The World Undone

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Summary

Anakin Skywalker, proud symbol of the strength and purity of the Jedi Order, is the target of a strange and handsome Sith named Obi-Wan, whose only goal seems to be pulling Skywalker down into the dark with him.

Notes

1/28/17 Edit: Hello, reader! Before you get started, why not take a look at this amazing fan art poster made by jerseytigermoth over on Tumblr? (THANK YOU SO MUCH! <3 <3 <3)

Sith Obi-Wan is a new, very fun experiment for me to try writing. Hope you enjoy!

As a note, there is no "M" content in this chapter and there may not be for a few more chapters down the road, but I wanted to give a warning that it will show up as the story progresses.
Please note that in this AU I moved Anakin and Obi-Wan much closer in age, about two years apart with Obi-Wan being the slightly older one.

"There is a dragon in the heart of every sun."

A young man lay motionless in the landing bay of a starship, staring blankly out the open hangar door as these strange words drifted one by one into his consciousness from somewhere outside of himself. His dazed blue eyes reflected the plumes of smoke and bright pulses of the alarms ringing somewhere in the depths of the ship.

He was unaware of anything except a distant sense he was injured, the sensation like watching a forest fire from the safety of a ship. Flickers of pain shot through his mind, underscored by a low, seething dread that he couldn't pin to any one particular feeling or sensation.

The trademark robes of his order sprawled around him in pools of brown and black and the starry arm of a galaxy spread out before him, a dizzying swath of light fighting against the vast blackness of space. The sight was beautiful and achingly cold, so sharp it would cut him if he reached for it. But he was already bleeding. Bruised or broken, his brain wasn't telling him just yet. Something red pooled near his head. That was not a good sign.

There had been a battle. He'd won. Hadn't he?

Once again, the voice slid over him and the pain and the river of light outside, repeating the odd sentence about a dragon and a sun. It was soft, so unlike the cold metal floor he was on and the hard weight of his saber in his limp hand. It sounded like home, warm and comfortable and completely alien in this dark, empty place.

He wanted to listen to it forever.

"That is why all suns are far apart. It's bad luck to have two in one system. Isn't it, Anakin?"

How did this voice know his name? What was it talking about? The young Jedi tried to turn, or sit up, but his body gave a scream of protest at the first tensing of his muscles and the galaxy ahead darkened as he fought off unconsciousness. He let out a faint groan, his mind trying desperately to cling to something that would keep him awake.

Anakin Skywalker, the Chosen One, was tougher than this, he tried to tell himself in the first bit of coherence he'd been able to manage since the battle he barely remembered. I can't give up. He tried to pull the Force to him, like a child on a beach scraping sand toward himself, but the waves of pain washing over him just took it all back out to sea.

Only a few bits remained to anchor him to consciousness. The sharp, distinct scent of burning oil and circuits. A mound of commando droids reduced to messy piles, rough edges still glowing a dull red from saber cuts. Anakin had done that, he was sure of it. That had been the battle, long and painful.
And then one of the last droids had rammed him when he'd cut off its weapon arm, hard enough he slammed his head into the flooring.

He was aware of that now. The world shuddered dark and he fought to keep his eyes open, so much pain and fog inside his mind he instinctively tried to scramble away from them by focusing on something, anything else.

The burning oil trailing across the floor, mixing in with his blood. The stars locked in a frozen spiral outside. And a hand, very gentle, on his shoulder. "Come now, Anakin. I'm not that boring, am I?"

He focused on the steady warmth of that hand, and willed himself to think about the person who knelt behind him. Male and roughly his age, from the voice. Awash in a violent current of the Force. Dangerous.

Unable to properly concentrate, once his mind touched that dark river Anakin almost fell into it. So much anger came from this man, so much hatred and bitterness for the world.

How could his voice be so calm? So soothing?

"No, no. You're hardly in any kind of shape to be pulling that sort of stunt." At these words, the smooth, elegant tones of a Coruscanti native, the river swirled away, drained off into shadows and leaving the impression of a very tall, very thick wall in its place. "It's a good thing I'm here to keep you talking, isn't it? Knocked yourself quite a good one there."

Anakin tried to reach through the haze and confusion lined in pain to understand what the man was saying, eyes drifting to the blood on the floor. He strung together words, carefully picking them from the back of his mind and arranging them with the clumsiness of an Initiate trying to meditate. "Did... I... we... win?"

A chuckle drifted to him in the man's words, teasing and light even as the hand on his shoulder patted him. "Your first question is to ask if we won. Well, yes and no. You and your side won, Anakin. I did not fight in this particular battle."

"What? Who...?" he whispered, voice hoarse, as he heard a door grind open somewhere far down inside the hangar and the harsh crackle of coms barking orders. "Who are you?"

"Someone who must be leaving, it would seem. Don't worry, Anakin. You'll see me again."

The hand on his shoulder slipped away, like the morning rays of sunlight dwindling to nothing in his room back at the Temple, and he felt a strange and curious disappointment even as it meant the other young man's frightening tide of anger was gone as well.

And then his men were there, their near-identical voices asking if he could hear them, calling for medics, and reporting that the Separatist ship had been taken and all aboard arrested.

"Did you see him?" he tried to ask, but only the first word came out before the darkness grew tired of waiting and took him down into a long, deep night.

Anakin was in the forest again, the one draped in the lush autumnal reds of a temperate world, the one with a tiny creek running through the clearing where he stood. The ground lay covered in dying leaves, each one a bright red jewel on the dark earth.

*No. Not here. Please. I don't want to see this.*
The distinct, wavering hiss of sabers spinning and clashing around him as he lay atop that cold earth, clutching in agony at the searing pain of what would become a scar tracing down his face.

"You will not have him!" His master Qui-Gon's voice, full of rage and grief.

_No, please. Why am I remembering this? I want to wake up._

A harsh cry right above him, savage and feral.

_Wake up! Please!_

Qui-Gon falling dead to the ground, body slipping into the creek. The water too low to carry him away, just enough to stream his robes and long hair out over his face. A leaf catching in his dark hair, the first offering on Qui-Gon's funeral bier.

_No... no..._

He woke with a start, the waking world pouring into his mind in a rush of clumsy sensations and colors.


"Master?"

Ahsoka. His Padawan.

He let out a rough breath knotted up in his throat and sank back into the pillows, the dream retreating at the sight of Ahsoka leaning over him, a datapad forgotten in her hand.

"It's ok. I'm here, Master." She looked into his eyes, reading the anxiety there, and gently squeezed his shoulder, letting a wisp of the Force wind its way into his mind, helping tether him there with her.

"Thanks, Snips," he said after a long silence, after the memory-dream had been pushed so far back into his mind he'd lost sight of it and calm had returned to the Force bond between them. Somewhere out in the hall clone troopers marched by, a steady drum of boots and clanking armor. "How'd we do?"

"Good," Ahsoka smiled, leaning back into the chair she'd dragged over next to his bed. "Complete victory on our part, but you got beat up pretty good."

He rubbed the back of his neck, feeling the cool sting of a bacta pack there, realizing there were more all over him. "You should see the other guys." He looked puzzled for a moment, Ahsoka noticed, but she didn't push him on it.

"It's ok if you still don't feel right. They want you resting for another few days. So I know just the thing to keep you happy and on the mend," she smiled, holding up the datapad. "My entire textbook for my Galactic Geopolitical Alliance class. Read aloud by yours truly in the most obnoxious Pong Krell impersonation I, your humble Padawan, am capable of."

"Kriff, I'll get up right now," he laughed, waving his hand at her. "One-hundred crunches and then run a klick, I swear. No Galactic Geopolitical Krell reading, please."

"No, no, Master. It's the least I could do after those training drills you assigned me."

He shook his head, his smile mirroring hers, and leaned back into the pillow. "How about some
"Food before you torture me?"

"You got it, Master. Cold caf and mystery rations, coming right up." Ahsoka stood, visibly relieved, and he felt her concern for him shining like a lovely golden halo around her.

Now was not the time to mention the man he'd... seen? Hallucinated? She was worried enough, and Anakin wasn't even sure if the man had been real. "Thanks, Snips," he sighed, sinking back into the blankets, glad for once to be somewhere clean and simple and quiet.
"Welcome back, Skywalker. We're glad to see you're doing better."

"Thank you, Masters," Anakin answered, walking in to stand at ease in the center of the lofty High Council chamber. A shaft of late afternoon light caught his hair, firing it to a bright copper as he bowed in turn to both sides of the room before straightening again, hands clasped behind his back.

The leaders of the Jedi Order were seated around the room in a ring, some in shadow and others bathed in the golden twilight that washed in through expansive windows. A few chairs sat empty, as they always did these days, their owners out on missions or leading their own troops.

The room felt peaceful and calm, like he was in the middle of the clouds that must have once floated above the mountain spire encased in the center of the Temple below. Anakin always found it a little jarring to be in the middle of a combat zone and then back here within just a few days, giving a bloodless report as if describing a holo vid he'd seen on the net.

He took a deep breath, reassuring himself he was really there among the tall, elegant windows, the floral designs of the flooring under his freshly polished boots. He was glad to be home. "It's good to be back, even if it's only for a little while."

"Eager to rejoin the fighting, are you?" asked Grand Master Yoda, the diminutive leader of the Council and oldest being in the room by far.

"Fighting does not please me, Master, but it must be done to bring peace."

Yoda leaned back into his seat and studied Anakin thoughtfully.

"We've read your reports," the human man next to Yoda added. "A decisive victory. Low casualties, and a good number of Separatist prisoners to bargain with. You did well."

"Thank you, Master Windu." He heard a note of pride in his voice and reminded himself to be humble. "I have good men fighting with me." That's the truth. I don't know where I'd be without them.

"Anything else to report?" The question was simple, but he noticed Windu's eyes slide to Ki-Adi-Mundi, a Cerean seated to his right.

"No, Master." There was no hesitation: he'd decided a few days after his injury that the pleasant voice he'd heard on the enemy ship was a hallucination. Strange things happened in battles, and Anakin had been in enough of them to know better than to overthink things. "Nothing to report."

"Then there is one other matter that we wished to discuss with you," Mundi said, his distinctive
elongated head tilting as he indicated Anakin's clothes. "We see that you are still wearing dark robes." He paused. "It has been three years since-

"Four. "Anakin's hands tightened behind his back and the faintest line creased his brow. "Please excuse me for interrupting, Master, but it will be four this month."

"Four. I apologize for saying the wrong number, Skywalker." Mundi nodded to him, a rare gesture of apology from the famed skeptic and one that caught Anakin off-guard."As I was saying, it has been four years since your Master perished at the hands of Darth Maul."

Anakin did not flinch at the name, knowing it was coming, but once again felt the pull of the hazy nightmare-memory of his master's death. It had found him again last night as if it had been waiting for his arrival back at the Temple, the terrible dream waking him roughly and sending him to wander the halls until the sun rose.

He remain composed, if not tranquil, as Mundi continued. "Would it not be better to put these dark robes away, perhaps on the anniversary of his death this year?" The Master gestured to the others seated around him. "We all miss Qui-Gon Jinn, Skywalker, and see how his death affects you still. We simply do not wish you to dwell too long in mourning and risk attachment that would endanger all of the progress you have made as a Knight."

"I understand, Master, and I am careful in my thoughts, but... I..." The scream, that dark, wrong shape standing over Qui-Gon, barely glimpsed through hands clutched over the searing wound on his face: Anakin blinked, shaking his head. "I am not ready to put these colors away, I think."

"Why?"

"It isn't over. Darth Maul is still out there."

"He is. Do you hope to fight him someday?" Mundi asked, incredulous.

Anakin hadn't fully articulated this idea to anyone, even himself, until that moment, but as he spoke he felt the weight of each word sinking in, a line of stones coming to rest along the bottom of his soul. "Yes. I hope to kill him."

A deep sigh came from his left, though from which Master he wasn't sure. He remained looking at the skeptical Mundi, trying in vain not to let his emotions bubble up and overtake him as Windu spoke. "He would cut you down where you stand without another thought, Skywalker. We would lose a good Knight and your Padawan would lose a good Master."

"I-"

"No."

"But, Masters-"

"Silence. No more talk of this foolishness." Windu waved his hand with a sharpness that declared the discussion to be over, his disapproval rolling through the Force in waves. "Keep your robes dark until your mind is at peace with your master's death. We see you are far from that."

"But if you ever see Maul you will retreat and report to us immediately from a safe distance. Period."

A long moment of silence passed as Anakin took his scattershot emotions by the throat, one by one, and strangled them until his mind was empty again. "Understood, Master."
Yoda shifted in his seat, tapping the arm of his chair as he considered something. "Next month the anniversary of Qui-Gon's death is. Difficult such a time can be. Meditating on this, are you?"

"Yes," Anakin sighed, struggling to remain calm, his nerves raw and Windu's words still burning through him. "I have, but..." *Why are you hesitating, Anakin? You shouldn't be angry with any of them. They only mean to help.*

*Think of Snips. She needs you.*

That did the trick. "I've had several dreams now about that day after months without any. The most recent just last night." He looked down at the intricate detailing of the floor, cold despite the ruddy twilight deepening around them.

"Perhaps meditate with me, you should. Help you refocus, I can."

"Thank you, Master," Anakin replied.

Yoda nodded, frowning at him as if able to see the ragged edges of his thoughts as they hung about him. "Through much you have been. Meditate, we shall, and then a Tier Two mission, perhaps."

*Tier Two? Not Separatists? "Master?" The chill of the dream faded, pushed aside by curiosity.*

"Discuss it, the Council must. But best for you it may be until this anniversary passes."

"I am ready to fight wherever I am sent, Masters." They watched Anakin stand a little taller, his face and thoughts once again carefully blank.

He was so powerful to the sensitive minds of the Council that even at his calmest the Force still peeked out around him like a hand glowing red when cupped over a candle flame.

Today, they had been able to read him as easily as one of the building-sized holoscreens that floated around the city, and now all of them were relieved to see anger was no longer at the forefront of his mind.

"Who will I be facing?"

"Pirates. They don't take time off for a war, sadly," Master Windu said, tapping on a datapad resting on a stand next to him. "As you know, while Tier Two are normally for Knights or Masters only, to help us keep a low profile, we think it would be a good mission for your Padawan and her training. With the low numbers in our ranks these days, she will likely be called up sooner than we would like."

Anakin nodded, mind drifting to the quiet halls he'd passed and all of the losses they meant. He'd never been particularly close to anyone his own age at the Temple, for various reasons, but beyond his own master he could recall a long list of fellow Jedi that were no longer with them. "When do you think the war will end, Masters?"

"It's hard to say," Mundi answered. "The bombing of the Senate killed so many politicians and senators in addition to Chancellor Palpatine. It may take a full decade before the power struggles work themselves out between all the systems."

The others nodded, Yoda turning back to Anakin. "Difficult times these are, and more to discuss the Council has. In one hour, come for meditation, Skywalker. For now, rest you should."

"Yes, Master," Anakin said, bowing as they dismissed him. He left, a dark shadow drifting back
out of the last glow of sunlight, and didn't see Windu look at one of the empty Council chairs and then to Yoda, displeased.

"Another reason we need to stop Maul, and whoever his master is, sooner rather than later."

"Good intel, Master Tiin is following. The Siths' location, soon we will have."

Saesee Tiin, a horned Iktotchi Jedi, stood in front of the entrance to the ice cave, regarding the rough outline of it with a certain nameless sense of dread colder than the mountain air around him. He had stood before countless doors and arches in his life, he mused, but few stood out to him as much as this one did.

The meandering gash in the mountainside was dark, almost black inside as the weak light of an overcast day struggled to reach in. It reminded him of something, his finely-honed telepathic instincts leaving an iron weight in his stomach.

He considered the images that came to him: the massive doors that awaited him the day of his Trial. The blank white of a door he waited behind while a friend went through emergency surgery. A damaged airlock, malfunctioning after a missile attack on his command ship.

Ah, yes. That was what this simple cave in the mountain reminded him of. The airlock. That horrid black hole yawning open behind him as he had clawed his way to the nearest doors, the wind howling as the void sucked out everything and everyone around him to the strident blare of alarms.

This cave was just as dangerous, his mind warned him. *What waits inside might be able to do what the void could not.*

"Sir?" His clone commander walked up next to him, boots crunching through snow and blaster across his chest. The other two commando troopers that Saesee had brought on this mission stood a little further back, keeping watch out toward the valley they’d traveled through to get here.

"Maul is almost certainly here. I believe his master as well." He looked up at the mountain towering above them, the peaks lost in the hazy drifts of a snowstorm that was only gentle flakes of white by the time it reached them. "This is the only entrance, your scout said?"

"Yes, sir. Far as we can tell. Should we just keep watch out here or report back to the ship?"

"Neither. We need proof one or both are in there. If they're not and we wait out here for them too long, their trail will go cold before we can pick it up again."

