so long everyone just treats it as another roommate.

An important thing I've learned about writing this story is to alter the plot to better suit the characters, not the other way around. Unlike some Star Wars things I could name. Because "You obviously don't trust me" was originally going to be the last thing Ahsoka said to Obi-Wan in the story and possibly in their lives before I realized Barriss has her own share of issues in this area and would intervene, so I changed the ending and worked some buildup for it into her conversation with him.
The House of Organa

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Barriss sat quietly in the Eclipse’s cockpit, eyes switching between the panel in front of her, and Ahsoka, who was glaring into the spiraling vortex of hyperspace, as she had been doing for the past two hours.

It was troubling. Barriss couldn’t recall ever seeing Ahsoka this angry. There had been times she’d been angry before, but she was usually direct about it. Right now, she was seething. Sitting still in her seat with her brow all scrunched up, arm muscles tense as she gripped the controls. Barriss hadn’t known seething was something Ahsoka even did.

It was also difficult to come up with something to break this awful silence. Ahsoka was upset about somebody keeping something from her and/or lying about it, that was all Barriss had extrapolated from that weirdly cryptic comment Ahsoka made after she’d plotted their new course. Barriss was also acutely aware she was responsible for more than her fair share of Ahsoka’s trust issues, and wasn’t eager to find out why she was mad in case it was somehow Barriss’s fault.

Keeping secrets was something Barriss had been strictly avoiding, obsessively so ever since Ahsoka had first asked her out. She’d even tried to stop keeping her emotions subdued, even when she really didn’t want to talk about them, because she didn’t want Ahsoka to get the impression Barriss didn’t want to talk to her, even if that wasn’t the problem, that was the only way to be sure. Now, something was making Ahsoka more angry than Barriss could remember, and even if she probably (hopefully?) wasn’t the cause, Barriss wanted to help. Or at least get out of the way when Ahsoka bore down on whatever the real cause was.

Also, Snoots’ nutrient frame was still disassembled, and she really didn’t feel comfortable leaving him lying on the floor as he was. He might be getting dehydrated.

“Why are you so angry?” Barriss blurted out.

For the first time in two hours, Ahsoka’s forehead unscrunched, and she looked at Barriss. “What?”

“Why are you so angry?” asked Barriss, relieved, slightly, that Ahsoka’s expression had softened up now that they were talking, so she probably wasn’t mad at her specifically. “You’ve been glaring out the window in dead silence for hours. Why are you taking us to Alderaan? ...Also, Alderaan is three days away, do you intend to stare angrily in its direction for the entire journey?”

“Maybe,” Ahsoka said tersely, taking a few deep breaths, like she’d been so focused on being mad she’d forgotten to inhale as often as she should. “Okay, I’m not 100% certain about everything that’s happened, but let’s go over some stuff I’ve been piecing together about my master and Padmé Amidala.”

Walking through the halls of the Aldera Royal Palace, Bail stretched his neck trying to work out the stress built up from all the time spent reading through the latest senate proceedings and trying to keep up with news of how Palpatine’s various governors and moffs were running the galaxy. With
Sheltay still on maternity leave, his other aides were still struggling to keep up. Taking breaks out in the garden helped, but he knew he’d have to get back to work and brace himself for the latest calamity. Just like yesterday, and the day before that, and the day before that.

The halls only had a few guards on patrol and droids at work, such as R2, who was rolling at what looked like a slightly faster-than-normal pace, dome swiveling around nervously, taking a hard left down another hall when he saw Bail coming. That droid was an odd one, though Bail respected him enough to continue his previous owners’ policy of not performing regular memory wipes. He stepped back into his office, turned on the lights, and felt his heart skip when he saw Ahsoka Tano sitting in his chair.

"Ahsoka?" he said, taking a deep breath as the pounding in his chest settled. “What are you doing here? How did you get past security?”

“You know exactly why I’m here, and I know a guy on the inside. Don’t worry, he owed me some favors, but was still pretty tight-lipped,” she said angrily, her expression shifting from subdued anger to bored disappointment with him as she leaned back in his chair. “How’s your daughter?”

A completely blunt response about her sleeping peacefully under the watchful photoreceptor of a nanny-droid almost came out, then Bail stopped, and the pause didn’t go unnoticed. Any carefully-worded response he could come up with had no point. Ahsoka was here. She knew.

“Don’t even think about giving me the run-around, I know everything,” she added.

Bail considered that for a moment, and while he didn’t doubt she understood more of the situation that when they’d last seen each other, if she really knew ‘everything’, she would appear much more depressed than she did.

“What exactly do intend to do here? What were you thinking would happen when you arrived?” he asked. “Besides justify my reasons for not telling you the truth? If you wanted to leave me shaken with that little appearance, you succeeded. You made me think my home was unsafe and an intruder had come to take my daughter. Well done.”

Ahsoka wasn’t budging, but the cutting remark had served its purpose.

“Padmé and Anakin are dead. I want to make sure their daughter is safe,” she said. “Don’t act like I’m the only one who hasn’t done the best job dealing with the situation.”

“...Come with me,” he said reluctantly, not entirely sure if he should be doing this, but nevertheless leading her out of his office and up a few floors to his daughter’s room.

The baby girl stared up out of her crib, curious, unable to comprehend to reason for the tears streaming down Ahsoka's face.

Staring at her with those big, brown, familiar eyes.

"The last thing Padmé did before the end was give her a name. Leia."
who was also there because her presence made Organa uncomfortable and Ahsoka felt he deserved to feel more of that emotion. The baby girl’s joy was doing a lot to temper Ahsoka’s rather intense rage with Organa, whose explanations she found rather... unsatisfying.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she demanded.

"I'm sorry, we thought the fewer people who know, the better," Organa replied.

"'We'? Who else knows?"

"You know what Anakin and Padmé represented," he said. Ahsoka let him talk, but she was well aware he had deflected the question. “If the Empire knew about this, if Palpatine knew-"

"You think I would ever tell the Empire about their daughter?" she yelled as she furiously approached the senator. "Don't you dare think I'd bring harm to their family!"

"It's not only concern for her that kept me from telling you. I wasn't sure if, if you knew..."

"Knew what? What else are you keeping from me?" she demanded, setting down Leia, who between Ahsoka’s outbursts and disappointment at not floating anymore began crying until Barriss began levitating her instead, keeping her within arm’s reach despite control equal to Ahsoka’s.

She found it hard to stay angry, seeing how saddened he was. Whatever he was keeping hidden, about Anakin and Padmé, it wasn't being done to hurt her. But she still wasn’t being kept in the know, and that wasn’t good enough.

“'You knew Obi-Wan was alive, and you didn’t tell me. You know what it took to find him?" Ahsoka asked. “What, are Anakin and Padmé alive, too?"

“Ahsoka, please,” Barriss said, as Organa, for a split second, twitched at her sarcastic question.

“I saw that look,” Ahsoka said accusingly, ignoring Barriss. “What did that look mean?"

“It meant you have come into my home uninvited and starting asking dangerous questions about my daughter!” he yelled.

“She’s not your daughter!” Ahsoka yelled back, and Organa suddenly looked angrier at her than she would’ve thought possible. For a moment the two of them scowled at each other- then Leia started crying at their outburst, and Barriss handed her over to Organa. Cradling her, he got her to smile again with remarkable ease. “...I’m sorry. All things considered, I can’t think of anyone in a better position to raise Leia.”

Ahsoka sighed and leaned back in her chair, shutting her eyes as she tried to deal with this latest act of disrespect and exclusion from the people she thought were her friends and allies.

Then her eyes shot right back open again at the loud crashing sound coming from behind them, and she and Barriss drew their sabers. One of the double doors at the other side of the antechamber was knocked off its frame, while the impact made its partner spin on its hinges and slam into the wall. The black-booted foot that had done it retracted into the opening, and the new arrival stepped through the threshold.

“BAIL! I figured everything out! I told you I would! Where are you, you bearded huttspawn!” Sabé yelled as she furiously stormed into the room. A royal guardsman rushed to tackle her, but without even turning around, Sabé reached back and pinched the area where his neck and shoulder met. Ahsoka wasn’t sure what she’d done, but the guy dropped to the floor. If it wasn’t for the Force,
Ahsoka wouldn’t have even been sure he was still alive. The Nabooian bodyguard zeroed in on Bail, who was protectively holding a very confused but intrigued Leia. The two ex-Jedi deactivated their weapons when she finally noticed them and walked over. “Ahsoka? Barriss? What are you doing here?”

“Same as you, I’m guessing,” said Ahsoka, pointing her thumb over her shoulder towards Leia. “How’d you find out?”

“Don’t act so surprised, I’ve been having adventures for the past month, too. I followed various leads, had to fight and tear an eye out of a sando aqua monster, mounted its preserved iris in my ship, called in that favor Typho owed me, ended up tracking down Padmé’s undertaker, then throttled the necessary details out of him. It was, um, more complicated than it sounds,” Sabé said, staring down at the filthy combat suit she was wearing. Now that Ahsoka was looking at it up close, the black fabric appeared to have been stained with multicolored blood from at least four different species. “It wasn’t hard to piece things together after that. How did you find out?”

“Um, piecing together random pieces of information, plus a few nudges from the Force,” said Ahsoka as she kept her expression under control. Ahsoka’s sense of smell was excellent, and Sabé stank of unfamiliar, dried bodily fluids. She had better not try to handle Leia with those filthy gloves on.

“Whatever works, I suppose,” she said, turning to Leia, who was huddled against her adoptive father’s chest. Sabé knelt down slightly to smile at her, then shifted her gaze upwards to glare at Bail, switching off between the two of them for the next few moments. “Hi there! Hi, I’m Sabé. Can you say ‘Sabé’?- Why didn’t you tell me about her?- Oh, aren’t you just the cutest little thing!- I am so angry at you- Look at her little hands!- If you weren’t holding a baby right now, I would punch your teeth out. What’s her name?”

“Leia,” Bail said, holding onto his daughter protectively, tense as the prospect of being beaten bloody by his new guest remained a real possibility after he’d been working so diligently not to be beaten by the last one.

“Oh, that’s a beautiful name!” Sabé said excitedly.

“Padmé is the one who gave it to her,” Organa replied.

“Of course she was,” said Sabé, rising up from her slight crouch, trying to keep up her smile towards Leia despite the surge of sadness she suddenly felt.

“What is the meaning of this?” demanded a voice from behind them. Queen Breha strode in through the opening Sabé had made, flanked by a quartet of guards, two of whom rushed to get between Organa, Leia, and the guests while the other two kept in front of the queen. All of them were pointing force pikes at the outsider. Ahsoka and Sabé both seemed to be expecting the other to start explaining first, and the resulting pause gave Queen Breha enough time to examine the situation herself. “Follow me. Guards, leave us,” the queen said, leading the group, sans the obedient guards, through to the other side of the antechamber, royal blue dress flowing behind her, taking her seat in the throne room with her husband standing next to her.

Sabé, having been among royalty for so much of her life, immediately straightened up and bowed down to the queen of Alderaan. “Your Highness,” she began, “forgive me, but are you aware of your daughter’s birth parents?”

“Of course I am,” she replied, giving her words the perfect touch of offense at the implicit accusation of ignorance to leave Sabé unsettled.
“I’m going to take Leia back to her room,” Bail whispered, cradling the tired infant as he kissed his wife’s hand, then left.

Leia looked over her father’s shoulder at Ahsoka, who waived back at her as Bail took the girl out of sight.

See you later, Skygirl.

“Tell me, what exactly did the three of you plan to accomplish in coming here?” asked Queen Breha.

“I came here to confirm my suspicions and to ensure the safety of Padmé Amidala’s daughter,” explained Sabé.

“I wasn’t planning anything in particular, what I’d do would depend on what kind of answers I got,” said Ahsoka.