"So simple recon, sir? Visual confirmation?"

"Ideally, yes. There is too much," he paused, thinking it was like trying to describe the color of fresh blood to the blind, "negative energy here for me to narrow it down and confirm any particular individuals inside."

"Our sensors aren't working much beyond the entrance, but there is no security tech out here, sir. We may be able to sneak in without a problem."

"Good. I doubt they expect anyone to show up. Com silence once we're inside, and do not engage
unless attacked. We see them, or even proof that they are here, we leave immediately," Saesee said, nodding to the speeders they'd parked under a snow-topped overhang.

"You heard him, men. Keep your lights low and eyes sharp. Let's go."

The small strike team quietly led him out of the grey day into the cavern, the soft blanket of snow under their feet replaced with firm, dark rock but the air just as frigid. The cave sprawled out in all directions, the rough stone ceiling rising higher and higher until it vanished into blackness, large boulders strewn about a mostly flat floor that went on so far it too faded into an unending night.

There was no tech, supplies, or any sign of a sentient here in the first large chamber, but jagged lines of shadow scattered around one wall suggested passages leading further back in. Saesee felt an immediate revulsion for the second from the left, and envied the less Force-sensitive troopers and their inability to feel such things.

We must be careful. There was a deepening of the disgust as he considered the small tunnel set into the coarse rock: somewhere down that way was Maul's unknown master. He was sure of it.

Leave. We must leave now.

No. Not until we have new information. Leaving to bring back reinforcements will only give them time to escape and waste the intel we received. We know there are always two. We need to know more about Maul's master.

"This room is empty, but he's up ahead. This way, and be ready," he murmured to the soldiers, taking the lead and doing his best to work through the various impressions floating through his mind to something coherent. It was like digging a hole in sand, more piling in the harder you dug, but it seemed this place was a training ground of sorts from the echoes of rage and strife, loss and superiority.

Is this where you trained Maul? he wondered to himself as they crossed the open chamber, almost blinded by the power he felt radiating from up ahead. The soldiers remained silent, blasters at the ready but far enough back to avoid a sudden draw of Saesee's lightsaber.

The small group was halfway to the passage Saesee had pointed to when a feeling of dread surged up behind him so swiftly and completely he thought the cave was collapsing.

Whirling, lighting his saber as he spun, he was too late: a line of bright, garish red tore through two of the troopers, the third flung aside by the Force into darkness.

The sound of the man impacting, a horrible crack of armor on unforgiving stone, echoed over the hiss of Saesee's own saber as he charged forward.

The shape standing over the motionless bodies of his men waited, as still as they were, for his assault.

Red met green and with a harsh twist the two neatly slid past each other, their faces bright in the warring glow of their blades. Saesee spun away to face his attacker, leaving a healthy distance between them as he did.

His opponent was human, a young adult male.

This isn't Maul!

The Sith did not move, a hard, elegant shadow made of obsidian, his aura just as black. His blade
arm hung loosely at his side, saber illuminating only the lower half of him in stark outlines of crimson.

Saesee did not hesitate, reaching out with his mind to call on an old trick that had made him the pariah of his Padawan class back at the Temple: his species' ability to read minds enough he was able to intuit their next strikes or parries before they made them.

It told him the human likely had no intent of attacking just yet. It felt like he wanted to show Saesee something, here in this lonely cave with the bodies of his faithful soldiers lying at the edge of the light cast by their sabers. "Who are you?" Saesee called out, careful to keep his voice and mind as calm as he could.

"I am Darth Arev." The Sith brought his blade up into an offensive slant across his chest, the fine features of his face distorted by the humming red glow of his saber. "Apprentice to Darth Maul, Great Lord of the Sith."

Saesee blinked and fought hard to keep focused, to not lose the thread of Arev's thoughts as he regarded his cold eyes. "I came looking for Maul, thinking him the apprentice, but the rest of the Council will be very interested to hear this news."

"The Council will hear nothing," Arev sneered.

Now! He means to strike up! Saesee slammed his blade around in a block just in time, the green a blinding, waving arc as he deflected the attack and pushed forward with a barrage of strikes of his own.

Arev blocked each one out of sheer instinct and then returned a vicious set of counterattacks riding on a tidal wave of primal rage and hatred, his higher mind so empty Saesee's attempts to read it were like trying to find a foothold on a glass wall.

But Arev was young, his emotions as rough as an avalanche, and he couldn't maintain the utter emptiness of instinct it would take to defeat Saesee for more than a few hits at a time. Downward thrust and spin. Shoulder arc. Saesee blocked his attacks, waiting for the opportunity to decisively strike.

Arev was graceful and deadly, his bladework a fine example of the Juyo Maul had no doubt taught him and more of a challenge than Saesee had expected: he was acting on coherent thought only half the time, the other half of his style wild, murderous instinct.

It would be a thing of beauty to Saesee if Arev weren't trying to kill him. Maul chose well. And where is he?!

Maul hadn't joined the fight. He hadn't even shown himself, though Saesee was now positive he was here in the cave too, most likely down in that inner passage somewhere.

Saesee dodged a vicious sweep of blood-red light and answered with a bone-jarring downward blow that sent Arev sliding back.

Sith are Sith. Maul may let him die if he can't win. This is probably a test of some kind for him.

An idea came to Saesee as Arev leapt away and he pursued, thrusting and striking at the spinning blade protecting Arev's retreat across the room.

Maul expects me to have to kill him in this fight to end it. But one careful hit, a quick retreat, and I could bring him back alive to the Council for interrogation.
A loud rumble of stone and surge in the Force warned Saesee in time for him to dance back as a small boulder slammed into the floor between them, obliterating the spot where he had just been.

*I can't handle a speeder and him at the same time, but with our ship...*

Saesee waited for the next attack, blade up and knees bent as he quickly punched in a two-combination emergency key on the com he wore on his wrist to start and bring his ship to their location. *Ten minutes from the landing site, maybe less. The sensors will park it right outside the cave. Wound him, grab him, and go.*

There was a cold, icy silence as the powdery dust of the explosion settled, and then the angry thrum of a saber stabbing down at him from above. Saesee rolled away and jumped to his feet, slashing out, but Arev was already out of his reach, turning in a swirl of black and red.

*You should go. Now.* Saesee had his information, and his mind screamed at him to escape. But he couldn't resist the lure of bringing home more than that, his confidence in his fighting skills strong after years of victories, even in the face of this formidable new enemy.

*I just need to focus more, see more of his thoughts.* Over the fight Arev had become aware of Saesee's efforts to read his moves and was blocking him now, a mental barrier rising up higher and higher until his next move was impossible to predict.

Saesee struck at Arev's shoulder, then his leg, both attempts blocked with less elegance than his own maneuvers but blocked nonetheless.

He set loose another series of attacks, aiming to keep Arev busy and unaware of the time passing, and Arev fought back with a fearsome strength beyond his years, feeding on the poisonous taint of the Force so tightly wrapped around him.

*Do not harm him too soon or Maul might come out before the ship gets here.*

*Injure him at the last possible second. Not until you hear the ship engines outside.*

Saesee found his idea was easier said than done as they continued to fight, sabers clashing loudly in the still of the cavern.

One blow almost made it through, searing across the tip of one of the downward-pointing horns that framed Saesee's face before he could shove it down and away. And then another, nipping at his robes.

*I will not lose to this boy!*

They struck and drew apart over and over again, the chill of the cave forgotten as Arev tried to find a way in past Saesee's defenses. *I need that wall of his down. Now.* Between blows, he sent his mind forward as much as he dared, insistently tapping at the unseen barrier around Arev, looking for a way in.

*Maul taught you well in this, at least. That would also explain why I didn't sense you behind us when we came in.*

Arev charged him, and Saesee thrust him aside with more effort than he cared to admit.

"Master Tiin, the great swordsman," he called in a smooth voice low with sarcasm as he moved back, red saber spinning impatiently. "How is it I am still standing?"
Saesee's com beeped, a faint noise signaling the ship had landed outside. "You will not be for much longer."

The acrid smell of the dead troopers' cauterized flesh filled Saesee's lungs as he drew a deep breath, summoning all of his mental power to smash forward past Arev's defenses and straight into his mind. It was crucial Saesee's last set of hits went unmet so he could incapacitate his target without killing or mortally wounding him.

The wall was gone.

"What.. what is this?" he whispered, stunned to find the man's mental gates wide open, a trap waiting for him to tumble into.

He realized too late that he was falling into something like the blackness of the open airlock he'd remembered earlier that day, falling into the horrid, incomprehensible void of this man's hatred, his body paralyzed as darkness overwhelmed him.

It was unlike anything he'd ever felt from another sentient. A glimpse, a second, of hell: vast, eternal, airless, crushing him as it spread to every horizon with the weight of a thousand dead worlds.

And then it ended.

Arev was in his face, so close Saesee could see the fine line of his lashes and the sweat on his brow.

There was something wrong with Saesee's hands, but he could only register the blinding pain of a saber in his chest, searing lava piercing him all the way through. Arev grinned, mouth curled in cruel delight, and kicked Saesee back to sprawl across the cave floor as the green light of his saber vanished in a flicker, the hilt bouncing and rolling out of sight.

Saesee Tiin, famed pilot and strongest telepath of the Jedi Council, drew a last choked gasp and was still. Smoke rose in twin lines from the stumps of what had been his arms.

Arev slowly walked over to the body, heart pounding from the fight and breaths coming hard and fast as he looked down into Saesee's blank eyes. "Rot in hell, Master Tiin," he sneered, shutting off his blade and returning it to his hip. Darkness returned to the cavern, only the faint, scattered lights of the troopers' helmets breaking up the gloom.

"How did that feel?"

"Incredible." Arev let out a long, ragged sigh of exhilaration and turned toward the silhouette of his master approaching him from the dark, a tall figure with a jagged outline crowning his head and the long trail of a black cloak sweeping out behind him.

"When I realized he was attempting to tail me I thought to bring him here for you. As a gift of sorts. I know how tired you are of waiting."

"Thank you, Master."

"This shows you are ready to face them, I think." Maul folded his muscular arms over his chest, thoughtful as he surveyed the dim shapes of corpses that littered the floor around them. "I have destroyed the Senate. I will let you, my apprentice, be the one to destroy the Jedi Council."

Arev nodded, eyes hidden in shadow but tone hard and brittle. "They will all die. I swear it."
"Yes. Think of this day as a preview of what is to come. The first Jedi death of many."

"Yes, my Master." The full glory of Arev's victory, the meaning of what he had done, brought a savage pleasure to his heart. He had killed Saesee Tiin. One of the hated High Council. One of the best saber-wielders the Jedi had.

And he had killed him.

Arev felt euphoric, his hate and pride a bitterly sweet mix that intoxicated him with its promise.

No one can stop me. No one.

Maul watched Arev and the slow, malevolent smile that crept across his face. He was pleased with the fierce, dark joy he saw there. "Tomorrow you will return to your primary mission. I have arranged for your transport to the Nidai system."

Arev lifted an eyebrow, running his hands through his hair, enjoying the heat from the fight smoldering in his muscles. The fight I won. "Is that where Skywalker is going next?"

"Yes. My contact in the Temple docking bays saw him board a ship bound for Nidai II yesterday."

"Excellent. That's far enough from the Temple it should be easy to get close."

"Yes." Maul considered the situation as they began to walk to the cave entrance. "There is also the fact that we have a chance to capture him that far out with little risk. We could torture him for days before any kind of word got back to the Council and anyone came to rescue him."

Arev nodded. "True. But that is your way, Master. And while I wouldn't have minded a little torture for dear Master Tiin here, my way will be much more effective with Skywalker, if we are patient."

"Make sure your idea of patience is similar to mine, apprentice."

"Yes, Master." Arev lifted his arms in a tired, pleased stretch as they began to walk out, the lithe line of his body slender next to the broad bulk of the Zabrak. "Think of the end goal. We want the Chosen One as a willing ally rather than a mad dog on a chain, don't we?"

Maul chuckled, and the two pulled their hoods up, black-cloaked forms going out into the snow to inspect the new ship and speeders they'd acquired.

Chapter End Notes

Whew! Chapter 2 is done. I'll be posting new chapters once a week, Saturday or Sunday, with the plot arc setting this whole thing at probably around 20 chapters. Hope you enjoyed and thanks for reading! :)

Tumblr: writegowrite
Nidai II could have been one of a hundred different worlds: an Outer Rim planet trying to be a Mid Rim one, industriously building itself up as quickly as it could, the growing sprawl of cities and spaceports faint dark splotches on the native plains and forests that arced along the equator. When the landing sequence locked in, Ahsoka sighed as they spiraled down toward the middle of the largest patch of grey. "Another city, huh?"

"What, nothing's tried to eat you alive this week? Too much time spent in a real bed?" Anakin teased, flipping a few switches as the ship began to rattle in the high winds of the upper atmosphere. The roar of the thrusters vibrated through their pilot chairs, their brute force correcting for the punishing gales.

"No, but cities are all the same, you know, when you get down to it. It's fun to see the parts of worlds that are different from other ones."

"I'm sure we'll have some fun here, Snips. We bring the fun with us."

She chuckled, keying in the landing permission code the Temple had supplied them with. "Is that what you're telling the Council next time something happens? 'Sorry, Masters, we overestimated the amount of fun this situation needed. We will attempt to bring less fun to future missions.'"

"Who can argue with fun?"

"Probably Master Yoda. Definitely Master Koth."

"True."

The city rose up to meet them, the nondescript architecture and low-level smog of hasty construction and unregulated industry spreading out almost to the horizon in every direction. Ahsoka watched as they drifted down through layers of dull concrete to the platform the central spaceport had reserved for long-term parking, sinking into her seat as the boosters ground into landing position and let out a loud hiss somewhere below them. "What makes you think they're hiding out on this particular planet?"

"After nearly every attack in this system and surrounding ones, ion trails and other data point to their ships returning to this planet."

"Ok," she said reluctantly as the ship touched down with a thud and they unbuckled their harnesses. "But this is going to be like finding a needle in a haystack, Master."

"So little faith in me, Snips." He stifled a yawn, rubbing his eyes, and tossed her a handheld holoprojector. "Take a look."

She clicked it on, a ghostly green ship flickering into view. It rotated silently, lines of data spilling down in a waterfall beside it. "What's this?"

"The model of ship this pirate fleet favors, according to reports. Strike-class B1240," he said. "Low-grade. Leftovers from a huge civil war in the Tlorian system."
"The Tlorian Conflict? We just learned about that! That was over, what, 60 years ago?"

"Exactly. Almost no one that can afford better uses them anymore." He leaned over and touched the air near the nose of the projection, a blue circle rising to mark the spot. "The 1240s have a problem with their stabilizers. There's a part in the stabilizer suspension array that breaks easily, especially if you're putting the ship through a lot of jumps or hard maneuvers. It's so delicate and broke so much they ended up discontinuing that design. Later versions of this ship model don't use that same part."

"How do you know all this?"

"The mechanics in the Temple docking bays. I pretty much lived in those garages as a kid." He shrugged nonchalantly, but she heard satisfaction in his voice as he continued. He loved solving problems no one else had been able to crack. "So, Snips, we know the pirates are somewhere on this planet, and we know a specific, discontinued part they probably need on a regular basis to do repairs on their ships. What do we do next?"

"Hit up all the mechanics and shipyards large enough to still have that part, or could make it," she said slowly as she thought through the answer, clicking off the projector and tossing it back to him.

"All of which are located in this city only. Nowhere else planetside."

Ahsoka nodded as she considered what he said, excitement growing. "Look at you go, Master. I'm impressed!"

"Thank you," he mock-bowed as they stood and walked toward the back of the ship. "I don't think we're going to be in this city very long at all, a few weeks at most. We sniff around, find their part supplier, track them back to their base, get the go ahead from the Council, and call in the troops. Done."

Almost a week into their mission, Anakin and Ahsoka had fallen into familiar recon mission routines: sleep, eat, split up to investigate the targets for the day, spend some time wandering the area, and then return to the ship.

The unassuming, boxy vehicle made an excellent base of operations, which pleased Anakin, who didn't want them staying in a hotel surrounded by nosy locals. Designed to transport and house six sentients stuffed on top of each other, it made perfectly roomy accommodations for two. Both of them had their own shower, sleeping corner, and place to sprawl out at the end of the day when they were comparing notes, and in the lineup of similar ships parked around them their cruiser was just one of many, strangers traveling and working in comfortable anonymity.

This morning Anakin had given Ahsoka her list of possible suppliers for the day and sent her off, quietly making sure beforehand that hers focused on neighborhoods he felt would be safest. He had taken the seedier locales for himself, dressed to blend in with the dark, fitted fashions of the locals and glad cloaks had not passed out of style here.

He liked the weight of one on his shoulders and draped over his face: it reminded him of who he was, and he wore his cloak as much as he could get away with on missions. For all of Nidai II's boring monotony, this was a point in its favor. No one looked up or thought twice about the tall human in the plain waves of a dark cloak and hood as he walked down the street or stepped into
shops and restaurants.

Around noon on this particular day, the white sun high in the sky and only a few faint traces of smog smudging the horizon line, Anakin stopped on his way out of an airtram station to admire the view it gave of the city. This platform station was higher than most, the apogee of a gravity-based track system, and a crowd of travelers and locals lingered along the railing to enjoy the fresh air before wandering along to the elevators that would take them down to the street.

Anakin remained behind as the crowd dispersed, pulling off his hood and resting his arms on the thick railing to take in the sprawl of the skyline. He closed his eyes and breathed in the freshest air he'd tasted in awhile as the wind tousled his hair.

The sun warmed Anakin's face and shoulders, and he was sinking into a moment of true relaxation when he felt the familiar pull of another trained Force user next to him.

"Snips?" He turned, surprised, and the questions he'd just started to form in his mind died in his throat.

"Hello, Anakin."

A young man just a little older and shorter than Anakin stood there, reclining with his back against the railing and in the same dark palette the Jedi wore, a cloak thrown over his shoulders as well. Anakin was dimly aware the stranger was handsome, but in his shock at that moment he couldn't have described any detail of his face save his eyes.

They were the icy gold of a winter sunset.

Sith.

The tram-alarm rang loudly overhead, startling Anakin out of his trance. His hand dropped to his saber, mind running through a dozen different opening strikes and the warmth of the day forgotten.

The stranger raised an eyebrow and nodded toward the track and the vehicle drifting to a stop there. "Car pulling in. Do you really want to start a fight here, with all of those innocent people around?"

"Who are you?" Anakin hissed, hand still at his hip, as the airtram doors opened and the midday crowd flooded out.

"I am Darth Arev. But you may call me Obi-Wan."

"Never heard of you."

Obi-Wan gave a low, dry laugh, watching a few children playing tag as their parents shooed them along. "I don't expect that you have."

"What do you want, Sith?" Anakin spat the last word, itching to draw his saber.

"Oh, I think the question here is more what you want, Jedi. Is it to fight me and capture me? Just as soon as all of these poor bastards get out of the way?"

"You're not walking away from here."

"So then your answer to that would be 'yes'." Obi-Wan turned to look at him again as the last big throng of passengers made their way to the row of elevators. "Well, far be it from me to deny the famed Chosen One, Savior of the Jedi, his chance at further glory. But let's not do it here, shall
we?" His polished voice never wavered, friendly and inviting, a spider beckoning a fly. "Why not a quieter, more private locale that won't draw too many eyes? Say the old garage just under us?"

Anakin glared at him, hating how utterly relaxed Obi-Wan seemed, and tried to think over the loud cacophony of his own raging emotions. Who is he? There is no way he's Maul's master so are there other pairs of Sith?

And why does he sound so familiar? "Where have I seen you before?"

"Oh, the last time we met you didn't see me. But you did hear me."

Anakin waited in icy silence while the airtram car pulled out, its exit marked by a gust of wind that rippled both their cloaks.

"The Separatist ship, a month or so ago. You were injured at the very end of the battle."

The educated, refined tones of Obi-Wan's voice taunted him with a strange certainty that he had spoken to him before, but he held fast to his suspicions. You can't trust anything a Sith says. "It was on the HoloNet that I was injured in that battle. Prove that you were really there."

Obi-Wan fixed Anakin with that unnatural yellow gaze, the aloof expression of a wolf not quite ready to finish off its prey. "There's a dragon in the heart of every sun."

Anakin immediately heard an echo of the same strange phrase in his mind. The same soothing, disembodied voice speaking to him from somewhere above as he had lain bleeding on the hangar floor. It was him!

"Whatever. You're a fool for not killing me when you had the chance," Anakin snarled, jerking his head over his shoulder. "Let's go. The sooner I win, the sooner you can be in a cell."

Obi-Wan gave a deep sigh and a smirk twisted the corner of his mouth up. "Of course, Chosen One." He pushed off the railing and turned toward the elevators, black cloak billowing as he went.

What is he playing at here? There has to be a trap down in the garage. Is he trying to capture me? Anakin reminded himself to stay calm, to reach out to the Force and trust it, even as his heart raced with anger and confusion.

I could just cut him down right here. Right in the back.

The cruel thought startled him, and he quickly blamed it on his nerves as he fell in behind Obi-Wan, determined not to fall prey to whatever this strange enemy had in store for him.

An idea came to him. "No. Not the garage. The roof." Anakin pointed to the top of the station, towering several stories above them and almost walled off by advertising holoboards. Don't go where he wants you to go.

Obi-Wan paused, fine profile impassive as he looked back over his shoulder at Anakin and then turned his gaze to the skies overhead. The Nidai system was only in the second phase of its galactic modernization, and while large commercial ships boomed through the upper atmosphere, hardly any private craft roamed the city low enough to matter. "As you wish."

"You could just give up," Anakin forced himself to say as they walked to the end of the platform and made their way up a set of rickety emergency stairs that zigzagged to the top.

He didn't want Obi-Wan to give up, he had to admit. Anakin wanted this fight. It was a primal need
for violent release, one that surged up at this unexpected opportunity but had been lurking quietly for weeks in sleepless nights and baseless anger.

Today, right here under a bright sun and blue sky, maybe he could drive out and exorcise the despair that had crept into his life since the return of his memory-dreams of Qui-Gon's death.

*A fight will not bring your master back. He is dead. He is never coming back.*

He felt that single, awful fact creep in from out of the dark, the final result of that horrible day, and shoved it back out of conscious thought as roughly as he could. Losing focus, letting the snarl of emotions tied to that particular trauma interfere with his fighting, would mean death against an opponent as skilled as this one likely was.

Obi-Wan's voice drifted back to him, amused. "I could just give up? How little you think of me. Let's see if that changes once we fight, hmm?"

They emerged onto the roof of the station, the wire-strewn backs of advertising panels taller than they were and propped up on every side to block out most of the city around them. The concrete glowed bright in the midday sun, the faint smell of hot asphalt rising from it.

Obi-Wan crossed to the far side of the impromptu ring and turned, shrugging off his cloak to let it pile on the ground around him. He took a long, deep breath, tilting his head back and letting his eyes drift shut.

Anakin tugged his own cloak off, throwing it to the side and never looking away from Obi-Wan. He drew his saber and lit it.

A line of bright blue sizzled to life next to him.

Obi-Wan grinned at the sound. He opened his eyes to slowly refocus on Anakin as he turned on his own saber, a bright red gash welling up in the air in front of him. "Come then, Skywalker. Come and fight me."

Anakin lunged and thrust straight for Obi-Wan's shoulder, using a quick burst of the Force to power him forward in a move intended to instantly cripple his saber arm. Obi-Wan jumped back, parrying with ease, and spun to strike down from above.

Anakin's blade slammed into his in a powerful block, and he shoved him back off with a grunt. Anakin followed with several wide sweeps aimed at his legs, but Obi-Wan deflected the first two and jumped over the last one to roll away. Righting himself, he wheeled his saber and laughed, bringing it up again across his body as Anakin charged him.

It took a dozen more whirling strikes before Anakin realized the fight style he was up against. *Juyo.* The thought that followed was so distracting, so dangerous in the heat of this battle, he shut it down hard enough only a black flicker passed through his mind.

They fought on, the loud whine of trams arriving and leaving again floating up from the platform below, marking five and then ten minutes. Neither could get a hit in on the other, it seemed. Almost every attack Anakin made Obi-Wan was somehow already waiting for him, and every attack Obi-Wan made Anakin saw coming from a klick away. *His attacks are too easy. If he really is a Sith, he's playing with me.*

*How am I going to end this before he stops playing?*

*The fake out. Yes.* Remembering an old trick that had worked on countless opponents since he was
a young Padawan, Anakin fought for a long chain of strikes without using the Force to enhance his moves, trying to lull Obi-Wan into a false sense of security that it was safe to get in close.

Once he was close enough, Anakin would finish the fight with a powerful Force-enhanced combination of figure-eight strikes he'd perfected on a long line of Padawans and later enemies, typically injuring the unlucky recipient in at least four places.

Obi-Wan met each initial hit with a block of his own as he fought in closer and closer, and when Anakin reached the crescendo of his planned attack, unleashing the Force to help him, he found a wild-eyed Obi-Wan answering in a rhythm of loud saber clashes, meeting each attack point on the figure-eight as if Anakin had told him exactly what he'd planned to do.

Obi-Wan let out a rough cry of triumph as Anakin's last hit fell away, powerless, and planted a hard kick squarely in the middle of the Jedi's chest.

*That wasn't playing. I need to end this, now!*

Anakin stumbled away with a grunt, swinging his saber in an upward arc even as he did, and Obi-Wan threw himself back in just enough time to miss the blinding blue arc that scored the air where his face had been a moment before.

Anakin whirled, regaining his balance as he blocked another hit from behind, andthreaded the two crossed blades up and over to come down in front of him. The harsh pivot forced Obi-Wan to take a step closer in so as not to lose his saber. Snarling, Anakin slammed his own saber down, forcing Obi-Wan's along with it as they stood together. Before he could jump away, Anakin wrapped his foot around Obi-Wan's ankle and gave a rough push forward with the Force.

Obi-Wan crashed to the ground on his back, blade dying in a flicker as his saber bounced out of his hand and slid away across the pavement. Panting, Anakin stopped the swing of his own saber just above Obi-Wan's throat, putting a boot on his chest as he held out his free hand.

*That was still too easy. He's planning something. Isn't he?*

Obi-Wan's hilt flew to Anakin, landing hard against his palm.

*There's no way he could have known I'd suggest the roof. There aren't any other Force users I can sense anywhere around. What is he planning?*

"I win," Anakin hissed. *Kriff it. He can plan whatever it is in a jail cell.* Despite his suspicions about how the fight had gone, pride and a dark, forbidden excitement pounded through him. Anger rolled in, too, as he allowed one particular thought to resurface. "Juyo."

Obi-Wan said nothing, catching his breath as Anakin held the blade steady at his neck. "That means Maul. He's your master, isn't he?"

"I see his reputation precedes me," Obi-Wan murmured, sitting up slowly to draw his legs under himself in a kneel. He raised his hands in the universal gesture of surrender.

Anakin's saber tip followed his every move, never more than a finger's width from cutting the life out of him. "Your master murdered mine."

"So I've heard."

At that dry, sarcastic response, Anakin's unthinkable urge from earlier, to slash his blade across this unarmed man, right where he knelt, bubbled up to drown out all rational thought. The sounds of the
No. I can't do that. That is not the Jedi way.

The name of his order broke the spell of bloodlust, and he found his voice after a few more seconds of struggling to calm himself. "Hands out. Any sudden moves and I will kill you."

Obi-Wan silently reached out and turned his palms up, still kneeling, like a beggar before a king. Anakin floated a heavy length of loose cord over from the edge of the roof to twist into place around Obi-Wan's wrists.

Anakin extinguished his saber and hooked it back on his hip before tucking Obi-Wan's into the back of his belt, reaching down to tie off the cord in rough knots once he was satisfied it was wrapped around enough times.

Obi-Wan had strong, graceful hands, his long fingers twitching as the last bit of cord dug into his skin. "And what do you intend to do with me now, Chosen One?"

"Take you back to the Council. Immediately. You can play whatever games you're trying to play with me with them."

Obi-Wan said nothing to this and stood, Anakin roughly dragging him by the arm back over to pile of black he'd left on the ground at the start of their fight. "Put it on." He looked down at his bound hands and back up at Anakin, giving an exaggerated, helpless shrug.

Anakin sighed in disgust and used the Force to pick up the bulky cloak, grabbing it and tossing it around Obi-Wan's shoulders as he glared into his eyes, jerking the front ties together tight enough it overlapped and covered his hands. The last thing Anakin needed was local police interfering where they weren't needed. "Don't try anything. I'll sense it."

The strange pair walked back down the stairs to the airtram platform, Anakin pulling his own cloak back on as they descended. He guided his captive to the end of the nearest platform, the one that would lead them back to the spaceport and their transport and eventually Ahsoka when she returned from her rounds.

It didn't occur to Anakin at all to contact Ahsoka: the situation was in hand and he didn't want to put her at risk if that suddenly changed. The familiar weight of his saber was balanced by Obi-Wan's saber resting against the small of his back, and he patted both absentmindedly, making sure Obi-Wan hadn't somehow palmed one from him.

They made a strange pair waiting on the platform, two dark cloaked figures standing close under a dozen colorful ads hanging from the grimy ceiling, Anakin's hand tight on Obi-Wan's shoulder, both hooded and silent. "Not this one," Anakin said as a blue-trimmed set of cars pulled up and the people around them surged into it. "We wait for an every-stop. And we get in the last car." Fewer passengers. Less risk if things go south.

"Smart. Good plan." There were and had been no ripples in the Force around Obi-Wan that Anakin could sense since his capture. In fact, it felt to Anakin as if nothing was there at all, as if a normal person were standing next to him. All this alleged Sith Lord did was watch the doors of the airtram cars that pulled up and then away, watching them ghost open to reveal a different scene inside each time before closing again.

Almost a half hour and seven trams later, Obi-Wan had still said and attempted nothing and Anakin
was still trying to figure out his captive's goal. *Maybe he's just given up? Maybe the plot is to get captured and taken back?* He gave a snort as an every-stop finally pulled up, only a few tired-looking residents inside. *Good luck with whatever he's planning. It won't work."

The doors slid open and after a slow-moving handful of people left they stepped on board, Anakin's hand firm on Obi-Wan's arm as he pushed him forward into the almost empty car. "There. Down at the end where no one else is."

"As you wish." And suddenly the Force was all around Anakin, a massive jolt of power that had somehow been building entirely without his notice. It was like opening one's front door to find a tornado waiting: the fierce gale violently threw him off his feet to skid down the middle of the tram car on his back.

As Anakin sailed down the aisle, arms flailing, he realized too late a thread of this same power had neatly plucked Obi-Wan's saber from his belt.

Anakin hit the end wall of the car so hard it knocked the breath out of him as Obi-Wan's saber dropped neatly into his now free hands.

Obi-Wan smiled past the few frightened passengers on board and saluted the dazed Anakin, giving a jaunty flick of his hand before stepping off the tram just as the doors slid shut. The airtram pulled away before Anakin could get back on his feet, too late to do anything but hammer on the auto-sealed doors as the station and Obi-Wan receded into the distance.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, dear readers! Thank you for all of the kudos and comments this week. They are always appreciated and keep me going when the writing gets tough!

Also a huge, huge thank you to Fireflyfish for all of her help in brainstorming and editing! <3 If you like my Star Wars stuff definitely check her fics out, too: she and I both love playing in Star Wars AU Land.

*To Live Among Wolves*
*Copper and Gold*
A Trade

Chapter Notes

Hello all! Thanks for the kudos and support as this story gets rolling! I usually post chapters for this fic on the weekends but got done so early this week I figured I'd go ahead and post early.

Hope you enjoy, and thanks as always for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Four days after Anakin had come back to their ship in an incredibly foul mood, Ahsoka still wasn't sure what was going on with him other than annoyance with the slow pace their investigation was moving at.

She wondered if it was the nightmares.

Anakin had had at least two here on Nidai II after a long period free of them, both times thrashing about so badly it had woken her up across the room. Half-awake, she'd come sit next to him and sleepily stroke his arm, a comforting touch of the Force passing from her to him and gradually soothing him back into a true sleep.

In the mornings she'd asked him as gently as she could about the dreams, and both times he'd shrugged and said he was fine. Fine in that tone that means he isn't fine but that I won't be fine either if I keep asking.

Anakin Skywalker was an incredible saber fighter and the best pilot in the whole history of everything, and most of the time she thought of him as the incredibly cool older brother everyone wishes they had. But you are really, really terrible at talking about how you feel, Skyguy.

Anakin didn't ever want to talk about the nightmares or what happened to cause them, and now whatever happened four days ago he didn't seem to want to talk about either. He blew in and out of the ship without much explanation, irritable and restless and suddenly very, very interested in city maps and rigging a security system for the ship.

I'm worried about you, Master. I wish you would just talk to me.

Today was their supply run day, and as they walked together down the wide lane that was the city's main pedestrian street, dark grey clouds vast and heavy overhead and a cool wind blowing Anakin's cloak about, she decided it was time to get to the bottom of things. "Master, can we talk for a minute?" she asked, slowing to a stop off out of the main flow of traffic.

Anakin followed her to the side of the road, curious. "About what?" They were underneath a large, gaudy awning that led back into a covered shopping arcade, the faint smells of fried food and calls of stall vendors echoing out to them. A heavy throng of shoppers walked past them going both ways, an endless stream of families with children, old women with rustling plasticloth bags, and harried deliverymen pushing overloaded carts. "What's up, Snips?"