The queen’s attention then turned to Barriss, who took a moment to realize she was being expected to provide an answer, too.

“I’m only here for Ahsoka’s sake. Admittedly, I’m interested, but I have no personal involvement in this issue,” she said, taking a step back and out of the discussion, hoping to avoid Queen Breha’s attention. She’d kept to the periphery of this situation so far, she wasn’t getting any more mixed up in it than she had to.

“Well, you are now here, and you appear to understand the situation. What do you intend to do now?” Queen Breha asked.

“With your permission, I would like to angrily yell at Bail for several hours,” said Sabé, coincidentally as Organa walked back in. “Beyond that, I offer my service protecting Leia, if you’ll accept it.”

“To your first concern, absolutely not. From this point on, any criticisms or objections you- or you, Tano- have to say to my husband, you will say to me,” the queen said protectively as Organa again took his place next to her. Even sitting down, Queen Breha’s regal posturing and voice were intimidating enough to make Sabé gulp. Ahsoka was pretty sure the queen couldn’t use the Force, but even so, she could feel that. “To your second, I will consider it carefully, and thank you for such an offer. Tano? What of you?”

“Leia is probably Force-sensitive,” said Ahsoka. “Even if you keep her origins a secret, her presence alone could attract the attention of Palpatine and his servants someday. They won’t know who her parents are, but he’ll see her abilities as a potential threat. Or a potential asset.”

“Yes. Bail informed me of the threat of the inquisitors,” said the queen.

“You know of them?” asked Barriss. “How?”

“Ah, that’s right, you had already left when a pair of them showed up and started threatening Riyo and the others,” Sabé explained. “No need to worry, I killed them.”

“What, two of them? By yourself?” asked Ahsoka. She’d figured Sabé was tough, but beating a pair of trained Force-users wasn’t something a normal person was able to do.

“If it concerns you, I had the element of surprise on my side and didn’t get through the battle completely unscathed,” Sabé said as she pulled at her neckline to show a large scar on her right shoulder.
“Tano, how do you propose to protect my daughter?” asked the queen, with a bit of urgency.

“If she really does have latent power, she’s going to need training in how to use it eventually,” said Ahsoka, who was coming up with this plan spur of the moment. Bringing up the inquisitors made her realize that maybe Bail really did have a point in the importance of secrecy. “Keep an eye on her. When the time comes, I can train her. In the meantime, I’ll keep my distance. If that’s what you want.”

“I wouldn’t object to occasional visits, though you’re concerns for our safety are unwarranted,” Queen Breha said. “Alderaan is a peaceful world, but ‘peaceful’ should not be taken to mean ‘defenseless’. We have no fleet with which to attack other systems, however our orbital and ground-based defenses are considerable. It would take the combined power of half the imperial fleet to break the planetary shield. There are few places in the galaxy safer from the Empire.”

“I’m not worried for the planet,” said Ahsoka. “This palace isn’t exactly safe from infiltration.”

“Your security scanners are easily fooled by basic countermeasures, door locks are easily picked, counterintelligence sweeps aren’t done often enough, and your guards’ primary weapons appear to be completely ceremonial,” Sabé added.

Breha sighed, aware of how little safety her family had. “We’ve been revising our security arrangements in light of the galaxy’s shifting political starscape.”

“What would you have us do?” asked the senator.

Oh, NOW everybody wants me to help them, Ahsoka thought bitterly. As angry as she was, she didn’t want to waste this opportunity.

“Taking Sabé up on her offer would be a good start. You need all the help you can get,” Ahsoka said, as Sabé smiled. It made Ahsoka feel better to find out Sabé didn’t know anything either. At least this time the secrecy wasn’t intended to exclude Ahsoka specifically. “Any kind of secret communication system or device you have, give me one. Any sign of trouble from the Empire, contact me. If she shows signs of Force-powers, contact me. I want to help you. As for everything else... please don’t mess her up.”

Seated atop the Eclipse, which was parked on a landing pad nestled in the mountains, Ahsoka stared at the glittering lights of Aldera. Partly trying to clear her head, mostly waiting expectantly for some new source of anger to pop into it, to piece together a new reason to storm right back into the palace and cause a commotion. Tatooine had been draining enough, but Ahsoka liked to think endurance was one of her strong points.

Stars shined in the clear night above the moonless planet, artificial lights scattered around the landscape making the dark sky and ground blend together at some points.

The only other thing she might want to try was talking to Artoo again, see what else she could get out of him. When she’d tried a couple hours ago, he was so panicked and hesitant. Artoo was panicked and hesitant. The more she tried, the more he got. Didn’t want the little guy to burn out his circuits, but her patience was getting worn thin.

There were still things being kept from her, like whatever Obi-Wan was doing, but now that Anakin
and Padmé's child was accounted for, Ahsoka wondered what could possibly be even more of a bombshell. Maybe she should stay on Alderaan for the time being. Maybe if she went back to Tatooine and told Obi-Wan she knew about Leia, he might be more forthcoming this time.

“Would you prefer to be alone?” Barriss asked, peeking out from the top hatch of the freighter, holding two steaming cups of tea.

“Absolutely not,” Ahsoka said, as Barriss sat down and put her arm around her, the two leaning against each other. It helped.

Leia was safe. She was cared for and loved by her parents. Above them, defense stations orbited Alderaan, and a planetary shield generator lay waiting just a few kilometers from here. Ahsoka hoped it would all be enough.

Chapter End Notes

Floating around like that was the happiest moment of Leia's entire life. It's all downhill from there.

Writing this has been an interesting experience as a Star Wars fan, and with everything that's happened in the franchise over the past couple years like the controversy surrounding The Last Jedi, I think I've noticed the major differences between Canon and Legends and why things are going the way they are. Legends has a reputation for being inconsistent and nonsensical, but the more I look at what's there, the more I think its compartmentalization is a strength. Yeah, a lot of it sucks, but it's also very easy to ignore. With the new canon, everything is so interconnected that the garbage can't be avoided, as has happened with TLJ's take on the characters creeping into the comics, primarily Poe's. Once something is in the canon, it's there permanently and it seems everything else has to shift around to fit the new stuff in rather than admit it was a bad idea and reject it. And then Disney can't admit any kind of flaw in anything, it all has to be part of some elaborate plan.

With more interconnectivity, the writers keep trying to lay groundwork for events and plotlines, but I've noticed a problem where they just don't go anywhere. The disconnect between TFA and TLJ is an easy target for mockery, but even Filoni's stuff has this problem. The inquisitors are forgotten in the second half of Rebels, the holocron from Malachor was smashed without us learning anything about who made it or what happened on Malachor, and Sabine's plotline ends with her abdicating her place as the new Mandalore to Bo-Katan, who does not appear in the show afterwards. With Filoni going to work on Resistance, who knows when we'll see Ezra, Ahsoka, Sabine, or Thrawn again, or find out what they've been doing. Maybe they'll show up in Resistance, but there's no guarantee. Then there's Lucasfilm's chronic inability to do anything significant with the Jedi in that thirty-year gap between RotJ and TFA because nobody can decide what the hell actually happened with Kylo Ren or who Snoke is. Everything is centered around the OT, so there's no stuff set in the Old Republic coming. Then there's the mysterious threat out in the Unknown Regions the Aftermath Trilogy and Zahn's Thrawn novel were building up which apparently isn't Snoke because he sucks and is dead, so who knows where that's going to go.

Then again, I'm pretty confident Zahn can do damage control on the novel side of
things. He's done it before, and Thrawn: Alliances potentially lays groundwork for who and what Snoke is that's actually intriguing. I'm not saying Zahn is the bestest writer ever, because he's not, but the guy seems to be the only person working on Star Wars with any kind of plan. Guys like Rian Johnson think they're smart, Zahn is smart, a bestselling author with a masters in physics. RCJ is an obnoxiously smug "artist", Zahn treats writing as a profession, one he works hard at to do the best job possible, and it shows.

Legends works had a definitive ending to their stories, the new canon just keeps going and going without delivering any resolution or definitive answer to anything. I wrote many chapters of buildup for Ahsoka getting together with Barriss, confronting Thrawn and Yularen, finding Obi-Wan, and learning Leia existed. Then I delivered on those points. It's not "predictable", it's payoff. I may just be a random fan who's written this insanely meticulous story as a hobby, but one thing I'm proud of is stuff fucking happens in it. Ahsoka canonically doesn't even get to hang out with Kaeden Larte past one book, much less either Skywalker twin. E.K. Johnston even wrote a short story making that clear. If it's to be taken at face value, it's another instance of characters not getting to develop together. If Ahsoka and Kaeden actually were spending time together in secret and the viewpoint character Miara simply didn't know, it's pointlessly drawing things out instead of just showing that relationship.

And after five years, we still don't know where Barriss is, not that it really bothers me. It's free real estate. Maybe the new season of Clone Wars will answer that.

That's not to say I think Star Wars has been "ruined". I don't think it can be ruined. Star Wars like a starfish. You might be mad that some jackass cut off one of your starfish's points, but it'll be fine given enough time.

I'd considered making this chapter the last, but there are a few more plot threads that need to be tied up, so I'm going to take this opportunity to take a break and plan out the final arc. I don't know how long it'll take. There's a general sense of what I want to happen, but I really need to work out exactly how and why everyone gets into their final places for it to work. Because that's what a self-contained story should do.
Renegotiation

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

As the *Eclipse* drifted through space around Alderaan’s sun, diametrically opposite the planet as it drifted through space, Barriss woke up. The new bed they’d bought and installed back when they were on solid ground was proving considerably more comfortable than the original bunks it had replaced. Alderaanian designers certainly knew how to prioritize comfort.

As the disc-shaped ship slowly rotated over the course of hours, sunlight came in from the cabin’s small viewport. Still a bit dreary, Barriss took a moment to muster up the will to open her eyes. Feeling a heavy weight on her chest, she saw it was Ahsoka’s head, blue-tipped horns pointed upwards next to Barriss’s left cheek. If they grew much longer than they were now, lying like this would become rather precarious. Thick layers of blankets covered them both.

*Ah. Of course.*

With that concern of the pressure on her chest resolved, Barriss rested her arms over the blankets covering Ahsoka, and closed her eyes again. Almost back to sleep, Barriss realized her clothes felt odd, shifting slightly. Looking down at her arms, then her bare shoulders, then over the side of the bed, she realized that her clothes didn’t feel as they normally did because they were on the floor.

*AH. OF COURSE.*

Fully cognizant now, Barriss lay rigidly stiff, arms at her side. If her heart kept pounding like it was, it’d probably wake Ahsoka up before long.

*Why are you acting this way?* Barriss wondered to herself after her heart settled. It wasn’t as if this wasn’t a position she’d dreamt of being in. Figuratively dreamt, of course. Also literally. A few times.

*There is nothing to worry about. This was your idea to begin with.*

With a bit of hesitation, she slowly raised her arms and put them back around Ahsoka, feeling her warmth. This was going to take a bit of adjustment.

Ahsoka gradually awoke over a few minutes, shifting her body upwards to bring her forehead nearer to Barriss’s cheek.

“Hey,” Ahsoka said groggily, opening one eye to check that Barriss was also awake. The blankets shifted as Ahsoka stretched out her legs, rolling over to Barriss’s side.

“Good morning,” Barriss said back, stretching out as well now that it wouldn’t wake Ahsoka up.

This bed was so comfortable. Regardless of their relationship status, Ahsoka wished she’d replaced those bunks months ago, they were terrible.

*Time to wake up,* she told herself.
Lacking the motivation to start the day, or whatever time it was locally due to how hyper-lagged she was from flying around the galaxy, Ahsoka shuffled over a few centimeters towards Barriss.

Step one: get your eyes open. I know you can do it, Ahsoka’s brained told her, trying to get her to work. Doing so, Ahsoka saw Barriss staring fixedly at her. It got a little unnerving.