"You've been kind of weird lately."
"Weirder than usual?" He cracked a smile, clearly trying to keep the mood light. "How would you rate my weirdness? On a scale of me getting up early to me landing a ship without crashing it?"

She grinned even as she told herself not to get sidetracked. It was impossible not to be charmed by Anakin Skywalker if he put his mind to it. "I think we're around the middle."

He nodded and patted her on the shoulder, a gesture of thanks even if he couldn't really say it. "I haven't gotten a lot of sleep lately."

"I know. It's the dreams, right?"

"Yeah, and... well..."

Ahsoka was about to speak when another voice cut in. "Hello, Anakin."

She turned to find a cloaked man stepping out of the crowd to stand in front of them. *He's calling Master by his first name?* She couldn't see the stranger's eyes, his hood falling too low over his pale face for that, but something felt incredibly, undeniably off about him. Ahsoka had to resist the urge to grab Anakin and drag him away to the other side of the street. *Maybe further.*

Startled, Anakin seemed to have the same reaction, sliding between the two of them and his hand dropping to his saber. "You're back," he said, as if he didn't quite believe it.

"I am." The man shrugged, palms turned up and tone friendly. "I thought we could talk a little more than we managed last time."

"Who's this, Master?" Ahsoka asked as politely as she could manage. There was nothing in the Force at all that told her anything about the stranger, but her skin crawled all the same. *Go away! Get lost!*

The young man waited patiently in silence, apparently oblivious to both her question and her discomfort. His hands dropped back into the folds of his dark cloak, his silhouette plain against the colorful river of people passing along behind him.

There was a long, long pause before Anakin answered her over his shoulder, distracted. "An informant, Snips. Look... you go ahead and get started and I'll catch up."

"Master? Are you sure?" Please come with me, Master. I don't like him.

"Yeah. Go on. I'll be fine."

She stepped out from behind Anakin and made a point to hook her thumbs into her belt, resting her hands over her sabers. "Ok, Master. See you in twenty outside of that big white store? The one with the fruit stands?"

"Yeah," he answered, his eyes never leaving the man. "I'll meet you there in twenty. See ya, Snips."

Ahsoka left, with more than one backward glance over her shoulder, and Anakin silently begged her forgiveness, his guilt at lying to his Padawan one more thing he could lay at the feet of this man.

When she had finally disappeared into a store down the way, he let out a long, angry breath and growled a curse. "What do you want?"
"To talk."

"You are insane."

"You're the one that let your back-up walk away. And haven't even told her about last time, it would seem?"

"She doesn't need to know. And I'm not going to attack you." This next part took a clear struggle to say. "You could have killed me. Twice now. And you didn't... So I guess we'll talk."

Hearing this, Obi-Wan reached up and took off his hood. His auburn hair almost glowed against the dim greys of the overcast sky, the unique hue of his eyes pale in comparison. "Glad to hear it. Do you like tea? There's a lovely little shop just over there."

Anakin hated how attractive he would have found Obi-Wan if he didn't know what he was. "You have eighteen minutes."

They were seated inside the restaurant's front window within three, simple cups placed in front of them and the local brew served in a large, heavy pot as the waitress set out several small dishes of sweet cakes and flour dumplings. The teapot sat between them, steam rising in silver wisps, as Obi-Wan studied Anakin thoughtfully.

"Twelve, Sith."

"Sorry, I was taking a moment to enjoy the fact we're sharing a meal together rather than trying to kill each other."

"We are not sharing a meal. I am sitting across from you and you are going to tell me what the kriff your Master wants with me."

Obi-Wan poured himself and then Anakin some tea, which he immediately decided he would not be drinking. "Oh, he's actually not involved in this little exercise."

"Like I believe that. You're his slave. That's how the Sith work."

"Says the Chosen One, symbol of the Jedi and the Jedi Council. The same Council that kidnaps children from their homes and forces them into the Order." Obi-Wan lifted his cup in a mock salute.

"They don't kidnap children. My parents gave me up when I was born and showed the signs."

"Oh?" Obi-Wan paused, the tea halfway to his mouth. "Where were you born?"

"Coruscant."

Obi-Wan lowered his gaze to his tea and gave it a dry chuckle before he took a sip. "You're a slave to them, you know."

Anakin sat back in his chair, trying not to let his pride take over. "I'm not a slave. I have my own life."

"You have nothing. They point you and off you go, saber swinging."

"And Maul doesn't do that with you? You don't just go where Maul points you?" Anakin asked, the question laced with sarcasm.
"No. I have my own goals independent of what my Master asks of me."

"What does Maul want with me?"

"Nothing. As I said, I have my own goals." Obi-Wan pointed at Anakin's untouched tea cup. "It's no good cold, you know."

He ignored the advice. "And what goals do you have? What do you want with me?"

"To have a little fun." The inviting, infuriatingly sexy smile he gave Anakin left no room for doubt as to what he meant.

"I don't understand you." Anakin put his elbows on the table and rubbed his forehead with both hands, inhaling the light scent of tea and sweets as he gave an exasperated sigh. "If you just wanted… that… you could have snuck up on me any time I was alone, with that parlor trick of yours you used on the airtram. Knocked me out cold and done… whatever."

"What, and take away time from my baby eating?" Obi-Wan shook his head, and Anakin couldn't tell if he was teasing or actually offended. "How crude do you think I am? Even a Sith can have a touch of morals... No one's perfect." He sipped his tea as Anakin frowned at him, bemused. "No, I just want a little fun with the famed Chosen One. That's all."

Emptying his cup, Obi-Wan poured more for himself, hands moving elegantly through the steam of the teapot to pick it up. "Speaking of things related to the Jedi and their all-knowing Council, I must ask… why hasn't the Council descended upon Nidai II in a flurry of brown cloaks and empty platitudes about life?"

Anakin was somewhat relieved he didn't have to bring this up first. He'd planned for the last three days what he would say when the Sith appeared again, and it came out easily despite the situation not being anything like what he had imagined. "I realized after we fought that if I tell them about you, they'll send more Jedi to hunt you down. Maybe even some Council members. They'll definitely capture you, and then they'll interrogate you until you tell them where Maul is."

"And that isn't an agreeable thought to you?" Obi-Wan speared and then took a bite of one of the dumplings, an eyebrow raised.

"No, because I want to find him myself."

He mulled this over as he finished the dumpling. "For the glory of the Council or for you?"

"For me."

Obi-Wan sighed as he reached out to pluck a sweet cake from a thin clay plate. "Oh, Anakin, he would kill you in a heartbeat if you tried to fight him alone. You are nowhere near a match for him."

The near-perfect echo of Master Windu's words sent Anakin's blood pumping in fast, angry thumps through his chest so hard he could almost hear his heart pounding under his cloak. "I will kill him," he finally said, voice low.

"You couldn't put a scratch on me. How could you possibly defeat my master?"

"I could put a few on you right now."

Obi-Wan lifted his hands and waved them. "Look, Anakin. I'd suspected you had decided to keep
me a secret when my contacts told me no more Jedi have shown up at the spaceport. Your
Padawan's reaction confirmed it. You clearly want to talk. So let's continue talking and not lose all
of this wonderful progress we've made, hmm? Look, not a saber to be seen."

"You know where Maul is."

"I do."

"And you're going to tell me." Anakin's gaze was hard and intense, icy blue and daring Obi-Wan to
defy him.

"I am? Now, why would I do that?"

"I will make you."

Obi-Wan considered this with the faintest hint of a smile, popping one more small cake into his
mouth and finishing it before he answered. "Well, as much as I would love to find out how you
mean to do that, I'm afraid it will have to wait." He inclined his head in a nod out to the street. "I
can feel your Padawan coming back. Is she always such a little storm cloud?"

Anakin blinked, realizing the building tension he'd felt these last few minutes wasn't all his own.
Ahsoka was on her way, just down the road and closing fast on his Force signature. He knew he
had time left before he was supposed to go meet her, and mentally groaned at her inability to just
do what he told her. *Is this what all Masters have to put up with? Was I like this?*

"She is a sweet girl to be so worried about you," Obi-Wan said, standing and tossing credits on the
table before pulling his hood back on. "She can finish my half. It'd be a shame to let good food go
to waste."

Anakin grabbed his arm as he walked by, glaring up into the shadows of his cowl. "Tonight. The
third level of the spaceport garage, the level closed for repairs. Oh-one-hundred. We can continue
this there, Sith."

Obi-Wan nodded and bowed as the door to the restaurant opened with a pleasant chime and Ahsoka
strode in. She looked around for Anakin and hurried over to him, giving Obi-Wan the coldest stare
she could as they passed each other on her way in and his way out.

Anakin sat back and slid down in his chair, exhausted and feeling as if he'd just run a training
marathon, while Ahsoka dropped into the empty one across from him.

She put their heavy supply bag down with a huff and pointed across the table at him, clearly having
developed and then practiced this speech during her shopping. It was easy for Anakin to imagine
her lecturing the fruit and vegetables as she gathered things from their list, pointing at them the
same way she did at him now. "That man is no good, Master. I don't care what information he's
got, you shouldn't be around him. We can find someone else to help us."

"Hi to you, too, Snips."

She didn't miss a beat. "Hi, Master. Stop talking to him. Please?"

"Don't worry about him." He pointed at the dishes spread out on the table. "Have some food. Just
not the tea. It's... cold." He waved a hand and asked the waitress to get the pot and cups changed
out.

"Did he at least tell you something useful?"
"No. Not yet." Anakin sat back up, stretching and trying to shake loose the anxiety building inside as he realized the plan he'd come up with had now begun, for better or for worse. *I'm keeping this from both the Council and Ahsoka. I don't even know what the Masters would do if they found out I was hiding something like this from them.*

He didn't want to think about what Ahsoka would say either, and looked away when she attempted to joke with him, her anger quickly overcome by concern. "I can always beat him up for you, Master."

"Nah, he's not worth your time." *I hate lying to her, and them, but I have to. This is the best chance I'll ever have.*

He'd confront Obi-Wan alone, somehow get the information alone, and then go fight Maul. Alone. He tried to ignore the low current of fear and uncertainty this word brought, and focused on what mattered.

He would avenge his master, bringing justice to the monster that had killed him.

No more dreams of the day he had been helpless, too weak to save the man that had raised him. No more anger. *I can return to being the Jedi I am supposed to be.*

They ate in silence, both of them worried for different reasons, the food barely tasting of anything despite how good it looked.

The day came and went, ending with a surprisingly good lead from one of the mechanics Ahsoka visited after they split up. She'd gone in asking for the same part the pirates used, and the Rodian behind the counter had told her they had just sold all they had last month but would be getting more the next day. "We might almost be done, Master!" she'd said with pride, happy to report something good after the wrong, awkward tilt lunch had put on the day.

"Good." He smiled at her, happy for the same reason she was, and keyed in the shop's address on the datapad that sat in the middle of the rough snowstorm of notes and maps on the floor where they sat to work every evening after dinner. "We'll start watching the place tomorrow in shifts while the other keeps checking out the last places we haven't visited yet."

They spent a little more time talking about the details involved and finished the evening with an attempt at silent meditation, Ahsoka absolutely terrible at it that night. She cracked one eye after several minutes of fidgeting to find Anakin glancing over at her too.

"Wow, we are so bad at this today," she said as they both laughed. It was a lovely, much needed sound in the quiet of the ship, and Ahsoka felt a little better about how the day had gone.

Later, after the two had changed into their sleeping clothes and retired for the night, Anakin lay in his bunk with his face to the wall, listening for the steady rhythm of Ahsoka's breathing that marked a gentle slide into sleep. He wasn't afraid of dying tonight: Obi-Wan clearly wanted him alive. He wasn't afraid of being kidnapped, either. Obi-Wan had had more than one chance to do that as well and yet here he was.

At the same time Anakin didn't believe for a second that all Obi-Wan wanted was him. It made absolutely no sense. And yet it sounded plausible when Obi-Wan said it, when Anakin thought
back to those golden eyes watching him over the rim of the tea cup.

He reexamined some of the ideas he'd had. *Maybe he's lulling me into a false sense of security just to kill me when I've let my guard down too much. That sounds like something a Sith would do.*

*Might he's going to plant something in the ship, a bomb or something, for us to take back to the Temple.*

Pondering Obi-Wan's reasons for his odd behavior was infinitely preferable to the other topic on Anakin's mind, but he reluctantly forced himself back over to it, knowing time was growing short. *I have no idea how I'm going to make him talk.*

*I guess at the end of my saber. Lull him into a false sense of security and draw before he can? He has no reason not to tell me about Maul. Sith kill each other all the time, don't they? And they're all cowards. He's just been so cocky because he's had the drop on me before.*

Anakin liked this seed of a plan. He had to like it because nothing else was coming to mind and time was running out. *Let's see how he likes it when he's the one taken by surprise.* The tiny numbers ticking away in a blue glow on the wall above his bunk showed 23:30. *That's plenty of time to get ready and get down there early to wait for him.*

Waiting another minute, making sure Ahsoka was still deep asleep, he got up and changed as quietly as he could, only the rustle of fabric and faint creak of leather giving away any movement in the dark. There was the issue of the door, but he sent a soft lullaby of warmth through the Force to her as he opened it and closed it behind him, receiving a hazy sense of contentment and happy dreams in return.

It took several minutes to cross the vast concrete space they and so many other ships were parked in, the whole floor only lit by a few scattered lights built into the walls along the edge and whatever auxiliary lamps each ship happened to have on. Anakin walked silently, his cloak trailing behind him, and took a set of emergency stairs down a dozen flights to the third floor. When he arrived at the right level the door was locked, but a quick flick of his wrist and subtle push of the Force broke the low-tech lock with a snap. He eased it open and crept inside, tossing the lock away and closing the door behind him.

The third floor was empty and completely dark, long lengths of moon and city light draped across the dusty floor, construction equipment, and the thick, squat support columns that lined the aisles in neat, orderly rows. This level was meant for small one- or two-seat speeders and pleasure craft, the ceiling so low Anakin's boots echoed loudly as he made his way around the cavernous room to inspect the large, sliding doors at the level's main entrance. They were chained shut but he doubted Obi-Wan would have any more issue with that than he had.

Anakin didn't mind the noise as he walked about, looking for a place that would let him see both the stairwell door and the only entrance and also located roughly midway between the two. The loud echoes meant he'd hear Obi-Wan come in later. *Let the bastard try to sneak up on me here.*

A few minutes later, Anakin settled behind a column still bearing the ragged corners of torn-down posters and began the evening's second attempt at meditation, trying to call in all of his doubts and fears and gather them tight in the dark, in the shadow his heart cast.

He thought about Master Yoda's soothing voice, telling him to remember the truth of his calling, the truth of the Jedi, that no emotion should master a man if he wished to master himself.

This bit of wisdom didn't help, but he did the best he could with it.
At 00:24, according to his com, a gentle metallic creak and click of boots on pavement drifted to him. *The stair door. He's early, too.*

The footsteps came in his direction, toward the main entrance. Obi-Wan apparently intended to check entry points as well.

Anakin held his breath, lifted his saber and strode out directly into Obi-Wan's path, igniting it to point straight at the man's chest.

He felt a distinct, deep satisfaction at Obi-Wan's surprised expression, painted in harsh blue-white as he jerked to a halt, his cloak swirling forward for a moment before dropping back to the ground. *Got you.*

"Hello, Anakin. I…" He stood a little taller, and Anakin reminded himself not to get lost in trying to read whatever thoughts passed across his face. He remained aware of Obi-Wan's body, of the tilt of his shoulders and the placement of his hands. They were hanging loose by his sides as he continued after some thought. "I had hoped we were past this."

"I told you. I'm going to make you tell me where Maul is. Hands up." Anakin slowly took a step forward as Obi-Wan raised his hands reluctantly, forcing him to take a step back. He continued walking him back, saber hissing just under Obi-Wan's chin, until he was up against one of the columns, a worn bit of construction graffiti scrawled above him like a dark halo.

Anakin lifted his chin, feeling powerful. It felt good to have the upper hand. *Finally.*

He fought a sudden, cruel urge to wound Obi-Wan, to give a quick, shallow scratch of his blade across Obi-Wan's chest. Just to show him who was in control now. *No. That is not why I am here.* "Start talking."

"Or what?" A flicker of real anger, a spark from a summer fire drifting up into the starless night of the garage. "You'll torture me?"

Anakin tightened his grip on his saber, the word far more disconcerting when said aloud and not abstractly imagined. "I'll do what I have to," he said, hoping he sounded more frightening than he felt.

"You'll do what you can. Which is nothing." Obi-Wan spit this last word. "This is your plan? To threaten me? To wave your saber about until I crumple in fear?" A bitter laugh came out. "Oh, Anakin, you are not the type to torture someone. Even for something like this."

"You will tell me where Maul is," Anakin growled, stepping in closer and angling his blade more across Obi-Wan's chest, careful to make sure Obi-Wan's hands were still up and still empty. He realized something else was different about this encounter with his Sith shadow: Obi-Wan, caught by surprise, hadn't walled off his Force presence yet. Anakin could feel him, angry and cold and oddly tense, and another idea came to him.

Without warning, he reached out into Obi-Wan's mind, throwing himself into the dark mass of his thoughts. It was like diving into a stormy ocean, and as soon as Obi-Wan felt his presence the ocean flashed to stone, waves now boulders crashing together and almost crushing him. Anakin retreated with a frustrated snarl and dove in again, his consciousness circling a new, impossibly high wall that stretched in every direction of his mind.

The only feeling he could get was that Obi-Wan was caught between anger and amusement. "You think you can get into my mind, Anakin? Do try." He held his hands up higher, almost over his
head, to show he would not try to take advantage of the situation by going for his weapon.

The mocking surety of the gesture brought a fresh swell of wrath and Anakin redoubled his efforts, but nothing greeted the soft touch of his mind except rigid, unyielding stone in every direction. It was like running his hands along the floor of the garage they stood in. He started to sweat, pushing himself harder and harder against Obi-Wan's shields, slowly working himself into a rage as he was rebuffed again and again.

Neither was sure how long they stood there, both completely motionless save Anakin's clenching fists, and, at last, a sudden wrinkle of Obi-Wan's forehead.

Had there been a flicker of weakness? Had he found a way in?

Anakin swung his saber back and grabbed the back of Obi-Wan's head, yanking him forward and leaning in until their foreheads touched. "I will get in," he hissed, staring directly into the Obi-Wan's eyes as he ground out every word.

Obi-Wan bit his lip even as he winced in pain, his reply a rough whisper. "Try harder, Anakin. Harder."

Anakin threw his mind forward to pound on the shielding when it suddenly vanished, a raw, deep lust flooding in from Obi-Wan. Anakin flushed bright red at the images that were suddenly there: the two of them lying naked and tangled together, another one of his hands in Obi-Wan's hair as his head settled down between his thighs, a dozen more that came and went in hazy silhouettes of flesh and sweat and moans.

Shocked and aroused at the same time, Anakin was horrified by the acridly sweet mix of emotions that paralyzed him where he stood: his hand tangled in Obi-Wan's hair, their faces close together, their breaths coming hard and fast.

With a quick downward tilt of his chin, Obi-Wan kissed him. The images vanished in a new wave of irresistible heat, the real and physical sensation strong and bright and alluring. It was almost painful for Anakin, caught up in lust he wasn't sure came from himself or Obi-Wan, to step away from that.

But he did. Jumping back, bringing his blade back up in a loud, hissing arc, he shook his head and tried to clear out the raging storm that swirled inside him. "Don't you ever touch me again!"

Obi-Wan's eyes were closed, an almost beatific smile on his face, and he opened them with some apparent reluctance. "You enjoyed that." He lowered his hands, leaning back against the column as he made the observation.

"Shut up." Anakin's saber was once again at Obi-Wan's chest, his heart racing.

Obi-Wan brought his hands back up into the air, looking at Anakin and then nodding almost to himself. "You want to know where my master is?"

Anakin narrowed his eyes. He didn't like this sudden return to the point of their conversation. "Yes."

"I have something you want, and you have something I want. So I'll give you his coordinates." Obi-Wan lowered his hands slowly as he continued. "For another kiss. One from you this time."

"What?!" Anakin shook his head. "No. No. Forget that."
"You're not going to torture me, you can't get inside my mind, and you know that every minute we stand here is one closer to me likely escaping. Use your time wisely, Anakin, before I choose to leave. A simple kiss, and you can go find my master. The one who killed yours."

"What in all the Sith hells is wrong with you?!" Anakin let loose a violent stream of curses as he paced back and forth in front of Obi-Wan, angrily twirling his blade and clearly wishing he could just run him through with it. But he didn't attack him and he didn't leave.

It was only a matter of time, Anakin's fear of losing his only chance to find Maul stronger than anything else, and Obi-Wan knew this.

He watched with a patient, knowing smile, and when Anakin's agitated pacing had finally slowed and the harsh mutters had drifted into sullen silence, he held out his hand. "Come, Anakin. Such a small trade for something so important to you."

Anakin looked at Obi-Wan's hand reaching out across the gap between them, their two silhouettes dark against the cityscape beyond save the hints of blue cast by Anakin's saber.

He turned it off.

True darkness fell over them both, the only light left drifting in from outside, as Anakin took one and then another step toward him.

"There… there we are," Obi-Wan whispered, holding out his other hand. He pulled Anakin in, the shocking images and feelings of earlier gone, only the faint warmth and handsome features of another young man like himself inviting him closer. The shadows drained all color from Obi-Wan's eyes, and if Anakin wanted to, he could imagine that he was normal. Just a young man standing in the dark, maybe another Knight given the cloak and robes. Someone like him.

_I have to know where Maul is. That is the only reason I am doing this_, Anakin told himself firmly and repeatedly, not allowing any dissenting thoughts to even cross the horizon line of his thinking before he shattered them into nothingness.

Obi-Wan's hands slid up Anakin's arms to his shoulders and then his face, drawing Anakin to him with a surprising amount of gentleness. Anakin let the most disturbing thought he'd had into view, one that would let him get through these next few seconds before he would seal it away again. _I am attracted to you. Force knows it's wrong, but I am._

Anakin closed his eyes as Obi-Wan did the same, the distance between their shadows closing as he leaned down over Obi-Wan. And then he kissed him, pushing his mouth against Obi-Wan's in a slow burn of heat, allowing that rebellious, forbidden thought to take control of him and guide him where it wanted. Obi-Wan responded in kind, kissing him back with the slow, languid sweetness of honey warmed by the sun, a hand drifting down to Anakin's chest and tightening in his cloak.

_That's long enough. I should stop_, Anakin told himself, and just as he was about to step back, Obi-Wan slid both hands up into Anakin's hair and pulled him down against him, mouth and tongue hot against Anakin's. Surprised, lost in the pleasure of the moment and his body obeying its attraction, Anakin kissed him back just as hard, returning the rough lust with some of his own.

Higher thinking screamed at him. _I need to stop!_

_Do I have to?_ his body answered.

The question startled Anakin out of his self-induced trance, scaring him.
He took a quick, breathless step back, out of Obi-Wan's arms.

Obi-Wan leaned after him for just a second, eyes still closed, before he realized Anakin was done and let out a soft sigh. He stood back to regard him with a pleased smile tinged with something else Anakin couldn't quite place. Frustration? Disappointment?

Anakin didn't give a damn, the hazy, forbidden bliss of a moment ago gone and replaced with the familiar snarl of anger and confusion that seemed to be his life these days. "Coordinates. Now."

"Of course," Obi-Wan said, his voice quickly returning to its usual polished notes. "The Akitan system. Akitan III." He reached into his robes, slowly so as not to alarm Anakin, and pulled out a handheld datapad, tapping it a few times and then tossing it to him. "Here are the coordinates of where he's staying there."

Anakin pulled out his own portable one and tapped the two together, checking that the information had transferred before shoving the first glass and metal slate back against Obi-Wan's chest. "These had better be right."

Obi-Wan nodded and took the device back, tucking it away out of sight and brushing at his shirt. "They are exactly what you need." His strange eyes, drained of all color in the dark, were unreadable as he looked up at him. "Good night, Anakin."

He bowed to him, a well-placed swirl of cloak, and disappeared into the dark in an echo of footsteps, Anakin watching him go and wondering if this was the last time he would see him.

_I hope I never see him again_, he fiercely told himself, unhappy to find there was a little less conviction in that statement than there had been an hour ago. _He's a Sith._

_He's dangerous._

This, at least, his soul still found entirely true.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks as always to Fireflyfish for her help! <3

My Tumblr: writegowrite
In the silence of a simple room streaked with gore, Darth Maul sat cross-legged with his back against a wall, meditating.

The frosted glass behind him bore most of the fine sprays of blood, and the sources of it lay stretched out in front of him, two bodies that were still warm. Faint yellow light glowed from outside, the brightness of day highlighting the lines of red on the wall and the pools growing beneath the corpses. The long knife he’d used sat in front of him, freshly cleaned and the focus of his contemplation.

Maul thought on his apprentice Obi-Wan, another weapon in his arsenal. It was something he did frequently of late. How far should I let Arev's leash out with Skywalker?

It was not a question of trust: any Sith who trusted his companion more than the bare minimum didn't live long enough to fully grasp the foolishness of that move.

It was a question of priorities, of wants, and whether or not an apprentice's priorities conflicted with his master's.

Jedi were measured by their duties.

Sith were measured by their desires.

What is Arev's top priority?

First and foremost, destroying the Jedi Council. Maul felt confident in this assessment, his mind falling back to the day he'd first met the young man who would take the name Arev, writhing in mindless pain on the ground and beaten so badly it was incredible the boy was still alive.

Maul was sure he had seen the depth and extent of Arev's true desire that day, and he called upon the memory whenever he needed a yardstick to judge all of his apprentice's later actions.

In the middle of the wilderness, far from any settlement, Maul leaned over this fascinating display of pain that had beckoned him from two systems over, its sharp pull on the Force a siren song to one well-versed in the Dark Side. The human was sprawled out alone across the ground, his moans hoarse, anguished gulps of air.

Maul knelt and caught the boy by the throat to pin him as one would spear a fish flailing in a net, noting his clothing was the simple, colorful linens of the local populace. He briefly wondered how the Jedi had missed this powerful of a Force-sensitive in their regular searches for such children.

Perhaps this was the first time his powers had awakened. That was possible.

Maul squeezed the youth's throat to still his pitiful cries and force him to listen.

Agony and rage soared through the Force, the boy's eyes threatening to roll up into his head. They were a familiar color, a frosted gold, the tint somewhat lighter than Maul's own. "Who did this to you?" He loosened his grip enough to allow an answer.
In truth, Maul didn't really care: someone dumped this far out in the middle of nowhere in this battered condition was likely a petty criminal or lackey who'd found himself on the wrong side of the area crime boss. Mostly he just wanted to see if the boy could still speak.

"... help... me..."

Maul watched blood trickle from the boy's mouth, felt the raw power of hatred rolling off of him so strongly it almost hurt to look at him. It was like a bright, promising sunrise to him: beautiful, pure emotion. "Do you want revenge on who did this to you?"

"... y-yes..."

Still an apprentice, with a master to worry about, Maul considered his options. This boy had a deep sensitivity to the Force. He would make a good apprentice himself. But that would require planning, and caution. Was it worth it taking him on?

He decided to find out exactly what he might be getting into and touched the teenager's pain-wracked consciousness with his own.

There was a brief flicker, like a torch dancing in sudden wind, and then nothing. In the Force the boy did not exist at all. Maul could still see him, but he felt absent even as he stared up at him, terrified beyond the distress he was already in.

A cruel smile formed on Maul's face. His own master, the crafty bastard Sidious, had a similar trick he'd been using for years to walk among the Jedi on Coruscant. But he'd never deigned to share it with Maul, no doubt not wanting Maul to be able to sneak up on him without Sidious being aware of it.

What this human was doing felt different than Sidious's artifice, like following a different set of instructions to build a speeder, but as long as the engine and thrusters were in the right place in the end it didn't matter.

He was just as invisible to Maul's Force senses as the dirt he lay in.

Maul bent down close, fixing the boy's yellow eyes with his own and recalling the bright, brief blaze of emotion now missing. "So much hatred. Who is it for?"

"... Jedi..."

This was not the answer Maul had expected, and he looked over the boy's bruised and battered body with a new appreciation. "Ah, did the Jedi ask for your help and leave you hanging in the wind when the offended party came to collect? Typical."

"I will... kill them..."

He considered the human's words and the bone-deep venom he felt in them as he watched the boy shiver and gasp for air, trying to fight past the pain he was drowning in. He would probably die of his injuries within the day if Maul did not intervene.

"Serve me, and I will give you your chance at vengeance." Maul stood, curious to see how much strength the boy had. How he reacted would determine if Maul would keep him alive just long enough to learn this fascinating trick of his, or if he would actually risk taking him on. "Kneel and swear to me. Swear your loyalty to the Sith and to me."

The auburn-haired teenager gave a choked moan and rolled onto his side at these words, seeming
to consider them with the scattered remains of his rational thought.

In the end there was no dramatic reply. Only a slow, determined shifting of his body, each movement accompanied by agonized whimpers.

It took the boy several minutes to force himself up on one elbow and then the other, Maul not minding the slow pace. His tears and suffering were a delicious show: Maul had no intent of letting him die at this point, but he didn't need to know that.

"Revenge, boy. Do you want it or not?"

The tormented young man took another long set of minutes to fold one leg under himself and then the other, his willpower a dark, throbbing thing raging somewhere beneath a few apparently broken ribs.

Somewhere in the distance a bird sang, calling out in long, sad notes to its brothers.

The boy sat up as best he could and then sagged forward with the knuckles of his closed fists thrust into the dirt, his eyes blind with pain and breaths coming quick and shallow.

"Say, 'I swear myself to the Sith and to you, Master.'" Maul was calm, his hands folded behind his back.

"I... swear... myself..." He swallowed, cringing forward as a hacking cough shook his body and he sobbed in agony. Blood spattered on Maul's boots.

He didn't mind. "Continue. 'To the Sith and to you, Master.'"

The human glowered up at him, face curled in a pure and black hate for the Jedi, for Maul, for the whole galaxy and every living thing in it, it seemed, his strange eyes as harsh and bright as the blood on his lips. The Force roiled, searing and boiling around them: Maul remained composed but his heart quickened at the force of it. This would be a powerful apprentice indeed.

"To the... Sith... and to... to you... Master..."

"Good. You may rest." He watched the boy give up and release his feral grasp on consciousness, eyes rolling back into his head as he tipped boneless to sprawl again in the dirt.

Now, as he heard a knock on the door across the room, Maul opened his eyes, reassured that Arev was well within the parameters of his mission. Whatever he was doing to seduce Skywalker, Maul felt sure that destroying the Council was still Arev's first priority. And that priority was most certainly in line with his own.

He replaced the knife in his boot and stood, crossing the tiled floor and stepping over one of the bodies to tap the door button.

It slid open to reveal Arev standing in the hall, polished and in control and so very different from the memory Maul had just contemplated.

A lump of strong, raw iron melted, hardened, and honed to a razor. I have done well with you, apprentice. "Come in."

Arev stepped inside and closed the door, looking around and then past his master to the bodies. "Who were they?" he murmured.
"Unlucky." Maul walked back over to the frosted wall of glass and tapped it. It faded to reveal a sunny, cloudless day and the never-ending ocean of buildings that formed Coruscant.

"I always appreciate a good view," Arev said, stepping to the side of one of the blood streaks now seeming to hang in mid-air. It slashed across a few distant buildings, blurring sections of them. "How far is the Temple from here?"

"East, roughly ten klicks."

"Excellent."

"I will leave the cleaning to you. I saw no family holos, but I'm sure you can mindtrick anyone who comes calling, hmm?"

"Yes, my Master. Where are you going?"

"I will be staying elsewhere. Continue clouding Skywalker's mind."

"Yes. Little by little until it's too late."

Maul flicked his cold gaze to Arev and then back to the busy skyline, the two watching ships scurry busily along in small, glinting rivers. "I know your strength is in your charm, Arev. And I would like to ensnare Skywalker with more than pain if possible. Pain is the weakest way to chain someone to you. But if I sense you are wasting time I will not hesitate to step in and take control of the situation."

Arev's mild expression did not change as he nodded his agreement. "Yes, my Master."

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In a tiny refresher attached to one of the modest Temple apartments, Anakin stared into the small, dim glass rectangle that hung over the sink, taking in the bluish circles under his eyes and the scar that lined his face and made his blue eyes seem brighter. The faint scent of soap and cleaner lingered in the air as he studied his face: the tanned skin, the dark frame of wavy brown hair that fell to his shoulders.

He hated all of it.


There was no excuse for him, for what a failure he was to his master.

Akitan III had been a lie.

Well, not technically. The locals in the area of the coordinates Arev had given him had told him they had seen a sentient matching Maul's description. Last sighting: three months ago.

*That bastard gave me old coordinates.*

After that strange, surreal night in the garage, Anakin had waited, more impatient than he dared to let on, for the pirates to come buy the parts they needed at the shop Ahsoka had found and set in motion the chain of events that would be the end of their reign of terror over the local systems.
It had only taken another two days. The mission couldn't have wrapped up more successfully: no losses, a quick and efficient response by the 501st, all good news to report to the Council. Through their holos the Council said it was a picture-perfect victory to broadcast out to those who doubted them in these dark times, and that Anakin had brought pride to the Jedi name once again.