Please blink, Barriss.

Your eyes are going to dry out.

Blink.

No? Okay, then.

...OH, RIGHT, Ahsoka thought, suddenly moving with more energy as she looked back over the side of the bed, found her clothes were right where she’d left them, stared up at the ceiling for a moment, then back to the floor to see that Barriss’s clothes were also where Ahsoka had left them.

I’M AWAKE NOW. TOOK ME A MINUTE, NOW I’M AWAKE.

“How’re you feeling?” Ahsoka asked, noticing Barriss was tightly gripping the top edge of the blankets and was holding them all the way up to her neck.

“Good. Excellent. I’m excellent!” Barriss said. Her smile was sincere, though she didn’t seem to know what to say.

Seeing an opportunity too good to resist, Ahsoka propped her head up on her left hand, placed her right hand on her hip, and coyly replied. “Yeah, you certainly were.”

Barriss was a bit taken aback by that, laughing unevenly, blushing, then, yep, the blankets were getting pulled up to her chin now.

There were a few things Ahsoka could deduce from her considerable understanding of her girlfriend: Barriss was not entirely sure what she should do, and she also did not want to be the first to get out of bed.

Getting up wasn’t something Ahsoka could be motivated to do for herself, but she’d do it for Barriss.

“I’m gonna go check our course, make sure we’re not drifting off course,” Ahsoka said casually as she finished getting dressed, ready to start the day, only to linger for a moment and sit down on the side of the bed. Ahsoka pressed her hand into Barriss’s cheek and asked, “Want me to get you something to eat?”

“That won’t be necessary. I’ll join you shortly,” Barriss said, closing her eyes and tilting her head into Ahsoka’s hand. She sure was enjoying this.

A lot.

It didn’t seem Ahsoka was getting her hand back any time soon. As she gently pulled the hand away, Barriss suddenly reached up and kept it right where it was.

Note to self, Ahsoka thought as Barriss smiled, \textit{start with her face next time}. 
“Um, heh, should I not have gotten dressed yet?” asked Ahsoka, as Barriss eyes shot open and she let go.

“No, no, go on,” Barriss said as she tugged the blankets back up to her neck while pulling them down over her legs with her foot, covering up the truly scandalous sight of her bare shins and leaving her a head poking out of a pile of fabric. “I’ll join you in a bit.”

The last thing Ahsoka heard before the cabin door sealed shut was Barriss collapsing back onto the bed. Better leave her alone for a bit.

Walking through the ship, Ahsoka could feel sand from Tatooine on the bottoms of her feet. Ahsoka felt tempted to get her and Barriss into the space suits, make sure everything is secured to the ship interior, and then open up the airlocks to blast the sand out with an explosive decompression. It was probably the only way to get it all.

Maybe she shouldn’t have been so quick to get out of bed.

_Focus, Ahsoka, you have things to do_, she told herself.

No, the other parts of her brain replied back, preferring to think about that thing Barriss had done with her tongue. That had been unexpected.

...Alright, fine, she thought as she focused, beginning an overdue system check, and considered where she should take them next.

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A few minutes of lazing later, Barriss finally got up and got dressed. Standing alone in the cabin for a moment, Barriss both felt uncertain, and uncertain of what she was feeling. It made for an interesting juxtaposition, and one she had become familiar with by now.

One more bit of Jedi teaching had been tossed in the incinerator. Admittedly, her education hadn’t technically been explicit about this sort of thing, but Barriss was fairly sure this fell under the ‘no attachment’ rule set.

The first concern that came to mind was getting something to eat, and Barriss somewhat regretted that she’d refused Ahsoka’s offer to get her food. In addition to the bed, Alderaan had served as an opportunity to purchase as much high-quality food as they could realistically eat before it decayed.

Heading to the galley on the way to the cockpit, the holocron was right where she’d left it, at the edge of the galley’s window, providing an excellent view of space. Revan preferred being left near a window whenever Barriss wasn’t carrying the holocron around.

In that instant, Barriss could feel every slight dishevelment in her appearance. A few out-of-place hairs, the ones Ahsoka had been running her fingers through and/or tugging on. There were exactly seventeen of them. Barriss could feel each one. Her clothes were wrinkly from lying on the floor all night.

Revan said absolutely nothing.

“Would you please say whatever you had planned for this and get it over with?” said Barriss. The silence was killing her. “I know you must’ve prepared something.”
“...You know what? Unless you ask for advice, whatever you do with your girlfriend is your business,” Revan said calmly. “Though it was smart to wait until you were light-years from Tatooine. No matter what you do, you might think you’ve gotten all the grains off your hands, but without water, there’s still sand. There’s still sand.”

“Well... I’m glad,” said Barriss, boiling some water to make tea. Along with some fruit and smoked meat she’d bought back on Alderaan, breakfast was ready.

“You are, y’know, happy with this development, right?” Revan asked, hologram appearing next to Barriss.

“Yes, I am,” Barriss said.

“Satisfied?” Revan added slyly.

“Well of course I—” Barriss stopped and groaned. “I’m going to bring Ahsoka our food,” Barriss said, walking right through the hologram.

There was a small jolt of acceleration, and looking back at the galley window Barriss said they were now in hyperspace.

Picking up the pace now, Barriss headed for the cockpit, carrying the tea and fruit, and asked Ahsoka where they were going.

“Myrkr,” Ahsoka answered, motioning towards the communications terminal, where a few lines of text were displayed. “I want to talk to Karrde about how things are going with the inquisitors. Just sent a missive ahead to let him know we’re coming, don’t want to show up at a bad time like our last visit.”

“Is that all because of Leia?” asked Barriss.

“Yeah. Karrde’s still our main source of intel on the inquisitors, if any of them are close to Leia, I need to know,” Ahsoka said, tearing off a large bite of bantha jerky. “If he’s got something new, I want to know right away. We don’t have anything more pressing.”

“And if they are aware of her?”

“Then we head back to Alderaan so fast the hyperdrive burns out, get Leia, steal the Tantive IV, and head as far away from civilized space as we can get,” Ahsoka said with frightening seriousness.

“Why would we steal the Tantive IV?”

“To make it look like we didn’t plan this with the Organas,” said Ahsoka. “Don’t worry, I’d explain everything to them once we’re somewhere safe.”

“This safe location being...?”

“Don’t know yet. Sabé’s home? I’m not sure if she has a permanent residence or not,” Ahsoka said as she sipped her tea. “Wait, no, Tatooine. I want to hear Obi-Wan’s explanation for all this. That should be an interesting conversation.”

“I know recent events have left you, well, aggravated, Ahsoka, but Alderaan is probably the safest place in the galaxy for Leia to grow up,” said Barriss. “Let’s not contemplate whisking her away from it so casually.”
“I know, I know,” Ahsoka grumbled. “Breha and Bail are probably going to be great parents, and I can’t think of anyone else I’d feel better leaving Leia with.”

“And they have the resources of their world ready to protect the new princess,” said Barriss. “Alderaan is economically stable, was undamaged by the Clone Wars, and has acted as a beacon of art and culture for thousands of years.”

“Fine, I get it. Yeah, Alderaan’s supposed to be the ‘planet of beauty’. You know, maybe I’m biased, but after a few days there, I don’t think anything there was anywhere near as beautiful as you,” asked Ahsoka. Vanity had always seemed a silly thing to be susceptible to, but Barriss could get used to these kinds of compliments. “Blushing a little, Berry?”

“...Is that my nickname now?” asked Barriss, her cheek twitching as she tried to maintain her smile.

“Yes! You’re small and sweet and yellowy-green. Like a juna berry,” Ahsoka, quite pleased with herself. While it wasn’t an inaccurate comparison at all, Barriss couldn’t hide her lack of appreciation for the pun. The romance was waning a little, and Ahsoka could tell. “So that’s a no on ‘Berry’, huh?”

“I’m indifferent towards it,” Barriss said indifferently.

“Yeah, I’m never gonna call you that again,” Ahsoka said, much to Barriss’s relief. Ahsoka got up out of her chair, wrapped her arm around Barriss’s waist and nudged her out of the cockpit. “Well, it’ll take a few days to get to Myrkr. How are we gonna spend that time?”

...Already? Barriss thought to herself when she realized what Ahsoka was implying.

One question was going through Barriss’s mind:

Am I nervous-but-excited, or simply uncomfortable?

Getting gently pulled by the hand back to their quarters, Barriss’s brow scrunched up as she tried to figure out why she was feeling so reluctant now. Then Ahsoka looked back at her, and Barriss instantly changed her consternation into a smile, then switched back just as quickly when Ahsoka looked away.

Shouldn’t have done that, shouldn’t act like I’m okay when I’m not, where has THAT ever gotten you, Barriss?

Ahsoka placed her hand onto Barriss’s cheek. It felt so good, but Barriss didn’t want to go any further right now. Ahsoka didn’t know that. Ahsoka thought everything was great, because Barriss acted like everything was great, even though she knew Ahsoka wouldn’t want her to act like everything was great when it wasn’t.

Everything should be fine, they’d already done this, why was this a problem now?

Back in their quarters, Ahsoka eagerly lifted Barriss up onto the bed.

I don’t like this I don’t like this I don’t-

“Ahsoka, stop, I- I don’t want to do this right now,” Barriss said.

“Oh, uh- yeah, okay,” Ahsoka said quickly releasing Barriss and backing off. After an uncomfortable beat, neither of them moving, she gently pulled Barriss’s shirt back down over her stomach.
“Thank you,” Barriss murmured as she re buckled her belt.

“Barriss, I’m sorry—”

“It’s all right,” Barriss said reassuringly as she sat up. Barriss didn’t want Ahsoka to feel bad, though she could tell the seriousness of her discomfort was sinking in.

“Are you okay?” asked Ahsoka.

“I’m perfectly fine, I’m simply not in the mood,” said Barriss, bringing her knees to her chest. “I wanted to be, I want you to be happy, but I can’t do this right now.”

“Barriss, there are a lot of things in the galaxy that would make me happy. You doing whatever I want isn’t on that list,” Ahsoka said. Raising her arm, she almost put it around Barriss’s shoulders, then stopped and began to pull back.

“I understand that,” said Barriss, moving over and leaning against Ahsoka, putting the latter’s arm around herself.

“To be clear, because I’m kind of worried now, last night—”

“Was at my suggestion, and I regret nothing about it,” Barriss said firmly. “Your... enthusiasm exceeds mine, and I would gladly repeat the experience. Later. I’ve been awake for less than one hour, how are you this motivated?” she said, exasperated and sounding rather tired.

“Barriss, I’m gonna be blunt: I wanted to have sex with you because you’re pretty good at it,” Ahsoka said. Barriss was a little surprised by the boldness, but decided to take the compliment.

“I feel like I’ve made things awkward,” said Barriss. “This isn’t exactly a romantic kiss beneath the moonlight.”

“Is... is that something you’re really interested in?” asked Ahsoka. “Because I will take this ship and find us a moon to kiss under. Alderaan didn’t have any moons, but there has to be one nearby. Does it have to be a moon, or would double planets count? We can swing by Yaga Major and Minor on the way to Myrkr.”

“That won’t be necessary. Let’s keep our priorities in order,” said Barriss. “We can cuddle, if you like.”

“Sounds nice,” Ahsoka said as they both laid back, and she was firmly embraced by Barriss’s arms.

The surface of Myrkr transitioned from a cloud-obscured mass of dark green into a dense forest, the rapid descent bringing the endless sprawl of trees into increasing focus. The stifling of the Force created by the collective focus of billions of ysalamiri added to the secluded feeling, and the lack of civilization.