Anakin had barely noticed their praise, itching to take Ahsoka back to the Temple, where she would be safe, and then find out once and for all if he truly was the Chosen One everyone kept calling him, with all of the impossible luck and destiny they seemed to think he had.

It had been easy: the Council had no immediate plans to send him back out until the following week, and the day after their final report in-person in the grand room that reminded Anakin of clouds, he had secretly said his goodbyes to life.

He had taken time to memorize Ahsoka's smile as she waved to him and hurried off after the meeting, thinking her Master was heading off on a quick scouting mission. The expression was a simple quirk of her mouth, a quick and ready happiness that didn't judge or doubt, and he realized how much he loved to see it and how much he would miss it if he never came back.

Later he'd stood in front of the open docking ramp of his ship, looking back and trying to memorize every detail of the Temple as it shone in the early morning light. The soft clay color of the walls, the chiming of the bells that summoned the younger Jedi to their classes, the cool breeze of Coruscant before the sun rose higher in the sky.

I stood there, like the fool I was, trying to commit all of it to memory because I thought there was a chance I might die and never see it again. I was ready to die, to live up to my duty.

And Maul wasn't even there.

Anakin's grip tightened on the plastisteel counter, fingers turning white. How could you trust him? How could you trust a kriffing Sith? How stupid are you?

The memory of Arev's stolen kiss, and of the one Anakin had returned, burned through him in a smoldering rush of embarrassment and shame. He didn't dare look in the mirror for fear of seeing himself blushing, and tried to will away the heat he could feel rising on his face.

He had been fooled so easily, but even now, as utter despair crushed his heart, he somehow still felt a flicker of desire for Obi-Wan. He turned away from his reflection, disgusted.

How pathetic am I?

And to top it all off, to add the last bit of self-loathing not already crawling through his mind, the dream had come back again last night. He was having it at least once a week now and he couldn't remember the last time he'd slept fully and peacefully even on the nights it didn't come to crowd in too close against his thoughts.

I just want these dreams to stop. I'm sorry, Master. I'm sorry, but I just want to stop dreaming about what happened.

Footsteps approached from outside and a knock sounded at the door. A familiar voice came through, cheerful but muffled. "Master! I heard you were back!"

He found himself walking to it even as he wanted to hide in a corner, and opened the door even though he wanted to bolt it shut forever. "Snips?" he asked, the word weak and helpless.

"Master?" she asked, stunned at the raw torment she saw on his face. "What's wrong? What is it?"
"I… I can't do this anymore…" he said, trying to keep his voice from shaking.

Ahsoka saw the anguish in his eyes and the way his shoulders slumped, and for a moment she didn't recognize her own master. It was like seeing the dark side of a moon that had shone over you your whole life.

She hugged him tightly, wordlessly, and shut the door behind her as she came in.

"I don't know what to do…" he whispered, letting her lead him to sit down on one of the two chairs every sleeping room had. There were no tears, and that concerned her more than if she had seen any.

For Ahsoka, things like sub-orbital drops and clandestine charity missions were fun. Charging into battle scared her, but it was her job and her duty to the Temple and the Republic and, if she were being honest with herself, it was exciting at times, too.

The death-defying events that were part of her routine service to the Jedi cause did not scare her like this unexpected glimpse into the pain Anakin was in and the deep hopelessness he'd reached.

It unnerved her on a basic, instinctual level and she fought her sudden fear for control, reaching out to grab the first good idea that appeared.

"Master, do you want to go see Master Yoda? Or someone else from the Council?"

"I can't stop these dreams." This was true, and Anakin forgot about everything else as he remembered them once again. "I just want it to stop. I don't want to think about it anymore."

"The Masters can help you meditate. Haven't they done that before when the dreams were bad?"

He nodded reluctantly, and Ahsoka rubbed his shoulder, trying to get him to look up. "Come on. Let's go see Master Yoda, huh? I saw him headed down toward the Masters' hall a little while ago. He's probably in his room."

After a few minutes of her gentle, reassuring presence, Anakin took a deep breath and stood. Ahsoka let him lead them out of the room, and they walked in the same silence, her hand soft on his back until they reached the end of the Masters' hall.

"I'll go ahead from here," he said as they stopped. "I'm... I'm sorry, Snips. It's nothing, really. I'm sorry if I worried you. This dream..."

Ahsoka was kind but firm, not budging from where she stood. "Please go. Master Yoda won't judge you."

"I will." He took a step and then turned back, speaking quietly to the floor rather than to her. "Thanks."

She smiled at him even though he wasn't looking up and nodded, waving to him as he walked away down the long, simple line of doors. Only when he had knocked and then gone into one of the furthest ones at the end did she turn away, letting out a worried sigh and walking off. I'll come back and check on him later.
Thank you, dear readers, for your comments and love so far! <3 I always like to hear what you're thinking about the characters, any guessing you want to do about what will happen, anything really! Hope you're enjoying the story so far and see you next Thursday with another update!

Also, my neverending thanks to Fireflyfish, who had to read poor Arev/Obi-Wan's scene several times during our editing. I owe you, baby!
"Some time away from all of this, you should have," Yoda said as Anakin emerged from Yoda's room an hour later, feeling much more in control than he had. Yoda had, like the last time the dreams had become a problem, walked him through a slow, calming series of meditations that soothed his frayed mind: Anakin felt the fear and uncertainty recede enough the black despair of this morning no longer crouched just above his heart.

The early morning stretched out ahead of him, blue and bright and not quite as hopeless as it'd seemed when he woke up. "I have no duties today. I might go for a long walk."

Yoda nodded. "Good idea. See me again if problems you have."

"Thank you, Master."

Anakin walked back to his room and grabbed his cloak before heading off to find Ahsoka, embarrassed at how maudlin he'd been earlier and determined to show her he was all right before he left. She was really worried about me and I don't want her to be. I'm fine. Or I will be. I'll try to be.

A quick check of the holoscreen schedules posted in the Padawan halls, the rosters much shorter than they used to be, showed she was with her Flight Systems class down in the learner garages.

Anakin made his way there and emerged into a large hangar lined with partially dismantled speeders and grease-spotted students, each one bent over or under his or her or its vehicle and the familiar, soothing clinks and whirrs of tools loud in the air.

A real smile crossed his face as the smell of oil and fuel and solder hit him with their distinctive tangs, different notes in the same happy song: these sorts of classes had always been his favorite as a Padawan, even more so than combat classes. Winning almost every practice duel had a way of making enemies, but no one could really accuse someone of using the Force to repair a com array faster than they could.

Strolling in, looking around for Ahsoka, Anakin was also pleased to find everyone so involved in their work no one paid him any mind or even looked up in the general din, the instructor included. The prophecy of the Chosen One was largely considered a rumor to all save the Council and him, but Anakin Skywalker, The Hero With No Fear, was well-known throughout the Temple.

Searching for the distinctive blue and white halo of her lekku, he found Ahsoka hunched down next to her speeder, examining the intake ports with fierce concentration. "Hey, Snips," he said as he walked over to her and dropped down into a crouch himself.

She blinked and looked over at him with a smile, taking a moment to come back out of her thoughts into the real world. "Hey, Master! Feeling better?"

"Yeah. Thanks." He hoped he sounded more convincing than he felt.

"No problem." A caring touch passed through the Force from her to him, an invisible hug, and he returned it easily, already intrigued by the spread of parts in front of him.
"This a practice lesson or a test?"

"Test. We have to find out what's wrong. Each of us has a different problem."

"Hmm. I can't help you then, can I?" They both stood up and he moved back to let her walk around the partially disassembled machine.

"I wish you could. Sure I can't bribe you somehow to trade places with me? I'll take your cloak and you can take my beads?"

The corner of his mouth turned up in what could have been the start of a grin, and Ahsoka was happy to see it. "We look so much alike," he mused.

"Well, you'll never be as good-looking as a Togruta, but no one's perfect. Sure you don't want to switch out with me?" She sat back down by the speeder's nose and patted it invitingly, trying to stage-whisper over the roar of a drill a few students over. "There could be a lack of boring paperwork in it for you next mission we have together."

Anakin sighed in mock disapproval, amazed at how a few minutes with her could help lift his mood no matter how bleak it was. "Sorry, Snips. I just came by because I'm going out for the rest of the day, I think. You want me to bring anything back for you? Snacks or something?"

"Sure! You going to the Tower?"

"I might. Do I go there that often?"

She reached over to the rough circle of tools laid out next to her to pick up a minidriver. "Just every time we're home. You're getting predictable, Master."

"It's got a nice view. And I've been going there since I was a Padawan myself, so it's not exactly a new thing. It's just, I don't know, relaxing to be up that high."

"I guess I should go sometime, then. I might need to after this stupid test."

"Is your instructor in danger?"

She grinned as she leaned back over the squat bulk of the vehicle and loosened a few screws with loud spins of the minidriver. "He might be if I'm the lucky one that gets to replace the wiring harness. If you do go to the Tower, will you bring me some Kellwitian crisps, please? There's a little store by the west entrance, one of the other Padawans was telling me."

"You got it. Anything else?"

She reached out to pat his leg and then remembered the grease on her hand, waving at him instead in an exaggerated parody of a mind trick. "Just go relax, ok? Relax. Have fun." She leaned back over her project. "I'll make sure the Temple's still standing when you get back."

He did his best to smile like he wanted to feel, with mixed success. "I leave it in your capable hands. Good luck, Snips."

She grumbled good-naturedly as she tugged on a casing plate, waving at him as he left.
Moving about on Coruscant was often intimidating to visitors coming from off-world, but Anakin found his way through the rivers of shuttles and trams and pedestrian bridges without issue, losing himself in the flow of the crowd and thankful for the masses of people forever out and about any time of day. His face was not as well-known outside of the Temple as in it, holo reports focusing more on names at the request of the Council, and he liked that he could walk about in his robes with his hood down as just a Jedi, perhaps a rare sighting for some but not unheard of given the Temple's placement on-world, someone who needed no special comment or attention.

He let the flow of traffic take him wherever it wanted, hopping off one shuttle to the next on a whim, walking in the direction of a wonderful smell drifting out of an open-air restaurant, turning corners just to see what was on the other side. An hour passed like this, and he remembered what he'd promised Ahsoka, figuring he'd get to the Tower before it got busy later in the day.

The Tower was a fantastic remnant of a long-ago age of unbridled wealth, a tall and airy spire that soared high into the atmosphere and was one of the tallest buildings on Coruscant if you counted the fact its roots stretched down into a natural canyon buried beneath pillars and concrete millennia before. It had been built by an incredibly powerful family, specifically a doting father who had decided on a whim to buy every piece of Eferite marble his daughter's mines produced, shifting billions of credits from his account to hers before he even knew what he meant to do with it.

The final decision had been the Tower, a magnificent structure which some thought most likely represented all of the marble Efer VI had to offer.

Anakin didn't know about that, but the soft white pillar against the morning sky was beautiful to him, an elegant standout from the later, more utilitarian architecture that surrounded it.

Following the maze of bridges and walkways that flowed there, the young man found himself in the large, circular park surrounding the Tower, an elevated and walled paradise piled high with exotic trees, flowers, and plants of every kind. A rainbow bloomed and faded every month or week or even day in certain parts of the Tower gardens, and he always found it soothing to walk down the shaded paths and sit in the cool dark of the larger trees before going up to the top of the Tower to enjoy the magnificent view.

The gardens were quiet this time of day, and this particular morning Anakin spent a long time following the trails, looking up through the canopy of leaves and taking long, deep breaths of the fragrant air. He reminded himself to get the snacks Ahsoka had asked for on his way out as he took another turn deeper into the park.

He was still jittery and off-center despite the lush serenity around him, but Master Yoda's help and Ahsoka's playfulness had done a lot to ground him and bring the most erratic of his emotions under control.

This borrowed calm was the only reason he did not immediately go for his saber when, out of the corner of his eye, he recognized a familiar form seated on a bench tucked away in a niche of vine-covered trellis and stone.

Obi-Wan-no, Darth Arev, remember what he is!- was looking out over the lovely view that spread out from this particular vantage point, a series of arches draped in vines and the beautiful white flowers that hung in clouds from them. The blossoms framed the gardens beyond, glimpses of waves of green and sunlight, and Obi-Wan's fine profile was still as he contemplated them.

Anakin's shame and anger whistled in like bombs dropped, slamming against the fragile inner equilibrium he'd worked so hard to achieve. He stalked over, his cloak swirling to block the beautiful view. "You."
Obi-Wan's eyes flicked upward to him, soft gold in the shade. "Me."

"Give me one reason not to run you through with my saber."

"You're a Jedi."

"You lied to me."

"I'm a Sith."

Anakin drew a deep breath and forced it back out, hands clenching at his sides as he weighed his options. Rage buzzed in his mind, a cloud of angry hornets almost louder than his thoughts. "You don't expect me to believe you just happened to be here."

"No, I don't. Will you let me explain why I lied about Akitan III before you assault me?" Obi-Wan patted the empty space next to him, inviting Anakin to sit down on the simple slab of marble with him.

Anakin remained where he was. "Make it quick."

"I did not lie about the coordinates, if we are being precise. I said they were exactly what you needed." Obi-Wan shrugged. "And they were. Strike me if you really feel you must, Anakin, but you know the truth is that you would die if you went after Maul today. So I kept you from him."

His calm, objective tone had the opposite effect: Anakin drew back and swung so quickly his target barely had time to lean back and avoid the worst of it. The punch caught the edge of Obi-Wan's jaw and spun him to fall half-way off the bench with a breathless grunt of pain.

"That's for lying last time," Anakin spat as he jerked him back upright with both hands, shoving him back into place. "Now tell me why you're here this time."

He felt Obi-Wan's furious urge to hit him back before he sealed it away, a pure and bitter flash cut short by apparent consideration for whatever reason had made him follow Anakin all the way to Coruscant.

Anakin waited, unmoving, resisting the urge to strike him again as Obi-Wan took a long while brushing at and rearranging his indigo shirt and coat. His garments were the long, fitted styles favored by Coruscanti elite, layered and draping down almost to the ground but sinuous in a way the loose bulk of Jedi robes were not. He was calming himself, it seemed, and Anakin felt a childish sense of victory that he had finally been able to ruffle him for more than a moment at a time.

When Obi-Wan looked up again, the icy calm Anakin had come to associate with him had returned, the glacier sliding back into place over the plains and valleys of his emotions. "I am here to offer you a trade, one much better than last time."

"Kriff your trades."

"You want Maul dead. But you lack the ability to make that happen. Right now, anyway."

Anakin said nothing to this, his lack of objection the closest he was willing to make to agreement.

Obi-Wan let that silence sit, showing he understood its meaning, before continuing. "You would have a much better chance at defeating Maul if you were properly trained."
Anakin folded his arms, tilting his head in a way that encouraged Obi-Wan to continue in the quickest, simplest way possible.

"Who better to train you for this task than me?"

Throwing his head back to let out a laugh, Anakin turned away and then back to him, waving his hands through the rich scent of flowers that hung around them. "You're going to train me to kill your own master?"

"That is what you want, isn't it? Maul dead?"

"That's what you want too, I'm sure. That's what all of this is really about, isn't it?" Anakin let out a disgusted sigh, turning his blue eyes up into the sky. "All of these bizarre mind games so you can get to what you really want. You want Maul dead. And you're going to use me to get it done."

"I have no active desire to slay my master, Anakin. You may find that hard to believe."

"You're a Sith, Darth Arev."

"True, but my name is Obi-Wan. And that brings us to the terms of the trade." He motioned to the bench again and Anakin sat down slowly in a billow of dark brown cloak and wariness.

"Go on."

"For every hour I train you, you must spend the same amount of time with me," Obi-Wan stated in the neutral tone of a negotiator at a war counsel.

Anakin was on his feet in an instant, the distance back between them. "Let me guess what 'spend time with' means. Kriff that."

"I will not touch you, I promise. Just time. Talking. Conversation."

Anakin's puzzlement turned to unhappy satisfaction, and he shook his head. "Let me get this straight. You're going to train me to kill your master, and hope that by the time I do you and I are… what? friendly?… enough I don't turn around and do the same to you. Good foresight, Sith. If it works. Don't count on it."

Obi-Wan looked past Anakin to the far walls of flowers, thinking and choosing his words carefully as the leaves rustled overhead. "I just want to set you free, Anakin. I want to show you there is more than what the Temple, and the Council, has taught you."

A new, decidedly unpleasant possibility came to mind, and Anakin reached down to grab Obi-Wan by the throat, forcing him to look up. "Are you trying to turn me?"

Obi-Wan gritted his teeth at the pressure of Anakin's thumb against his jaw, his voice a low hum against Anakin's palm with each word he spoke. "I thought I was trying to get my master killed."