The sensation of this world made Barriss wonder if there was any way to deploy those strange creatures more to their advantage, and what the limits of their abilities were. Barriss couldn’t hide her smile and had to stifle a laugh as she imagined tens of thousands of confused ysalamiri, supported by parachutes, descending over Coruscant while Palpatine watched bewildered from his window. Their
little heads looking around the unfamiliar surroundings in confusion as they slowly fell, more glass and metal than they’d ever seen on Myrkr.

*Oh no the wind is pushing them into sky traffic OH NO THE BLOOD-

“What the heck are you thinking about?” Ahsoka asked, carefully deploying the landing gear and setting the freighter down outside the smuggler base, activating the holographic camouflage. If they could avoid being spotted by some unexpected flyby, may as well get some use out the device.

“Nothing important, I’ll tell you all about it later,” Barriss said as she tried to purge the image of blood-splattered repulsorlifts from her head.

Lowering the ship down amongst the scraggly trees, Ahsoka headed out ahead to look around for Karrde, leaving Barriss to attend to a minor matter.

“You’ve been traveling all across the galaxy with us, isn’t that right, Snoots?” Barriss said as she carried the ysalamiri’s nutrient frame down the boarding ramp and set it down into Myrkr’s soil, into the sunlight and hot, humid air. “There. How does it feel to be back home?”

Snoots raised his head, looked around his native environment with his four beady black eyes, made a disinterested grunt, and went to sleep.

“Oh, you’re so unappreciative,” Barriss murmured, walking off into the base.

The whole place was significantly more active, with upgraded equipment and refurbished ships everywhere. The money from the dreadnoughts they’d sold to the Corellians was clearly being put to use.

There was some commotion coming from the nearest hangar, the various pilots and mechanics stopping what they were working on as they heard growing and snarling of some unseen local predators coming from the edge of the forest. The sound was getting louder, and the smugglers who were armed drew their weapons. Barriss followed suit, pulling out her stun pistol, ready to deal with the unexpected threat of the local fauna.

Then the booming roar of a Trandoshan pierced the air, echoed through the forest, and the screeching of all the other animals instantly ceased.

Perhaps the volume alone was enough to frighten away predators, or perhaps the various pack hunters had enough encounters with Vrask to run when they heard her roar. Faintly, Barriss picked up the barking and whimpering of unseen animals moving further from the base.

The Trandoshan made her appearance, calmly approaching Barriss. While the other smuggler crew still appeared jittery after a potential encounter with some vornskrs, Vrask seemed to shrug the incident off, like scaring the carnivores away was a chore.

“Interesting holographic system,” Vrask said, inspecting the pattern of green and brown covering the *Eclipse*, covering the hull almost as seamlessly as if it was painted on. “Where did you get it?”

“We purchased it from a specialist,” Barriss said, considering whether that Chistori mechanic would approve of her advertising his illegal ship modifications. What were the smugglers going to do, alert the authorities? Better to send the business his way. “I could recommend him, if you think it will help you.”

“I would,” Vrask said, handing a small datapad to Barriss so she could add a note with the necessary details and walking with Barriss towards the main building. “Your captain rushed on ahead, though
Karrde isn’t ready to see you quite yet. She’s oddly eager today.”

“There are matters she wants to discuss with your employer,” said Barriss.

“Regarding her mentor?”

“Not exactly,” Barriss said as she picked up the pace, unsure of how much Ahsoka would want shared.

In the main building, Ahsoka waited patiently in Karrde’s office, staring out the window at the surrounding forest.

Perhaps an anonymous gift of some of Myrkr’s trees accompanied by a small population of ysalamiri would be added to the gardens of Alderaan’s royal palace.

No, she didn’t want to do that to Leia, even if it protected her. Didn’t want to stunt her growth, so to speak.

Well, maybe. Was nurturing a connection to the Force work endangering her life?

As they waited, Ahsoka examined the only new decoration of the central room, likely something Karrde’s people had found in the local ruins: a statues of two ysalamiri carved out of some dull green stone, perched opposite each other on an elaborate metal pedestal, and between them sat an orb which she assumed represented Myrkr. It was beautifully crafted, and certainly improved the non-existent décor in this place. The rest of Karrde’s living space was empty and blank, save for a desk and that table Barriss was seated at. Where did that guy sleep?

Finally, their host arrived. Ahsoka and Barriss couldn’t help but stare in quiet horror at Karrde, whose hair, rather than his typical brushed-back black, was an ugly, unnatural, dull shade of red and came down to his shoulders. Then there was the face, with a weirdly-thin, identically-colored mustache seamlessly merging into a set of thick sideburns. His bushy eyebrows were the same color, too.

“Yes, I know it looks terrible, alright?” Karrde said after a full minute of putting up with their gawking. “It was part of a scheme I just got back from.”

“Did you disguise yourself as the galaxy’s most tasteless smuggler?” asked Ahsoka.

“Perhaps he was a bounty hunter in pursuit of the hairdresser who did this to him,” suggested Barriss.

“Wow, you too, Offee?” Karrde said as he pulled the wig off, then yanked at the fake facial hair, and peeled off the fake eyebrows. “Come one, we have things to talk about. It’s fortuitous you decided to come when you did.”

“You have news for us?” asked Ahsoka.

“Yes: I know where the inquisitors’ primary base is,” Karrde replied, activating a holographic display built into the table to show an icy world, lacking distinct features save for branching river flows.
This was far worse than Ahsoka had expected.

"Ilum," she whispered. The Empire not only knew where Ilum was, they had set up their own facilities there.

"Yes. It’s in a nest of kyber crystal mines. Offee, if you’ve got more of those things tucked away, sell them fast, because the market’s about to be flush with them once shipments start getting attacked by pirates and smugglers begin moving them around the galaxy,” Karrde said, handing a data card over to Ahsoka. “This is all the information I’ve compiled. Position of the base on the surface along with some of the largest mines, numbers and movements of ships in and out of the system, a few images from orbit. The probes and scouts could only get so close, and I figured you’d prefer having less information than risk the Empire knowing you were coming.”

“‘Visitors’ implies Ilum is their world. It’s not,” Ahsoka said through gritted teeth, then taking a breath and getting a handle on this latest reason to hate the Empire. “No other news, then?”

“No, this is all I have for now.”

“Then there’s something else I want to talk to you about,” said Ahsoka. This wasn’t something she was completely sure she wanted to involve Karrde in, but it was too important not to make use of what allies she had. “I want you to use your information network to keep the Empire away from Bail Organa.”

“I can arrange that, but my people don’t work for free,” Karrde said evenly, apparently under the assumption she was simply protecting another ally from the Empire. “You want the costs deducted from what’s been allocated to finding Jedi and learning more about the inquisitors?”

“Yes,” Ahsoka said with certainty. Seeing how much progress had been made on those two fronts, committing resources to shielding Leia would be a good use of credits.

“Consider it done,” he said casually. “Whatever’s going on with Organa, I’ll run interference to throw off any imperial organization that has their sights on him. As I’m sure you understand, if you think he’s hiding something specific, it’d be easier to protect him if I knew-”

“I’m worried that he isn’t making the security arrangements he should be,” said Ahsoka, delivering the explanation she’d been practicing. She was convinced Karrde could be useful, but she didn’t want him to know everything. “Organa’s smart, but he doesn’t have my military experience, and I’m worried he’s going to get sloppy. Alderaan’s the most well-defended and politically influential anti-imperial planet in the Core, we’re going to need its leadership protected.”

“Very well, then. I’ll run as much interference as possible to keep hard evidence of rebel activity out of sight,” said Karrde. “I suppose your recent trip to Alderaan didn’t leave you impressed?”

“How do you-”

“Incoming hyperspace vector. You didn’t come here directly from Tatooine,” Karrde said, clearly having fun showing off. “How did your foray into the desert go, by the way?”

Stuff like this was why Ahsoka didn’t like hanging around Karrde. Leaving innocuous bait for important information.

“It was a disappointment,” Ahsoka said truthfully. She and Karrde stared at each other for a tense moment, each trying to suss out what the other was thinking about.

“There’s something else I wish to discuss with you,” said Barriss, to the shared surprise of Ahsoka
and Karrde. “I wish to purchase one of the dreadnoughts, in exchange for an appropriate sum of kyber crystals. I can provide a down payment, and supply you with the rest after making a trip to my source.”

“As I mentioned, those things won’t be of much value soon with the largest concentration of kyber crystals in the galaxy being plundered by the Empire,” said Karrde.

“They will be if we demolish those mines,” Barriss replied casually.

“We’re going to do what-now?” asked Ahsoka. This had suddenly gotten a lot more ambitious than what she was thinking.

“We can’t allow Palpatine to remain in control of Ilum’s kyber crystals,” Barriss told Ahsoka. “That world has supplied the Jedi Order with crystals for millennia, who knows what the Empire will do with it?”

“And you need a dreadnought to attack the facility with?” Karrde said rhetorically. “Interesting. I can get you the dreadnought, but you know I can’t supply the hundreds of people you’d need just to form a functioning skeleton crew, much less enough others to make it battle-ready. There are a few mercenary organizations I could recommend, though.”

“You can let me worry about that,” said Barriss, getting up to leave with Ahsoka. “When can you provide the dreadnought?”

“Where do you want it sent to?” asked Karrde.

“For our purposes, I want it positioned at the outer edge of Ilum’s system, somewhere we can easily access without risking the Empire stumbling across it,” Barriss said, as Karrde nodded compliantly with the requests.

“It’ll take me approximately eight days to get a dreadnought to the position you want,” Karrde said. “I can’t get it there any sooner.”

“Very well, then,” Barriss said as she calmly walked out of the room.

“I like it when you’re confident like that,” Ahsoka said as she caught up.

“So do I,” Barriss said, blushing.

“You do have a plan for that ship, right?” Ahsoka asked as she scrolled through some of the images of Ilum on her pad, wondering what Barriss had put together in the past few minutes.

“I’ve been forming one. Even if we ultimately don’t require the ship ourselves, we’ll have it ready to offer another rebel cell.”

Of all her potential allies, Tano wanted Bail Organa protected. Didn’t even bother to mention her friend Chuchi, and as it was unlikely Tano no longer cared about the safety of Pantora, it meant Organa had something very, very important.

You have many skills, Tano, but lying is not one of them.
Perhaps that wasn’t entirely fair to think. Brushing off her interest in Alderaan as purely strategic made a great deal of sense, but it didn’t appear consistent with Organa’s tepid response to the Empire, not when Corellia was so much more ardently opposed to Palpatine’s authority.

There was also how she tried a liiiiiittle too hard to make it clear that this wasn’t driven by anything specific. If you want to convince someone of something, you can’t throw it at them like that.

I know there are answers out there, don’t think I won’t find them.

One very important skill Karrde had acquired in negotiating and business was the importance of learning what a client wants even when they don’t- or won’t- communicate it explicitly. Karrde would fulfill his end of the deal and then some, despite Tano’s omissions.

Whatever had Tano so concerned, Karrde could find out. He could save any document his slicers deleted from imperial libraries, and was quite confident in his abilities to piece together disparate information better than small-minded imperial intelligence officers.

What’s changed recently? What are the new variables? Karrde wondered, looking through all the data he could find on Bail Organa. Consort to Queen Breha, represented Alderaan through the entirety of the Clone Wars, notable political ally of the Jedi Order. Friend of friends when it came to Tano, nothing he found implied they were close. Aside from becoming part of the little rebellion that was forming.

Perhaps they were working more closely now that she was taking direct action against the Empire.

Perhaps he had told her something?

No, Organa hadn’t told her anything. Not willingly. He wouldn’t have told her something this important because Tano was powerless to help him presently. That’s why she’d asked Karrde for help. Very reluctantly. It didn’t take an acute ability to read people to know Tano didn’t like Karrde very much, not that he really cared. Not as long as she was smart enough to maintain a mutually-beneficial arrangement rather than discard it over a character judgement.

What could be so important that she’d risk involving me in it?