"You will never turn me." Anakin let go of him but did not step back, a shadow of somber colors towering over him, dark hair wreathed by the delicate lace of greenery far above.

"I only wish to set you free, Anakin. If you turn after that, that is your choice." Obi-Wan rubbed at his jaw, doing his best not to wince.

"You're pretty sure of yourself, aren't you? Train me, kill your master, turn me… Are all Sith this arrogant?"
"You do not understand what I want, Anakin. I know that. I also know that failure means I will die, either at my master's hand or yours. I know that, too." Obi-Wan looked up at him, gaze and tone unreadable. "I accept that." Dappled sunlight played across his face, giving a warm cast to his golden eyes.

"So your offer is training for time? That's it?"

"Yes."

"And you understand if you try to touch me or pull what you did last time I will do worse than hit you?" Anakin, the symbol of the Jedi Order, heard his words coming out harsh and merciless, but his humiliation at the memory of that night flared and allowed him to brush aside the twinge of guilt he felt at threatening Obi-Wan like a common thug.

"Yes. I will not touch you unless you ask me to."

Anakin snorted. "That will never, ever happen."

Obi-Wan said nothing.

"And you still want to make this trade?"

"Yes."

A loud burst of sound echoed down the path, two Twi'lek children running down toward them. Anakin stepped back to let them by in a riotous whirl of noise and slapping feet across stone, considering what Obi-Wan had said.

_He would be the best teacher I could get for fighting Maul. Especially considering the Council is off the table for this. And in return he thinks he can 'set me free'? Good luck with that._

For the moment, Anakin wasn't sure just what he would do with Obi-Wan once Maul was dead. In the way of the Sith, Obi-Wan clearly assumed Anakin would kill him as well. But even in the midst of his bemused anger, Anakin felt torn at the idea. Looking down at him, at this fellow young man with strange eyes sitting on a bench in one of Anakin's favorite places in Coruscant, it was hard for Anakin to truly imagine himself murdering Obi-Wan in cold blood.

The laughter of the children floated back from the direction they'd gone in, their shadows lost along the green and winding paths. _When Maul is dead, I'll tell the Council about Obi-Wan and they can imprison him. They won't believe anything he says about all of this anyway._

"I accept," Anakin said. "When do we start?"

"I was thinking tonight."

Chapter End Notes

Hello again, dear readers, and thanks for your kudos and kind words this past week! I really enjoyed writing this chapter: it was a nice change of pace from a very grim one I just finished for my other Star Wars fic.

As always, I love hearing your thoughts on what's happening, the characters, anything
you care to share! Have a wonderful week and see you next Thursday!

(Love and Sith kisses to my very own Jedi, Fireflyfish, for her editing help!)
Training

Chapter Notes

The turbolift Anakin rode in sank with the last light of day outside, plummeting downward enough levels that he was thankful for the nondescript hooded coat he'd dug out of his closet, a leftover from an undercover mission awhile back. The address Obi-Wan had given him was not deep enough into the Coruscant underworld to wallow in total lawlessness, but anyone obviously a Jedi would be watched carefully and commented upon wherever he went.

To the soft hum of the elevator, he reviewed what he knew about Obi-Wan beyond his looks, which was incredibly little. Sith. Juyo fight style. Maul's apprentice. Clever. High Coruscanti accent. Unusually powerful with shields.

What does he really want?

The blinking lights outside the frosted glass and metal of the elevator, showing each level passed, faded as he concentrated and tried to think his way past the heady, forbidden kisses they'd shared and the looks Obi-Wan had given him when he'd been asked that directly. Does he really want me? Why would he? Or is this just part of his plan to get his master killed?

The memory of the kisses smoldered in the back of his mind, Obi-Wan so close and warm and eager in the darkness of that strange night, as he attempted to shift his attention to other things.

Focus, idiot. It's a diversionary tactic. It has to be. He claims he doesn't want his master dead, but he's a Sith. That's all they do is try to kill each other, right?

Earlier in the afternoon, the same memory and doubts taunting him, Anakin had taken almost a half an hour to make sure his mind was calm and his voice casual before he stopped by Ahsoka's room with her snacks from the Tower and a favor to ask. She'd always been better at digging through the Archives than he had, he'd said, which was entirely true, and he had asked her to search for two names: "Obi-Wan" and "Arev".

Ahsoka was used to odd requests for information and had learned a long time ago not to question her master when he came to her with them and not to discuss them with others until whatever theory Anakin had going panned out or not.

Leaned against the doorway of her room, Anakin felt guilty at how quickly she sat down at her work desk and pulled out a datapad to take notes on. "Who am I looking for, Master? There's different sections in the Archive for Jedi, allies, informants, criminals, enemies, and then the parts of the galaxy they're from, and then by loyalties to groups not us, and so on."

"How mad would you be if I asked you to check all of them?" he inquired hopefully.

Ahsoka shrugged, pretending to be miffed. Like Anakin, she enjoyed a good puzzle when things were slow. "If I had known the price of these crisps I wouldn't have asked for them. But I'll take another few bags as payment."

"Deal. So how long will it take?"

She started tapping on the datapad, thoughtful. "'Obi-Wan' and 'Arev'… Do you know how they're spelled?"
It was Anakin's turn to shrug, as nonchalantly as he could. "I've never seen them written, actually. Just heard them."

"They don't sound like there could be too many variations. I'm busy today and maybe tomorrow but I could take a look before our mission next week if it's not something you need right now?"

Anakin had agreed, knowing what a massive task it would be having no way to narrow it all down and not wanting to push his luck, and that was where he had left her, typing out different combinations into a list to take down into the Library when she had a chance.

A few hours and a quiet exit from the Temple later, here he was, gloved hands in the pockets of the coat and his right one resting next to the comforting weight of his saber as the lift slowed to a stop. I need more information about him. Hopefully she'll find something. The last teasing echo of Obi-Wan's stolen kiss faded as he readied himself for whatever lie outside, that old battle habit, at least, serving him well.

The doors slid open to reveal a busy pedestrian road lit more by the dazzling rainbow of neon signs than any proper street lamps and awash in the strong scent of food stalls, loud conversations, and the buzz of unlicensed speeders zooming past just overhead. Anakin stepped out into the crowd as if he belonged there, walking confidently in the direction of the given address and less than thrilled when he rounded the last corner to find the gaudy, blue striped facade of a gambling establishment awaiting him. Looking around, he was relieved to see Obi-Wan waiting across the street from it, the hood of his own black cloak down and the indigo lines of his clothing navy in the shadows.

"Don't tell me this is the place," Anakin said to himself in exasperation, leaving his hood up as he walked up through the flow of pedestrians to him. A few scantily clad women of various species called out to him and everyone from the brightly-lit doors of the building across the way, but he put his back to them, facing down Obi-Wan. "Tell me we are not training in the kdajj pits here."

Now that Anakin had found him, Obi-Wan pulled his own hood up over the blue glints in his red hair and nodded. "And a good evening to you, Anakin. I really must teach you the fine art of greeting others, as no one else seems to have done that."

"You have two hours tonight, so let's get started. Where are we training?"

"Not here, much to your relief, I'm sure. Come along." The cat calls of the gambling den's sirens faded as they walked off down the road and turned a corner, and then another. Anakin kept careful track of where they were going in the gloomy haze of neon twilight, their boots clicking loudly along the narrower and narrower alleys as the crowds fell away. Now there were fewer doors and no signs, only the occasional shadow of another traveler passing them by in the bare circles of light cast by what few unbroken street lamps remained.

Obi-Wan walked ahead of him, his graceful strides showing his confidence and surety that Anakin would not stab him in the back, and Anakin reminded himself he needed to be careful around the Sith given how dangerous he had proven to be.

Silent, Obi-Wan eventually slowed and came to a halt in front of a large, rusted door set in the long, unbroken wall of this particular block, a windowless expanse of grey lit by bulbs planted sparsely at either end of the alley that led here. As huge and ugly as the door was, it was likely the delivery entrance to an old factory of some kind, long abandoned. There were no markings or signs of use: in that sense it was as decrepit and unremarkable as the backstreets it sat in.

Obi-Wan lifted his hand, and Anakin felt him use a solid push of the Force to send the door creaking open in a painful shriek of ancient hinges. He motioned for Anakin to follow as he slipped
inside the gap, the blackness inside swallowing him up instantly.

_Clever. With no power to it, no one else would be able to open this without heavy machinery._

Anakin strode in after him, ready for an attack, but Obi-Wan was merely waiting, only letting the Force shoving on the door dissipate once he'd made it through. It clanged shut with a rough, piercing cry that reverberated through the empty, man-made cavern they now stood in, the musty scent of age heavy around them.

Obi-Wan reached over and pointed, another tendril of the Force stretching out, and on a far wall something clicked and whirred. A few lights came up in slow, dim rings of illumination, enough to reveal old machines and assemblies pushed into piles against the walls, leaving an open space easily half as large as one of the training halls back at the Temple.

"Your physical training will take place here. I trust you can remember your way back?" Obi-Wan inquired, glancing over at Anakin as he shrugged his cloak and coat off and tossed them on a conveyor belt near the entrance that looked recently cleaned. He was dressed in a simple shirt and pants, his saber attached to a narrow belt worn on his hips.

"Yeah." Anakin took his saber out of his coat pocket before adding the garment to the black pile of Obi-Wan's cloak and following him out onto the concrete floor. He was dressed in a similar, simple fashion, not sure what to expect exactly but certain Obi-Wan would not go easy on him.

Choosing this place was more than clever, Anakin had to admit as he thought about it: beyond the built-in security of the wickedly heavy door at the entrance and the machinery pushed up in piles taller than a man against the internal doors that prevented anyone entering this room from other points, soundproofing on Coruscant had been mandatory for millennia given the tight confines everyone lived in. Factories, especially, were required to make sure no neighbors could hear any noise from production, and Anakin considered the walls and ceiling almost lost in the deep shadows outside of the few lights that were there. _We can fight as hard as we can and no one outside will hear a thing._

Obi-Wan stood in the center of the room, looking up into the starless night of the factory for a moment, apparently gathering his thoughts. Anakin came to a stop a comfortable distance from him, waiting.

"You are a talented saber wielder, Anakin," he finally said, lowering his gaze to him.

"I am. But you were playing with me that day on that roof on Nidai." Anakin didn't like saying it out loud, but considering where he was standing and who he was with of his own free will, it didn't seem like it could make the situation any worse. "Are you that good? Or is that some other Sith mind trick you have I don't know about?"

Obi-Wan mulled over his question, hands behind his back. "I am quite good because I have to be. My master is not tolerant of failure. I considered training you exactly as he trained me, but that would leave far too many marks you'd have to account for with your fellow Jedi."

Anakin raised an eyebrow. "So what exactly are you going to teach me?"

"I will not try to teach you Juyo. We don't have time for that, even if we take months, and my master will always be better than you at it having used it so much longer." Obi-Wan walked over to reach inside a box seated atop a pile of gears and tossed Anakin the plain, unadorned hilt of a training saber. It appeared old, and used, but lit up perfectly in a soft green glow.
"We're not using our own sabers set lower?"

Reaching back in, Obi-Wan pulled out another one for himself, and soon a second emerald line mirrored Anakin's. "As secure as this place is, I'd prefer to have my own weapon at full strength in the event of an emergency. Wouldn't you?"

Anakin shrugged, spinning the training saber around once in an arc of light as he tucked his own into place on his belt. "Yeah."

"As I was saying, there is no point in attempting to teach you Juyo itself. Instead, you are going to learn to defend against Juyo in general and a few of my master's habits in particular. That will allow you to survive." Obi-Wan gestured, and Anakin took a few steps closer, until they were at a standard dueling distance. Obi-Wan's tone was the crisp, neutral tone of an instructor as he eyed Anakin impassively. "To win against him you will need more than that, but I will talk about that shortly. For now, we shall begin with a duel. One at the start of each training session."

"And you won't go easy on me like you did on Nidai?"

"Never again," Obi-Wan promised, the slightest of grins breaking through his unreadable expression as he brought his blade up across his chest. The stance was one Anakin had seen from him before, but it looked odd now that his face lay in a cast of green rather than red. "Shall we?"

With a lit saber in his hand and a long awaited rematch in front of him, Anakin couldn't help smiling back a little as he nodded: there was a part of him that sang for battle, that hated the quiet moments inbetween and the paperwork and the hyperspace travel and all the managed monotony of Temple life. He'd tried to meditate it away for as long as he could remember, but here, in this secret place with the most unorthodox teacher a Jedi could ever have, perhaps it would be understandable if he gave into that side of himself a little more.

Obi-Wan kept his word about not pulling any punches: Anakin found himself on his back with a saber hissing at his throat less than two minutes after the duel began. A whirling ghost of jade light, Obi-Wan had easily cut through his defenses and shoved him off-balance, something Anakin had never fully recovered from as he staggered to keep his balance and fend off Obi-Wan's attacks that grew increasingly vicious until Anakin had been forced to his knees. A final sharp kick had sent him flying back with a breathless grunt, legs akimbo as his pursuer followed and pointed his saber down at his neck. Barely out of breath, Obi-Wan waited for Anakin to nod his surrender before he shut the blade off, reaching down to help him up.

The gesture surprised Anakin, not something he'd expected from a student of Maul's, but he took the offered hand and regained his feet without comment about it.

"Why did I beat you?" Obi-Wan asked, moving back to the center of the room.

Anakin thought about it, still feeling the pleasant heat of Obi-Wan's grip on his palm and deeply embarrassed at how quickly he'd gone down in the fight. Is that really how long I would have lasted against his master? "You're faster than me."

"No. You're just as fast. Or you would be. But you hesitate."

"Me? I never hesitate."
"I can imagine there are many times you don't. But not in this case," Obi-Wan said, tapping his own forehead. "You're thinking too much about your opponent, about Maul, about what you think I will do and what Maul would do. And I will tell you, Anakin. You can never predict that. We don't fight that way. We trust our instincts over all else."

Anakin was not impressed. "You're just going on instinct?"

"Partly, yes. That is what you will need to win. As I said earlier, I can teach you defense. But to win you will need to learn to give in to your instincts, to let them guide you even when they go against what your prior training has drilled into you."

"You can't win a fight with random moves," Anakin scoffed, annoyed at such vague advice. "Everyone has patterns they follow. You just think it's instinct."

Obi-Wan listened to Anakin's words and tilted his head, eyebrow raised. He tucked his practice saber into his belt and reached up to begin undoing his own shirt. "Shirt off, please."

"What?" Anakin took a step back.

"I can see you're not going to believe me until you see it for yourself. You think if you just fight me enough times you'll learn my 'patterns' and be able to beat me. I will teach you defense techniques that will allow you to live, Anakin, but I can't teach you the instinct you need to win in this case. You need to see how powerful that instinct is. Shirt off, unless you plan on wearing it sweaty back to the Temple."

Anakin frowned, pride rattled, and stripped down, reminding himself he'd trained like this a thousand times in rooms full of people. This is no different. Not at all.

Obi-Wan held out a hand as he walked by, taking Anakin's shirt and going to toss the both of them back on the pile of cloak and coat. Anakin watched him as he went, curiosity eager to tag along with his caution.

He was as lithe as Anakin and bore as many scars as he did along his back, his strong shoulders and narrow waist showing that Obi-Wan spent as much time with his blade as Anakin did and the marks that ghosted along his skin showing that, like Anakin, not all of that time had been spent in the safety of a training hall.

Beyond the faint, lovely ghost of tension Anakin felt running through him at the feel of the cool air of the factory on his bare skin and the sight of Obi-Wan's handsome form, Anakin felt a certain sadness, too. What's it like, to be raised, or made a Sith? Just you and no one else. No other students, no Temple, no one. Just your master. Anakin remembered his lonely childhood at the Temple, no real friends that he could recall, and felt a small, quickly brushed-aside pang of sympathy.

Murderer. He is a murderer and you can't forget that.

You don't get those kind of eyes without killing someone.

The tension receded but didn't vanish completely, becoming just another bit of background noise in the constant low hiss of emotions Anakin had never been very good at controlling.

As Obi-Wan turned to come back, something caught Anakin's eye, one particular scar just below his right collarbone, and he was glad for the distraction. Unlike the other thin streaks and jags scattered along his pale skin, this mark was precise and narrow, the red scar tissue of a laser-droid surgery, and between that and its odd placement Anakin wondered what it had been for.
He tried to keep thinking about that as Obi-Wan rejoined him, the impassive instructor voice somehow drawing more attention to the fact he was shirtless and alone with Anakin in a place no one knew about. "Back into position."

Anakin narrowed his eyes and focused on his anger at being so easily beaten before. That was always a sure bet for getting his mind off of other things, and it worked just as well this time. "How many rounds do I get?"

"As many as you want."