A smirk formed on Karrde’s face as he scrolled through news articles, legislative news, and bits of political drama late into the night trying to find some change in the political landscape, something Organa had that could be such a threat to the Empire it needed to stay hidden.

This was the kind of thing that had gotten him into this trade, why he was so interested in information: its resale value. You give fifty-credit bribe to a dock worker who can tell you where a certain ship was last headed, and you get a sizeable cut of the million-credit bounty from the hunter you passed it on to. Those two ex-Jedi had already ensured he was well-funded, by what degree now depended on how efficiently he could do his job. Saving hundreds of thousands of credits blindly trying to obscure some nebulous weak point by pulling one caf-fueled all-nighter on the holonet, for example.

Eventually, his attention drifted away from galaxy-spanning relevance of the imperial senate’s activities and focused on the local news of Alderaan, things that were only important to their culture. Declarations by Queen Breha, gossip about when the princess would be coronated even though it was decades away, controversy regarding the increased centralization of power on Coruscant or ‘Imperial Center’ as it was now being called, aristocratic drama, construction of new orbital defense stations, some trite photos of the queen and senator with their new daughter. The kid was cute, sure, but who cared about this stuff? You think babies are so cute, make one of your own.
Karrde stopped, scrolling back up to the image of the royal family.

*New variables...*

He shouldn’t be ignoring the possibility the Empire would exploit familial connections.

*That still doesn’t mean much. Upper-class people need kids to pass on their ridiculous, unearned titles and power to. Got to keep making new people with that precious royal blood in them aaaaaaaaaannnd she’s adopted.*

*‘War orphan’.*

*Plausible, common, sympathetic. Logistically impossible to verify.*

*How old is this girl?*

*Less than a year, adopted shortly after the Declaration of a New Order...*

Karrde tapped his fingers to the side of the keyboard, considering whether he was actually onto something. Assuming that story really was fabricated and he wasn’t going down a dead end, why was she important? Who were her biological parents? Were they still alive? He didn’t know, but he was certain he could find out. With so many puzzle pieces innocuously filled in by Tano’s request to him, it would be easy. Filter through Tano and Organa’s shared contacts, find out which ones were expecting children, which ones bore a resemblance to the girl. Was her name given by her biological parents? What planet did the name originate from? Were there any family members or close associates she might be named for? Get flight records from Organa’s ship from that time, assuming they hadn’t been deleted, bribe some crewmembers if they had.

Then there was the other issue: Tano had gone to Tatooine in search of Obi-Wan Kenobi. She had not returned with him. She did not appear to be dealing with any recent personal loss. Nor did she explain what happened beyond it being ‘disappointing’, which set off a bunch of alarms in Karrde’s head. She hadn’t mentioned anything about following another trail, and had asked to take resources away from the Jedi search. All signs pointed to Kenobi being alive, and remaining on Tatooine.

A planet was a large area to search, but having the approximate location of a Jedi master was a significant asset. What he really wanted was a way to persuade Kenobi to work for him, a serious challenge if one of his own students couldn’t budge him off that sandy rock. The obvious solution was blackmailing his location to the Empire if he didn’t cooperate, but Karrde didn’t take that route the way most other criminals liked to. Extorting someone strong enough to deal with a current enemy only left you with a more dangerous enemy later.

The Jedi, the Emperor, Car’das, they may have the Force, but Karrde had the leverage. And perhaps, if he properly nurtured current alliances, a reliable Fulcrum.

As Karrde considered how to locate and approach Kenobi himself if so desired, he thought about the timeline of events. Tano left from Corellia to find the Jedi master, completely unconcerned with Organa. Now, a very short time later after her trip to Tatooine, he was suddenly a priority.

*Is there a connection?*

*Could Kenobi... have a daughter?*

So began the search for every female human or near-human whom Kenobi, Organa, and/or Tano had regularly interacted with.
Kryze died too soon. I think. The article says Leia was born shortly before the war’s end, could they be lying about her exact age?

I don’t have a good sense of how babies grow, she could be two years old for all I can tell.

Ventress is less of an issue, but that kid doesn’t look half-Dathomirian.

Attempts to research human-Dathomirian hybrids proved uninformative as to how dominant the respective species’ traits could be. Regardless, it was unlikely anything between Kenobi and Ventress got that far.

Also, why would Organa have their kid?

Then there the results of a search for previous uses of the name ‘Leia’: a species of bright white flower, said to represent a ray of sunlight that drives away evil.

It was native to Naboo.

With that connecting piece of information, everything suddenly came together.

*Obi-Wan Kenobi and Padmé Amidala were having a secret relationship throughout the Clone Wars.*

*It makes so much sense.*

*Everything fits, the connections between Kenobi, Tano, Amidala, and the Organas, the recent timeline as I can piece it together, Amidala’s mysterious pregnancy that supposedly ended with her life, the need to keep the girl a secret from the Empire.*

The rush of excitement at solving the puzzle quickly faded, as Karrde wasn’t exactly enthused at this revelation as he thought about the specifics. He’d seen plenty of questionable relationships like this, and they didn’t sit well with him.

*She’s eleven years younger than you, Kenobi. I know you had a thing with Kryze when you were an apprentice and it didn’t work out, did she know about this?*

The contradiction with Jedi views on relationships annoyed him even more. Who knew how many other members of the order had secret relationships?

The only other option was Amidala and Anakin Skywalker, and Karrde expected Amidala to have better taste. Yeah, Skywalker had flowing, voluminous hair and was probably really muscular under that combat suit he wore, but since learning of his death, Karrde had looked over some of the admittedly few public statements the guy made regarding the war. They all had an unsubtle authoritarian bent to them, not that any of Coruscant’s journalists ever bothered to point that out, and Karrde didn’t think intensely freedom-loving democratically-elected queen/senator like Amidala would be able to listen to the guy talk for long before deciding those beautiful pecs were just *not worth it.*

Then again, he didn’t really know all that much about Amidala. Searching showed him all her records, including her reign as queen beginning at... age fourteen? That couldn’t be right.

Nope, it was correct. Apparently, the people of Naboo preferred young politicians because they considered children to be pure of heart and more likely to make positive changes.

*Has anyone on that planet ever met a child?* he thought sarcastically to himself. Apparently the people of Naboo were all perfectly willing to hand control of their government over to someone...
whom most other worlds would consider too young to drive an airspeeder.

Wait, if the adults consider themselves to be less virtuous than the children, why would they trust their own judgement on that? If the kid does something wrong, does everyone assume their own hearts are corrupt and everything’s fine? Have there been any disastrous kings and queens? How are the candidates selected? Yeah, lots of kids want to be monarchs, but adults are supposed to tell them ‘no’ because otherwise you end up with spoiled brats. Also, the job is dangerous enough that a sizable number of bodyguards and decoys are employed, but you still elect the innocent child to the position? Purify your wretched hearts or whatever and run for office.

See, this is why Naboo is the kind of society that can be conquered by fragile B1 battle droids under the brilliant tactical direction of Nemoidian businessmen. The Alderaanians know what they’re doing, they’ve got hundreds of ground-to-space weapon platforms and multi-redundant planetary shields ready to fight off anyone that comes knocking. That’s why the Separatists never attacked those ‘pacifists’.

Karrde suddenly cringed and glared down at the image of Kenobi on the screen as he did the math and realized not only was Amidala eleven years younger than the Jedi master, but they would’ve met when she was an adolescent. Which, if the situation was really as bad as it looked, put the oh-so wise, respected Jedi high councilman on the same level of propriety as various tenth-rate pirates and fringe crime lords.

Eugh, no wonder Tano decided to leave him on Tatooine. At least that’s what I think happened. She found him, found out about the kid, did the math, cut all ties with him.

Good for her.

‘Disappointment’, yeah, I see what you mean now, Tano. Sorry I asked... Karrde thought as his deductions kept making the situation look worse and worse to the point he actually felt a little bit guilty about prying into things. This had all gotten much more personal than he’d expected.

What was I thinking about?

Right. The royal brat.

Karrde shut his eyes tightly as he tried to blot out those thoughts. He’d been up working on this all night, expecting a document, a cipher, the completion of some new puzzle he was eager to sort out.

Instead it was just ‘Leia’.

This wasn’t some strategic keystone Tano was having him protect. This was purely personal. An innocent life, the legacy of loved ones, whom Tano was determined to protect at any cost. Bail Organa was simply her guardian, a potential attractor for trouble which could hurt the girl. Tano wasn’t really concerned about the political situation or the immediate future of her rebellion, she just didn’t want Amidala’s daughter to be in harm’s way.

He stared dreary-eyed for several minutes at the image of Alderaan’s royal family, getting the impression that events in the galaxy might hinge around this little girl, then shut down his terminal for the night.

They all looked so very happy together.

Also, her biological father was a creepy deadbeat.

He could falsify data to provide a slightly-inaccurate estimation of her birth date. Find some bodies,
say those were her parents, fake genetic records. Create some made-up articles in obscure databases about the etymology of the name ‘Leia’. Make up a word for where her name comes from, add it to varies dictionaries on the Holonet, say it originated on Alderaan. Keep track of any imperial intelligence officer who were threatening the Organas, and then have them killed. Then kill five others at random so nobody realized that family was the connecting factor. While also framing another enemy of the Empire for the deaths to divert attention towards them.

Whether or not she was willing to tell him the full story, Tano was paying Karrde to keep this kid safe and off the Empire's sensors, and he prided himself on doing his work well.

Chapter End Notes

Finally back. Took longer than I wanted, but work's been rough. Also been really worried about doing everything right with this chapter.

That's right, Barriss is the big spoon and I'm standing by that. She enjoys holding, not being held.

Karrde's appearance has been very inconsistent over the years with varying height, build, and hair; case in point, his Wookiepedia page image clearly shows him with hazel eyes, but his description directly beneath it says they're light blue. Timothy Zahn isn't concerned and actually thinks it makes sense for him to change his appearance, something I agree with and worked into the story, and I seriously considered making him secretly a Clawdite. But through it all, we must never forget the abomination that is Star Wars Galaxies Karrde. Look at him. Look at him and tell me there's a god. Yeah, he got crazy buff arms, but at what price? The way I imagine him here is just younger, without a beard, and with shorter hair. Like an earlier Pokémon evolution of that.

Wouldn't it just fucking suck for Ahsoka if Karrde figured out Darth Vader was Anakin after only a few months, but he never told her because he wasn't supposed to be digging that stuff up, and he thought she already knew anyway so she was in the dark fifteen years longer than necessary? That sounds like exactly the kind of bullshit that would happen to her.

Alternatively, decades later during the events of Bloodline, now-retired Karrde is watching SC-SPAN, (the first S stands for Space) finds out who Leia's biological father really is and is like "Wow, I was way off. And Amidala had terrible taste in men."

Gotta ramble a little bit about Queen's Shadow. Mainly how (SPOILERS) at the end of the novel Sabé is extremely suspicious of Padmé's death and decides to contact Bail Organa, which fits weirdly well with how I wrote her appearances and her interactions with Bail. I don't think EK Johnston reads my stuff or anything, we had the same idea because it makes logical sense, but this isn't the first time this has happened. A Padmé comic showed her handmaidens knew about her relationship with Anakin, which I also wrote in Sabé's case. Also, apparently Sabé may know about the twins? TEotS already had a bunch of similarities to the Ahsoka novel. Then I also wrote Thrawn being aware of and concerned for Force-sensitive Chiss children and their role in facing a threat in the Unknown Regions, which turned out to be part of Thrawn: Alliances. Now there's this. The Thrawn thing in particular is weird because it doesn't obviously flow from
anything else, I came up with it on my own. If I'm warping reality and making my ideas canon, how much more Forcedamn Barriss content do I have to make before she reappears? Can I make Revan canon again by speaking it into existence? How about Mara Jade, I wrote a one-shot with her when I was starting out, can I bring Mara back? *I'm going to anyway.* This is Barriss, isn't it? ISN'T IT! Have I been right all these years? Answer me, Filoni, your wolf-loving cowboy bastard!
Equal and Opposite Force

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

At the edge of the galaxy on the icy world of Ilum, the Galactic Empire harvests valuable kyber crystals to empower its war machine and overwhelm opposition to imperial rule.

Now aware of the presence of an inquisitor base, Ahsoka Tano and Barriss Offee plan their daring assault to shatter the Empire’s hold and end the exploitation of the former Jedi bastion.

Outnumbered by the inquisitors and the imperial army, the two rebels will need every advantage to prevail and prevent greater terrors from arising out the ashes of the Jedi...

Walking around the perimeter of the smuggler base, Ahsoka found it difficult to feel at peace, even with all the fresh air and tranquil sounds of Myrkr’s forest. Alien birds of all colors flew from tree to tree and filling the air with their unique songs as the sun began setting.

The problem, she realized, was that it was impossible to walk around anywhere without feeling as though she was being watched. Because she was. Every tree contained at least one set of four black eyes staring down at her. This was indisputably their world, and she was physically and metaphysically a trespasser.

The ysalamiri remained a disconcerting anomaly in her understanding of the Force, and their ubiquitousness as she walked beneath their perches made her more and more uncomfortable with that ignorance.

Setting her sights on one of the creatures clinging to a branch and her eye level, she approached, looked down at the ground, and spied a palm-sized rock at her feet. Time to test something out.

Closing her eyes, holding out her hand, she tried to use the Force to levitate the rock upwards.

"KRRRSSSS," the ysalamiri hissed, its fur bristling as it bore its fangs as it sensed what she was attempting to do.

“Oh, krrssss yourself, I want to try something,” Ahsoka hissed back at it. That imitation must’ve been rather good, as the creature’s mouth snapped shut and its head jerked back as it looked deeply offended by the noise she had made. How dare she. She was the one doing wrong things.

Upon recovering from the insult, the ysalamiri went back to growling at her.

“What’s the big deal to you, huh?” she asked in a scolding, rhetorical tone with her hands on her hips as she looked up at the ysalamiri on higher branches. Most of them were keeping completely still, a few lazily swaying their tails and letting the closest one be outraged on their behalf. “Do my efforts to move this rock offend you? Is it a special rock?”

They couldn’t be infinitely-powerful anti-Force machines, there had to be a limit to what they could do, and she wanted to compare their limits to hers. They could negate the passive awareness and
intuition the Force offered, but what if she really focused?

Closing her eyes again, putting all of her concentration into telekinesis, Ahsoka did everything she could to move that rock. Her forehead scrunched up as she tried to extend her power, to alter the world around her, but she couldn’t.

Use of the Force was often described as ‘reaching out’ with your thoughts, your senses.

Maybe the ysalamiri were adept at shoving your back into your own head where you belonged.

Though her eyes were closed, as she focused harder than she had since she was first learner to move objects with the Force, she heard the small rock flip over and finally relaxed, successful and unexpectedly exhausted.

Opening her eyes again, the ysalamiri, most of which had previously acted lethargic and uninterested in Ahsoka, were now all perked up and focused on her. After a few seconds of maintaining eye contact, they decided they’d tolerated her long enough and gave a warning hiss. Ahsoka jumped slightly when she looked forward and finally noticed that first ysalamiri was so infuriated and bristling with anger that it resembled a miniature nexu. Taking that as her cue to leave, Ahsoka walked off to find her real target.

The forest wasn’t the same as before, though. Even though the ysalamiri she walked around had never encountered her, she had their undivided attention, becoming alert once they spotted her. A little later, she noticed some were already looking in her direction before she’d rounded a large tree trunk or rock mound. It was starting to unnerve and irritate her. The nearest one was hissing at her, and at this point she was ready to match that hostility before stopping to think.

You’re the one who tried to provoke them. You knew they wouldn’t like what you attempted, and now you’re upset that they’re upset.

Finding a suitably flat-topped boulder, Ahsoka sat down and got into a meditative position. Closing her eyes, she simply thought peaceful thoughts, listening to the gusts of wind shaking the branches, smelling the air, becoming part of Myrkr. When she got up again, the ysalamiri had turned their attention away from her. Mostly. A few still watched her warily.

Around here, Ahsoka may not have the Force, but Togruta instincts and echolocation via her montrals were the next best thing. Very important for this next part. Back against a tree, eyes closed, muscles tense, hand open and ready to grab, Ahsoka listened for the motion of something small in the underbrush. A juvenile ysalamiri emerged, big enough to be on the cusp of adulthood, and headed for its target: an Olbio tree branch that didn’t have another ysalamiri on it, but was large enough to support one. There weren’t many more of those in the area, and she’d been looking.

When it was close enough and began checking out the spot as a place to settle down, making it clear it was mature enough to do so, Ahsoka jumped up and nabbed the critter in her hand, its head and front legs wriggling between her fingers.

Its half-meter-long body thrashed around until she grabbed the tail with her other hand, restraining it until it calmed down and she tried rubbing the back of its head with her thumb the way she’d seen Barriss do with Snoots sometimes. The young ones must get a lot more energy eating bugs all day than however many calories the adults gained siphoning fluid from trees. It took a few minutes of dedicated petting for it to accept Ahsoka wasn’t going to hurt it.

“Meeeeeep!” the young ysalamiri whined.
“Mep,” Ahsoka said back, imitating the rough, low tone of the creature’s vocalization.

“Mup,” replied the ysalamiri, surprised at her response and settling down.

“Meep?”

“Mlep.”

“Mip.”

“Mep.”

“Mep- Okay, I’m gonna go crazy if I keep doing this,” Ahsoka said as she carried off the ysalamiri. If she and Barriss were pitting themselves against a facility containing an unknown number of enemy Force-wielders, they ought to have one ysalamiri each for concealment.

———

“And then a Sith trooper invited me to party with his friends, they all got drunk, and I stole one of their uniforms to get past one of their guards. Course, I was pretty drunk too by the end of the party, and the next thing I remember after that was fighting swoop gang members in Taris’s Lower City,” Revan said, concluding a lesson about infiltration. At least, that was the supposed lesson to the story, but it kept branching off in places as Revan offered increasingly paltry justifications for breaking into people’s apartments, in some cases while the residents were still present. “Saving the galaxy one back-alley knife fight at a time!”

“I find the relevance of this questionable,” Barriss said.

“Okay, what do you want to know about?”

Barriss drummed her fingers on the top of the table in the Eclipse. After all these conversations with Revan, she’d noticed certain patterns of behavior which she was curious about. “You often make comments about using darkness, but despite how you act, I know you’re not so shortsighted as to genuinely recommend malicious choices. Why are you so cavalier about the use of the dark side?”

“What Jedi philosophy refers to as light and dark aren’t automatically good and evil, though the conflation is an understandable one,” said Revan. “It’s more selfless vs selfish than good vs evil. People who rely on their inner darkness focus exclusively on their own needs, to the point of killing anyone and everyone around them if it suits their needs. Its effects are more obvious that the light.”

“Those being?”

“If you draw solely on the light, the only person you’ll destroy is yourself.”

Barriss felt an ache in her chest as that comment sunk in. “You’re wrong. I’ve destroyed much more than that.”

“Hmm. Perhaps,” Revan said thoughtfully. “Point is, you’re not a bad person for caring about yourself. Sacrificing yourself for strangers seems noble, but once you’re gone, are the people you left behind enough to keep evil at bay? You think loving other people makes you evil? Fight for them. Survive for them.”

“Well, I never thought love was dangerous, exactly. Attachment was taught as a path into darkness
through inevitable loss, not darkness in and of itself. The Jedi were guided by trying not to care about
certain people more than others,” said Barriss. “I believe they came to care for all beings equally little
as a result.”

“Every time you say something cutting about the Jedi, my will to live gets a little bit stronger,” Revan
said with immense pride.

“As many... criticisms... as I have of the Jedi Order in practice, so much of the philosophy has
inspired me. Helping those who need it. Negotiating peace. Preventing the misuse of power,” said
Barriss. “What about following the light and not the dark?”

“I’m not the kind of person who adheres to binaries,” said Revan. “The Force, Harmony, the Pulse,
Unity, Cosmic Power, Potentium, Lifestream. It has a million names on a million worlds. There was
a time when I was the most powerful being in the galaxy, but I never knew them all. The Force
existed before anyone tried to split it into light and dark, and it will be there long after. Other people
besides Jedi can use the Force, so obviously there’s more to it than that philosophy.”

“Most Force-users outside the Jedi have poor relations with the Order,” Barriss said, reflecting on
how the Jedi had alienated potential allies. The consensus of the Jedi was that other organizations
whose members used the Force, even if they didn’t embrace the dark side, were at best misguided in
their thinking without the following Jedi teachings. “Even ignoring the Sith, relations were always
tense with the Zeison Sha, Matukai, Jal Shey, and the Selkath’s Order of Shasa.”

“...Oh wow, she made her own cult...”

“If I sought out Jedi-hating organizations to aid the rebellion, they’d probably welcome me,” Barriss
said bitterly. “I’m far from the kind of Jedi they’d be expecting.”

“Failures can present opportunities, if utilized properly,” said Revan. “It takes time, but you can
move on from them. Find something better than regret.”

“Have you ever wondered how a different choice may have changed things? Our actions have
consequences and significance we can’t possibly predict, while other times, it is clear the choice
made in that moment can change our lives. Have you ever wondered what would happen had you
done things differently?” Barriss asked, and Revan thought on her question a moment.

“Don't do this, kid. I don't want to, but I'll fight you if I have to. Even if it costs me my life,” Jolee
said as Revan turned to face him, and an altogether delighted Bastila approached to join to resurgent
dark lord. He made good on his word, and was pretty tough to bring down, for an old guy.

“A true Jedi will never bow down to the Sith. If this is your decision, I have no choice but to do
battle against you,” said Juhani. Sparing her life in that grove on Dantooine had clearly been a
mistake, one Revan would take this opportunity to correct.

“I don’t think you’ll kill me. Not if I don’t attack you, first,” said Mission, her voice trembling as it
sunk in how outmatched she was. The bravery she showed on that alien beach was impressive, and
not enough to change anything. Zaalbar roared at Revan for killing his little friend, but all that thick
Wookiee fur and muscle didn’t mean much to a lightsaber.

“There’s a part of you that believes in hope... and mercy... and love. And that part knows it will soon
be gone forever,” Carth said inside the Star Forge’s hangar. May as well let Bastila finish this guy off. He was right, though. If he’d showed up maybe an hour or two sooner, maybe that part he was talking apart wouldn’t have been gone yet.

Say what you want about Carth, flying through a space battle to try and talk down a Sith took guts. Revan decided to at least dispose of his corpse in a more respectful manner than Darth Malak’s. Well, as respectfully as possible given his current state. Bastila went a little overboard with the slashing. Then again, it wasn’t like a few saber burns could make that orange jacket look any uglier.

“Malak is dead – all hail the return of Darth Revan, the true Lord of the Sith!” Bastila proclaimed as Revan stood at the peak of the Temple of the Ancients, clad once again in Sith robes, and all was right with the universe.

“ALL HAIL LORD REVAN! ALL HAIL LORD REVAN!” chanted the throngs of soldiers assembled to bear witness to Revan’s return. Millions of kilometers from this planet, an endless armada flew outward from the Star Forge, ready to make the final push into the core of the Republic. Soon, warships would emerge from hyperspace over Coruscant in such numbers they would blot out the sun. With the wreckage of Admiral Dodonna’s fleet fallen into and consumed by Rakata Prime’s sun, broken down into atoms and feeding back into the Star Forge, the Sith fleet grew in power. The Galactic Senate would have no choice but to offer unconditional surrender, which Revan would peaceably accept.

The Jedi High Council would not receive such mercy, and Revan would take great satisfaction in watching them all burn along with the temple.

“Oh come on, his jacket looked fine,” Revan muttered.

“Excuse me?” asked Barriss.

“Nothing, just, thinking to myself,” Revan said before casually adding, “Yeah, sometimes I wonder how events could’ve played out. Despite certain disappointing outcomes, I’m confident the choices I made were largely the best possible. Everyone likes to think that if they made different decisions, it would’ve been better because they wouldn’t be dealing with present regrets. What they don’t realize or don’t like to think about is that they’d probably end up with different regrets alongside whatever changes they like,” said Revan. “There’s little benefit in wishing you’d made a different choice compared to preparing yourself for the next one. Live and burn, as they say.”

“You mean ‘live and learn’.”

“You say po-tay-to, I set fire to your po-tah-toes.”

Barriss thought about what would’ve happened if she hadn’t made... certain mistakes. Yes, she would have few regrets today. In fact, she’d have no regrets whatsoever, because she would’ve died during Order 66, betrayed by clones and incinerated by AT-TE fire or meeting some similar fate.

“I’ve been considering how to handle the Empire’s control of Ilum. No good will come of it, but I’m not sure how best to dislodge their presence from that world, or what impact it will have,” Barriss said as she paced around. “There are inquisitors there, likely in numbers and with supporting forces too great for Ahsoka and I to overcome. Any we kill will be unable to continue hunting other Jedi survivors. Any we defeat non-fatally will likely be killed by their imperial masters for their failure
regardless. The more Ahsoka and I confront, the more likely we will both be killed.”

“You’re trying too hard to come up with a perfect solution, the ultimate strategy to get everything you want, and it’s freaking you out,” said Revan. “You’re giving yourself decision paralysis. Establish what your priorities are.”

“Priority 1: Ahsoka doesn’t die.”

“Good start, it’s a little incomplete, don’t you think?”

As for the current situation, in the event of being recaptured, Barriss was acutely aware of the consequences and had no delusions of her will being unbreakable. It had already broken before.

“Priority 2: I do not die or get captured.”

“Feel like that should’ve been part of Priority 1, but keep going.”

“The kyber crystals are the primary target. The Empire desires them, I must destroy them. Priority 3,” Barriss said, voice getting calmer. “A large enough crystal in the heart of an imperial weapon could kill many more people than any inquisitor. I should focus on destroying as many of the crystals as possible. On a planetary scale. Completely avoid fighting the inquisitors at all, if possible... I need to start writing down ideas.”

The nutrient frame the new ysalamiri would be occupying turned out to be surprisingly simple to construct. All it took was a metal frame, a small tank for the nutrient mix, a syringe pump, and the ‘branch’ was made from tough, porous filtration material Karrde’s people had extracted from a water heater, and then a strip of cushioning on top. Then they ground up some tree leaves, mixed them in water, and sprayed that onto the branch so it smelled appealing and familiar.

Settling down on the new perch, which they’d placed opposite Snoots to make the new ysalamiri feel more relaxed with another of its kind, Ahsoka and Barriss watched it, hoping it would accept the frame. Instead, it sat there and watched them back.

“Do you suppose he’s nervous?” asked Barriss.

“Nervous about what?”

“We are staring at him,” Barriss said out of the corner of her mouth.

“What, it’s not like I’d want to eat him. Except if it’s an emergency and we’re out of protein bars,” said Ahsoka. “They’re not a natural part of the ecosystem, do they even have predators to be afraid of?”

“...Please do not eat my pet,” Barriss said as she considerately turned away from the ysalamiri. “They probably weren’t genetically engineered from scratch, if they’re derived from some prey species, they may have holdover behaviors, now turn around.”

Following Barriss’s lead, Ahsoka waited and listened to the activity going on behind her.

“Mep,” greeted Snoots.
“Mep?” the other ysalamiri asked cautiously.

“Mep,” confirmed Snoots.

Slowly, Ahsoka turned her head just enough to see the two ysalamiri in the corner of her eye. Their new companion got comfortable, carefully positioning his legs since he would likely be there the remainder of his life, finding the artificial branch both smelled pleasant and was noticeably softer than a natural one. The ysalamiri dug his little claws into the perch to begin absorbing nutrient fluid from it, settling in for life as a sessile adult.

“Have you thought of a name for him?” Barriss asked with a smile as she affectionately stroked the latest addition to the ship.

“I was thinking ‘Obi-Wan Junior’,” said Ahsoka. “Being around him makes me feel like I’m about to get a headache, and he makes me doubt everything I thought I knew about the universe.”

“It’s... a bit long,” Barriss said helpfully. The smile was still there, the enthusiasm that created it was not. “Did you have a second choice?”

“Tousle,” Ahsoka said conclusively as she tousled Tousle’s fur. ‘Anakin Junior’ was her real next choice, followed by ‘Emergency Rations’, but Barriss was right, a shorter name was better, and the matter was settled. With nothing more to be done that evening, Ahsoka was soon drifting off to sleep in the incomparable position of being held tightly in Barriss’s arms.

Everything was so dark, Ahsoka wasn’t sure where she was. The ground felt solid, like rock. Reaching out to find the closest wall, she found it was only a few steps away, and freezing cold. Feeling her way along, she seemed to be in an upward-slanting cave, without enough light to tell where it ended. Carefully to avoid tripping, she began her ascent, and as she did so, pinpoints of light shined all around her, illuminating a cave of ice.

There was a distant howl that seemed to come from ahead of her, echoing down through the cave, and the lights dimmed.

“Anyone there?” Ahsoka called out.

The howl came again. The kyber crystals waxed and waned, their power calling out to Ahsoka and then being drowned out. The cave grew wider and wider as she walked up. Ill-defined forms sprung up out of the fog, then collapsed back into it as quickly as they’d come.

Ahsoka tried to hear where that sound was coming from, following the cave upwards.

More howling came, from what sounded like hundreds of sources, repeated from all around her, the low, long cries forming an almost soothing monotone that drowned out and suppressed the kyber crystals.

With no direction to go, Ahsoka walked casually around. The lines of the environments gradually changed from rough ground to smooth, linear, sapient-designed structures, and the cool blue light became warm and yellow. The more definition they gained, the clearer it was to Ahsoka that she was walking through the gardens of the Jedi Temple. They were different, though, as the largest trees more resembled those of Myrkr than the ones in the temple. At least she thought they did, she’d
never spent very much time here.

Vague figures, like people seen in her peripheral vision, walked around the courtyard taking no notice of Ahsoka. The further she walked, the figure faded into shadows, though by that point she’d ceased to notice them.

The sound of a lightsaber’s hum snapped Ahsoka to attention, and she drew her own as she followed the sound to find one person being surrounded by shadows, swinging her saber in wide arcs to ward them off.

“Barriss!” she said, running to help her.

“Ahsoka?” asked Barriss, leaping over the circle of enemies forming around her and landing at Ahsoka’s side. “What are you doing here?”

“Oh, y’know, wandering around,” Ahsoka said. They both stared at each other for a moment as the shadows retreated and they had a moment to think about what was going on. “Are we in each other’s dreams? I didn’t know we could do that.”

“Such things are not unheard of,” said Barriss. “Though I wasn’t expecting this to happen without intent.”

“How do we tell if this is real?” Ahsoka asked as she looked around for any other attackers.

“I suppose we’ll find out for certain whenever we wake up and confer with each other,” Barriss said as she watched their flank.

“Who was that you were fighting just now?”

“Unclear,” Barriss answered worriedly.

The distant howls came once more, louder and closer, and the more Ahsoka heard them, the less it sounded like any creature she was familiar with.

“Can you hear that, too?” Ahsoka asked, waiting and listening for where it was coming from.

“I can,” Barriss replied as she looked around for the source, but there was nothing besides this hazy vision of the Jedi Temple. “I believe it would be best if we left. Follow me, the layout of this place has proven accurate to reality.”

Ahsoka recognized the pillars and statues adorning the temple steps as Barriss led her out. Beyond the exit, rather than the urban sprawl of Coruscant, were the immense sheets of ice, the ones which covered Ilum. Behind them, the Jedi temple had transformed into the inquisitor base, now a very real and imposing spire of dark metal jutting out of the ice rather than the small, flat images Karrde had supplied. The distance scream of TIE fighters hung in the air as squadrons circled kilometers above them. It strained Ahsoka’s neck to look up to find the top of the spire.

“Ahsoka!” Barriss yelled, getting her attention and pointing to the vaguely humanoid shadows that were emerging from the same entrance they’d left through. Ahsoka was ready to fight, Barriss grabbed her wrist and tried to run for it. “Why are you standing there? We need to go!”

“I want to know who they are.”

“They’re inquisitors, obviously!”
“Then why can’t we see them?” Ahsoka asked as the shadowy figures spread out to surround her. No, not to surround her. They were keeping to two lines. Making a path for someone else.

“AHSOKA!” Barriss screamed.

Ahsoka relented, and when she turned back around to follow Barriss, countless ysalamiri were scattered across the ice, spreading from the boundary of the inquisitor base to the horizon.

The ysalamiri turned their heads toward the sky, bore their fangs, bristled their fur, and let out a uniform howl that spread cracks through the ice of the darkened Ilum.

So focused on the creatures in front of her, Ahsoka took no notice of the heavy footsteps coming up from behind out of the spire or the shadow it cast over her.

Ahsoka gasped as a red blade pierced her chest, while Barriss watched in horror. Against the burning pain spreading through her lungs, she tried to turn her head and see who held the lightsaber. As she turned, the dream shattered around her, the dark assailant fading away as that howling rose to a deafening volume, the ice and the entire world shattering around her.

“Well that, uh, took a turn,” Ahsoka said as she and Barriss held onto each other tightly. “What was that?”

“I believe that was a Sith,” Barriss said as she pulled back, turned on the light, and checked that Ahsoka wasn’t hurt. No cauterized chest wounds were present.

There was some kind of screeching noise coming from the cargo hold. Carrying their lightsabers as a precaution, Ahsoka and Barriss stepped out to find Snoots snarling and thrashing around on his nutrient frame. Barriss walked forward to try and calm the ysalamiri, careful to avoid his snapping jaws, which were sporting teeth much longer and sharper than Ahsoka would’ve through possible for a head that small.

“Snoots, it’s all right!” Barriss said, gently and very carefully petting the creature’s back, keeping her hand out of snapping range. He was still panting heavily, but Barriss was calming him down and he stopped that screeching.

Touste was eerily still. Doing absolutely nothing except stare at Ahsoka from his perch.

Even though Snoots eventually stopped, Ahsoka could still hear that same sound coming from elsewhere. Ahsoka opened the upper hatch of the Eclipse and climbed out onto the top of the ship and into the dim light as Myrkr’s sun had just started to rise, and found the cause of the noise.

The ysalamiri were angry. All of them.

With Ahsoka now in view, the ones on the branches encircling the Eclipse were taking notice. Every one of them with a line of sight on Ahsoka turned their heads and bared their teeth, snarling at her. Many were visibly struggling to move their limbs, as if trying to tear themselves from their branches to get at her, even if it killed them.
Their screeching rose into a uniform, repetitive cacophony, a thousand animal shrieks coming from all around her. Sounds from below caught her attention, and she could see the juvenile ones were slithering out of the forest, gathering under the Eclipse and snarling up at her. Rather than wait to see if they were smart enough to start crawling up the landing gear, Ahsoka climbed back down into her ship and sealed the hatch.

“What did you do?” Karrde asked in a bored, scolding tone from behind his desk as Ahsoka and Barriss stood in his office.

“We don’t know,” said Barriss.

“What makes you think it was us?” asked Ahsoka.

“What makes me-I’m an information broker! Deduction and pattern recognition are my job! ‘Hm, the Force-blocking native lifeforms all went crazy the same night two of the few trained Force-sensitive people in the galaxy showed up at my base. Could there be a connection?’” Karrde said, the momentary energy of his indignation quickly dissipating and fatigue replaced it. He looked like he’d been up all night.

“Maybe you’re not as good at piecing things together as you think,” Ahsoka said, and judging from Karrde’s frustrated expression, it looked like she’d hit a nerve.

“You would be surprised at the kinds of things I’ve pieced together,” he hissed. “Also, y’know, a few dozen of the little ones are currently clinging to the outside of your ship, and if people start asking me what makes you two so interesting, I don’t know what I’m going to tell them. I also don’t think this the first time this happened.”

“What are you talking about?” said Barriss.

“The last time you were here, I heard some odd noises coming from the forest, but it died down before I could see what made it, and it wasn’t anywhere near this serious,” said Karrde, recalling the night Barriss had encountered him overlooking the base during the night.

“I see,” Barriss said worriedly. “Ahsoka and I had a vision, of Ilum. It ended... poorly.”

“I don’t know how the Force works, but I know a bad omen when I see one,” Karrde said as he rubbed his temples. “Don’t go to Ilum, then.”

“That’s not an option,” said Ahsoka. “Barriss and I have been in dangerous situations before. We’ll be careful.”

“Oh, yeah, you’ll ‘be careful’,” Karrde said as he swiveled around once in his chair. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

“This doesn’t concern you, Karrde,” Ahsoka said, turning around to leave.

“Wait, wait. If you won’t back down, at least let me help improve your odds. Whenever you get ready to leave, talk to Vrask, she’ll give you anything in our supplies that might help you. Cold-weather gear, sensor jammers, explosives, and I guarantee it’ll be better stuff than anything you’re planning to buy commercially” Karrde said. “We may also be able to arrange disguises if you want
to go the stealthy route. Are either of you good at talking your way around enemies?"

For a few moments, Ahsoka’s mind blotted everything out, repeating ‘Unhand me, brigand!’ on a loop.

Next to her, staring off into space, Barriss was having a similar experience with ‘Who else could it be if not her?’

“Not particularly,” Ahsoka grumbled.

“Guess that’s it, then. Glad I got to talk to you one more time,” Karrde said as he stood up and walked past Ahsoka towards his door. “I’m going to get you your dreadnought.”

“By yourself?” asked Barriss.

“No one can be allowed to know the location of those ships except for myself and the army of maintenance droids I have checking them over one by one for minor repairs.”

“How long will it take to get the dreadnought here?” asked Ahsoka.

“It’s not coming here, I’ll leave it at the edge of Ilum’s system,” Karrde said, handing over a pad with instructions and coordinates. “It’ll be there in... eight days. After that, whatever you do is your business. If you need crewers for the dreadnought, I can’t give you any of my guys, but I could recommend you some mercenary companies. Unaligned with the Empire, and completely loyal so long as you can pay them.”

“Appreciated, but unnecessary,” said Barriss.

Karrde shrugged. “I’ll see you round, then. Try not to die.”

As Karrde had mentioned, the Eclipse was currently covered with juvenile ysalamiri, probably every one within a radius of a kilometer. They’d calmed down by morning, and were now comfy enough lounging around on the hull that they didn’t seem inclined to move. Climbing up out of the ship’s top hatch, Barriss attempted to disperse the creatures.

“Go! Shoo! Return to the forest!” she yelled at the disinterested animals. A few of them shambled off, but that was probably more due to getting hungry than Barriss’s attempt to drive them away. Then she tried stomping on the hull, but the loud clanging didn’t bother them at all. Slumping her shoulders in defeat, she then tried raising her arms over her head and growling at them to scare them off.

Dozens of ysalamiri immediately took notice of her and growled right back, a simultaneous threat display which startled Barriss so much she nearly stumbled backwards off the Eclipse’s edge.

“All right, I would’ve preferred you left of your own volition, but that was quite enough,” she said, drawing her stun pistol and shooting the closest ysalamiri with it. Checking to make sure that it was still alive, Barriss began stunning the ysalamiri, aiming for the ones in the centers of clusters. The ones she didn’t shoot got the hint and scurried off over the side of the ship and back down to the forest floor.
“Good hunting today?” Ahsoka jokingly asked as Barriss carried the stunned ysalamiri in her arms down through the ship.

“Indeed,” Barriss replied back as she hit the button to lower the entry ramp with her foot, walked out, and set the twitching creatures down as gently as possible. One of them was still half-conscious and let out a disconcerted moan of confusion and aggravation. “Don’t give me that, I tried to get you to leave peacefully!”

With that matter settled, Barriss dusted off her hands and sealed the ship back up.

“We need to talk strategy,” Barriss said as she pulled out her datapad and set a small holoprojector down on the table. “We haven’t been taking our proposed attack on Ilum seriously enough.”

“We haven’t?” Ahsoka said, a little confused by Barriss’s dire tone considering how they’d only found out about the base yesterday and she’d recently gotten a new ysalamiri in preparation, but was very keenly interested in what she had been planning. “What’re you thinking?”

The holoprojector displayed a full view of Ilum, with an orbital shot of the Inquisitor base, the same one from that dream, and an arrow pointing to the base’s coordinates on the planet.

“This is our target, the largest known facility operated by the inquisitors who are presently tracking down and killing Jedi survivors,” Barriss said. She pressed a button, and an image of a Dreadnought-class heavy cruiser appeared, accompanied by data regarding its mass, maximum sublight velocity, and other technical information. Pressing another key displayed a flight trajectory connecting a hyperspace exit point, and the marked point on the planet. “I intend to drop the dreadnought out of hyperspace in orbit above Ilum, then slam it directly into the inquisitors’ facility.”

“...Subtle,” Ahsoka said in a very calm tone as she read the numbers, a bit shocked at the level of devastation Barriss was suggesting. “You know you’re talking about causing an extinction event, right?”

“For it to be called an extinction event, the planet must support native lifeforms. Ilum does not,” countered Barriss. “The impact of the dreadnought with the planet’s surface will send a shockwave powerful enough to cause the largest, most volatile kyber crystals to explode, and a chain reaction would spread through smaller crystals and the imperial mining machines around them.”

“This seems like we’re throwing away a dreadnought. Why can’t we just drop an asteroid onto the planet?” asked Ahsoka.

“Putting sufficient energy into a similar mass is beyond the power the Eclipse is capable of outputting, and we can’t move it through hyperspace. The scanners of any imperial vessel would detect local asteroids approaching, and between turbolasers and tractor beams, it would have no better chance of reaching the surface than any other passing rock,” said Barriss. “If the resource exchange concerns you, keep in mind that purchasing the dreadnought from Karrde cost perhaps a few handfuls of kyber crystals. Sacrificing said dreadnought will deprive the Empire of the greatest source in the known universe.”

“Fair point,” Ahsoka said, reminding herself that Barriss’s knowledge of logistics and long-term sabotage efforts could easily be much more damaging than an army.

With at least one and as many as five Star Destroyers in orbit around the planet at any given time, even if they could find a trained crew to get the dreadnought at full combat readiness, they’d have a lower chance of success than simply slamming it into the planet.
“We will need to load the dreadnought with as much mass as possible. Pull asteroids into its hangar, fill it with ferrocrete, anything to increase the energy of the impact,” Barriss said, adding estimated increases in the total mass. Whatever Palpatine intended to use Ilum’s wealth of crystals for, they were going to set his plans back by a few years, at least.

“With the dust cloud lowering surface temperatures even further, this will impede further mining efforts,” noted Ahsoka.

“The Empire has enough resources to scrub the atmosphere if it wants.”

“What do you think the Empire will do: committing the time and resources to permanently make the planet livable again, or put their mining teams in potentially hazardous situations to cut costs in the short term?”

“Fair point. There’s still one problem to deal with, and it’s a serious one. We’re going to have to get inside the facility before we can destroy it,” Barriss said dismally as she focused one of the reconnaissance images, marking one of the sections. “There’s a shield generator within the bounds of the inquisitor base. One that size will be able to withstand or at least dampen much of the impact force.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time I’ve broken in and out of a heavily-guarded enemy installation,” said Ahsoka, as she gradually became aware that her planning wasn’t improving Barriss’s mood. “What’s wrong?”

“If we attempt this, you could die.”

“I could die anywhere I go, I’m wanted by the Empire,” Ahsoka said dismissively. “And what about you? You could die, too.”

“Ever since the day we met, you’ve cared more for my life than I have. Allow me to return that kindness,” said Barriss.

“I will. I do!” Ahsoka sighed. “Is this about the dream?”

“Visions are complicated, but I’m concerned about what we may encounter on Ilum. What if that was a vision of what will occur? We need a more comprehensive plan, particularly one to let us escape and survive. I don’t want a repeat of Mitoth.”

“You saved me there,” Ahsoka replied confidently.

“With an ability I had never utilized previously, and have not thoroughly tested since,” objected Barriss.

“Alternatively, you’re afraid of me dying, and that’s why you had that dream. I get it, and it’s sweet of you to care, but it’s not a vision of the future.”

“We had that nightmare, not me. Ahsoka, how many times were you nearly killed during the Clone Wars?” Barriss asked critically. Ahsoka tried to come up with a reasonably low number, but more and more near-death experiences popped into her head. As well as that one time she technically was dead for several minutes, and that pretty much killed her willingness to keep arguing. Point goes to Barriss.

“What do you think we should do?” asked Ahsoka.

“I think we should stop blundering our way through things, and if necessary, be willing to cut our
“losses,” Barriss said as she checked over her calculations of impact energies and trajectories. “We have eight days. Let’s not waste them.”

Chapter End Notes

Star Wars characters: *up to their dramatic bullshit*
The ysalamiri, collectively: "Would you SHUT THE HELL UP, we are TRYING to SLEEP!"

I’ve come to realize that far as biological weirdness goes, the ysalamiri are the Star Wars equivalent of the platypus. I could easily write something about Ahsoka and Barriss discovering some outpost made by the ysalamiris’ creators which contains the ysalamiri 2.0, a creature powerful enough to permanently remove a person’s connection to the Force, and it's a fucking platypus.

Yes, Ahsoka named her pet after what she was doing while attempting to come up with a name for it. This is the girl who saw a gold droid and dubbed him "Goldie". She's not very good at coming up with names.

I wasn’t certain whether Barriss would endorse the plan because it depended on whether Ilum had native life or not. In Legends it did, in Canon, I couldn’t find anything on the topic. I’m assuming there isn’t because I don’t think Barriss would be so willing to devastate a planetary ecosystem no matter how much it would hurt the Empire. Maybe it’ll turn out Ilum actually did become Starkiller Base like people have theorized, in which case, it’s not like they're going to kill anything that won’t be dead in fifty years, anyway.

Ordinarily, I don't like making significant changes to previous chapters beyond correcting any typos I notice, but there was one change I had to make. In earlier chapters, Ahsoka's alias was Shaak Ashla, and I went with "Jana Lorso" for Barriss, a name I stole from a Mirialan NPC in KotOR II because I was too lazy to think of something cleverer. I corrected that instance of laziness and changed earlier chapters, because recently it hit me that her alias should've been Jana Bogan. Because fuck subtlety. If Barriss ever appears again in canon and doesn't use Bogan as part of an alias after Ahsoka spent most of a novel calling herself Ashla, what the hell is even the point? They're literally A&B!

I know updates have been slow, but that's because as the end draws nearer I've been planning a sequel and I just keep coming up with ideas for scenes. So many scenes. I can't stop because I don't want to forget something. The total word count of all the half-finished chapters probably comes to over 40K. So you can look forward to that even if TEotS is updating slower.

Also, because I'm sure SOMEBODY thought about it, yes, potatoes exist in Star Wars, I checked.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!