Time bled into a long blur of green and strikes and sweat and pain punctuated by brief breaks as Anakin lost again and again, never able to press an advantage for more than a minute and the longest duel only a few minutes before Obi-Wan's saber was at his chest, Obi-Wan jerking the blade to a halt just before it struck him and sparing him a nasty welt.

They stood together, panting, muscles slick and eyes intent on each other as Anakin switched off his blade in an unspoken sign of surrender. Obi-Wan did the same, the glow between them disappearing. "And that," Obi-Wan sighed, looking into Anakin's eyes and trying to get his breathing steady again, "is our hour of training for tonight."

"What?" Anakin said, not moving. "No, that couldn't have been an hour."

"It has, I believe. I've always had an unerring sense of time." Obi-Wan stepped back, and the part of Anakin that loved the chaos of battle was sad to see him go. Whether that part of him wanted to fight Obi-Wan or pull him in close, it wasn't sure. But it did not like him moving away.

Anakin ignored it as best he could, trying to catch his own breath as Obi-Wan took his practice saber and threw him a towel and a pod of water from the same box the sabers had come from. "So that's all training is?" he asked, adrenaline starting to drain away, drinking half of the bottle before pouring the rest into the towel and wiping himself down.

"No, not at all. But do you understand now what I mean about the uselessness of relying on patterns to win against me?"

"I guess." It was hard to admit being wrong, and Anakin quickly changed the subject as he wrung out the towel and tossed it to land half out of the box. "So what now?"

Obi-Wan ran his own damp towel over his bare arms and chest before hanging it over the side of the box to dry with a careful neatness that seemed out of place for a Sith to have. "All the Sith hells, you're stubborn," he noted with a faint, almost affectionate laugh as he held out a small bacta patch to Anakin and pointed at his side, a fresh red mark showing one of the rare "killing" strikes Obi-Wan hadn't been able to stop his momentum on before the saber had met skin. "It's like you don't know you're losing."

"Thought I'd give up?" Anakin chuckled, taking the patch and slapping it into place. This was
comfortingly familiar: the sting of the bacta, the trash talking. It was like half of the conversations he had with his clone troopers after a battle.

"By the fifth time, yes."

"You don't know me very well. I never give up." This was given as a simple fact, the words muffled as Anakin tugged his shirt on, the tanned lines of his chest vanishing under simple linen.

Obi-Wan shook his head, that same amusement there that, despite its source, somehow didn't mock Anakin. It was friendly, friendlier than he could remember his own Jedi instructors being back at the Temple. "I can believe that."

As they left, the door creaking open again under Obi-Wan's power, Anakin quietly confirmed the time as he pulled his coat on, seeing that his com read just over an hour after they'd started. He was telling the truth. Good.

When Obi-Wan had said up, Anakin had imagined a few levels, maybe a minute back up skyward if you were taking a lift, but as their two-seater drifted higher through the designated air tunnels meant for express traffic, Anakin had to wonder just how high they were going to go. Somewhere sky-side?

The vehicle itself was a sleek, home-use design meant for those who didn't do much other than run errands and travel around the city, its white exterior a dull grey against the darkness around them. Anakin couldn't have named the exact model and number, having little use for civilian speeders like this, but he recognized the brand. Lutani. Very nice. Very expensive, if I remember right.

As they finally exited the air tunnel, blue guide droids swirling into a ring to mark their chosen exit, he glanced over at Obi-Wan and wondered again about him. He sat comfortably in the driver's seat, the traces of cool wind that made it past the shields ruffling his auburn hair and his golden eyes bronze in the dim light of the dashboard.

He looked at home in an expensive speeder like this, his features calm and in control and undeniably patrician in a way Anakin's never would be as he guided it through the towers of the city-world. Anakin had always felt an irrational dislike of nobles and the wealthy, something Qui-Gon had told him to work on time and time again, but once again Obi-Wan proved the exception in a way that both intrigued and annoyed him.

Maybe it's the speeder. Anakin loved flying, and he realized that in this silence that hid any words that would remind him of the truth of their situation, and the gloom that darkened Obi-Wan's eyes, he could pretend for a little while that they were just two friends, two young Knights out running some errand or off on leave from a mission.

Obi-Wan did not speak either, and Anakin felt the slightest bit of mutual calm from the other side of his shields as the city drifted past. Perhaps he was enjoying the moment too.

"Here we are," Obi-Wan said a short while later, bringing the speeder around in a lazy arc to rest against a private bay set in a huge towering bulk of a building, the dock just large enough for the speeder itself and passengers to get out and go inside. Anakin sighted past him to a spacious wall of glass and then down into Coruscant and up into the sky, stunned at how relatively high they were given what he had been expecting.
He got out and followed Obi-Wan inside to find an apartment that was just as luxurious as the exterior, adorned in soft whites and greys tastefully arranged by texture and tone. The living area was the entire front of the apartment, chairs and long rows of cushions looking out into the glittering skyline of the Coruscant night, and vibrant plantings of flowers tumbled out from collections of stone vases set in the corners. "This is your apartment?" Anakin asked, sinking down into one large, sinfully soft chair, stretching out and trying to ignore the surrealness of this entire situation as Obi-Wan leaned back outside to set the charging controls for the speeder.

"Yes. Make yourself at home."

_I just spent an hour practicing with a Sith to kill another Sith and now I'm sitting in this apartment that is a place the Temple would very, very much frown upon as I'm pretty sure that piece of art on the wall is worth more than every physical thing I own and this chair is way too comfortable and, oh, yeah, I think the Sith wants to sleep with me even though he hasn't tried anything so far tonight._

_And for the bonus round, everyone, I'm not sure if I want him to or not._ The beautiful thing about fighting for Anakin, or training as hard as he could, was that the strenuous exertion drained away all of the extra distractions his mind tried to fill in: his duties, his fears, random thoughts. Pushing his body to its limits was like meditation for him, and in the aftermath of it he could consider ideas that would put him on edge any other waking moment.

So he considered that idea in all of the simple clarity of someone examining a particularly interesting math problem. _What would it be like with him?_

He was still pondering that question when Obi-Wan moved to stand in front of a datapad mounted on the wall. "I'm having food brought. Any requests?"

"Will it get here before I leave?"

"Oh, this high up anything you wish can be delivered in under twenty minutes, Anakin," Obi-Wan said nonchalantly, his yellow eyes flicking over to Anakin for a second.

Anakin's mind ignored the innuendo while his body noticed, that lingering tension back, and leaned back into the plush seat, mostly just happy to be at rest. He had to admit he was hungry after going full-tilt like during training, and there were foods he missed that he couldn't get outside of missions, Temple food being incredibly healthy and incredibly dull most of the time. "Can you get Navakese?"

Obi-Wan nodded and slid his fingers along the keys, a pleasant chime signaling when the order had been placed. He wandered off through one of the row of doors that led further back into the apartments and emerged with two glasses of ice water. "The kitchen's back this way, and the refresher is the furthest door down. Here," he said, sitting down and putting one of the glasses down on the small table that stood between his chair and Anakin's. "Or is this going to be like the tea?"

Anakin picked it up, convincing himself as much as he was answering Obi-Wan. "If I'm going to train with you I have to trust you. At least somewhat."

"I'm glad to hear that, Anakin. It's a little jarring having a saber thrown in your face every time you meet someone."

Watching the glimmering lines of far-off traffic in the night sky, Anakin drank, enjoying the cold water as it soothed his throat and spread out in a crisp layer of ice through his chest. They sat in peaceable quiet for a while before he spoke again. "This is all so strange."
"Which part?" Obi-Wan sipped at what was left in his own glass. "You have good reason to want my master dead. It makes sense you would take the deed of killing him upon yourself. And I thought you found it quite normal that a Sith would want to kill his own master."

"You're not like a Sith. Not what I thought a Sith would be like at all."

"Ah, the baby eating," Obi-Wan said in a droll tone, lifting his water glass up in a salute to the skyline. "In the old days there was no overpopulation due to the Sith. Why, dropping off a single pair of breeding compatibility could reduce a planet's numbers within just a few months. Sith, best baby eaters in the universe."

Anakin gave a dry chuckle and laid his head back against the chair, Obi-Wan shifting to watch him and the lovely line of his throat as it drifted down into the folds of his shirt and coat. "No. I mean, yes. Sith aren't supposed to be polite. And well-dressed. And enjoy things like this." He gestured around the apartment and out at the view.

"We are all supposed to be craven, hideous monsters crouched in the dark, spending all our waking time terrorizing the good Jedi of the universe, hmm?"

"Yes."

"Well, you bring up a good question, Anakin."

"How is that?"

Obi-Wan leaned back in his own chair, staring up at the ceiling and closing his eyes in relaxation. "My master is exactly all of those things just described, give or take a few details. And yet there is one thing I don't understand."

"What?"

"Why is it that my master let you live?"

Anakin's stomach tightened and he sat up straighter. "What are you talking about?"

Obi-Wan didn't move or open his eyes, voice soothingly quiet. "You were there when he killed your master. Weren't you?"

"I… a rescue ship came before he could kill me."

"Really? How close did Maul get to you?" Obi-Wan returned with the glass and put it in Anakin's hand, the intensity of his eyes betraying his light tone.

"So my master, the great Sith Lord Darth Maul, killed your master and then just, what, spared you? Left you alive, the famed Chosen One?" Obi-Wan blinked, stood up, and went back into the kitchen to get more water, taking Anakin's glass with him and his question as casual as if they were discussing the weather.

The rustle of red leaves and a small creek ghosted across Anakin's memory, stealing away the peace he'd just found and leaving behind a dark, pained set of disjointed images. "I… a rescue ship came before he could kill me."

"Really? How close did Maul get to you?" Obi-Wan returned with the glass and put it in Anakin's hand, the intensity of his eyes betraying his light tone.

"He was… right on top of me." The frigid condensation on the side of the glass was cold against his hand, running down like sweat over his fingers. Anakin was actively struggling now to keep the dream-memory away, to just say the words as sounds without any true meaning.
Obi-Wan sat down, taking a long drink from his glass before he replied. "And he couldn't have taken the extra second it would have required to run you through, as you have so colorfully threatened to do to me?"

Anakin set the glass down with a thud, water splashing out over the side. "I don't want to talk about it." Angry, he got to his feet, running his hands through his hair and going to stare out the window, trying to find something that would catch his eye and take his mind off of that horrible day.

Obi-Wan's educated, melodious voice reached out to him, more deferential than Anakin had ever heard it. "I am sorry, Anakin. It's just something I have wondered about. Perhaps it would be worth meditating on, if you wish to understand my master. Maybe you will have more luck than I have had in understanding it."

A gentle ring sounded from the datapad on the far wall, cutting through the awkward silence now between them, and he heard Obi-Wan's footsteps as he left the room and then came back with the clink of carefully packaged dishes and the luscious scents they trailed.

"Excellent choice," he said to Anakin's stiff back, the sound of opening boxes and plates being set out along a bench and larger table that ran half the length of the living area. "Come, eat."

"No, I'm not hungry."

"It would be a shame to let food go to waste. You don't strike me as that type."

Anakin let his head fall back, giving a quiet groan to the ceiling before walking over to join Obi-Wan, sitting on the far end of the bench and surveying the dishes before him with a stony glare. "Fine. I want that one," he said, pointing to a stew topped with tiny blue flowers.

They ate in silence, Anakin surprised to find Obi-Wan wasn't pushing him to talk as the last of their time for the evening drained away. _He's worried I won't come back._

_I will. I need him if I'm going to beat Maul._

The question Obi-Wan had raised surfaced again in Anakin's mind, but he didn't want to think about it. There would be time for that later, or maybe he could even ask the Masters about it. _It's probably just an unimportant detail, a stroke of luck,_ Anakin thought bitterly as he pointed out the time and stood to leave. _That's me, the lucky one._

They settled on another meeting the evening of the following day, the last time Anakin would be able to come before he and Ahsoka left for a week-long mission, the details of which he was careful not to share with Obi-Wan.

It was a dry, bloodless goodbye, Anakin disappearing back into one of the building's lifts to make his way back down far enough public transit would take him back to the Temple. He didn't mind the trip and the four different stations he passed through, connecting lift to shuttle to airtram to shuttle to pedestrian walk. With each one the weird unreality of the whole evening retreated further and further, buried under a steady assault of mundane normalcy, slow layers of rumbling vehicles, the conversations of other passengers, the smell of the Temple gardens as he walked in through one of the smaller side entrances.

By the time he walked through the door to his own small room, he found it hard to believe any of it had happened. Taking a proper shower before bed, rubbing the bacta patch on his side and still aware of the sharp tang of the Navakese dish on his tongue, he had to admit it did and thanked the Force Obi-Wan seemed to be a serious teacher.
Finishing his nightly routine and settling down into bed, his last conscious thoughts were of Obi-Wan and his usual inscrutable gaze and wondering yet again what Obi-Wan wanted with him.

Anakin would blame this errant set of thoughts when he woke up in the morning for what had happened during the night, and spend the remaining days before his mission and the entire week of it focusing only on the clinical aspects of saber techniques before falling asleep.

But tonight he dreamed.

It was a small, dark room, its features unseen and unimportant beyond the small, firm bed he lay on. It was only meant for one person and that was why it was so odd that another was there with Anakin, slipping in under the covers next to him, legs and thighs and hips warm against Anakin as the other came to lie on his side, facing him.

Obi-Wan.

He grinned, eyes colorless and features almost completely hidden in the dark, and Anakin stared at him, stunned at how good it felt to feel Obi-Wan's arms sliding around him.

"What are you doing here?" he heard himself ask, shocked.

"Really, Anakin?" Obi-Wan smiled, a happy, playful expression that Anakin had yet to see from him in real life.

Anakin blushed, the heat on his face almost as intense as that of Obi-Wan's naked body pressed against him through his thin nightclothes. Anakin wanted him. There was no hesitation about that. There was something that should have made Anakin sad, something important... wasn't there?

He couldn't remember.

He could only feel the enticing weight of Obi-Wan against his chest, his mouth sinking down against Anakin's in an affectionate kiss that deepened as they lay together, Anakin's hands shyly making circles on Obi-Wan's back as they touched and caressed each other, their mouths lingering, deliciously hot, on each other's throat and collarbones.

By the time there was no real thought left, only lust, Anakin wanted Obi-Wan so badly it tightened his heart in his chest and set every muscle, every cell, to a fine fever-pitch of need tinged with anxiety. But this was wrong. This was wrong and they weren't supposed to do this.

Were they?

"Anakin," Obi-Wan whispered, dragging the syllables of his name out in the heady rasp of a lover. It was a question, and as an answer Anakin slid underneath him, the two trading rough, passionate kisses as Obi-Wan pulled off his clothes.

His hands were gentle and caring, leaving traces of fire everywhere he touched Anakin, and just as they were about to sink down together into the deep, fierce rhythm of pleasure, Anakin awoke with a gasp, sitting straight up.

In his own room.

Alone.

Breaths coming short and fast, he stared around, unable to process what he saw for a moment. It was a dark room, and he was most certainly still aroused, but there was no Obi-Wan.
"Kriff!" he spat, tossing himself down to lie on his back with his hands balled at his sides. "Are you kriffing kidding me?"

The room remained silent.

Growling a sigh of utter distaste, not sure who or what he was more mad at, he decided blame would have to wait. There was the very sensitive matter of his pooled lust to be dealt with first if he was going to get back to sleep at all, and as Anakin brought his arm up over his eyes, trying to block out what he was doing with the other hand he slid downward, he did his very best not to think of the dream or Obi-Wan.

He failed miserably on both counts, and was both disgusted and thrilled at how hard his body shook with pleasure when release finally came.

Gasping, breath hot and hard in his lungs as ecstasy slowly melted away, he distantly wondered what was so fundamentally wrong with him that he could feel this way about a Sith.

I am not the Jedi I should be. Not at all.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, dear readers! Your comments and kudos brought much love to my cold, dark Sith heart, and I hope you enjoyed this chapter. Please let me know what you think, what you love or hate, and have a wonderful week! :D

Many thanks go to my dear Fireflyfish, who bravely sacrificed herself reading this particular chapter to help me edit. ;)


Ahsoka was awake an hour before the sun rose through the spires of metal and glass that stretched out like a forest around the Jedi Temple, nervous excitement pushing her out of bed and into the refresher early. She did the bare minimum attempt at meditation that her classes required, dressed, and had the last bag of crisps Anakin had brought her for breakfast rather than taking the time to go to the communal dining hall.

By 07:00, an hour before her classes began, she was at Anakin's door, datapad in hand and hoping she'd find him awake. Or there at all. *I saw him leave last night in civilian clothes… maybe he went out to a bar or something?* When it was up to him, her master didn't spend much time around anyone other than her and his clone troopers, so it seemed a little odd, but nothing compared to what she thought she might have found in her research the night before.

To her surprise Anakin opened the door almost immediately. He was just as awake and dressed as she was, dark rings under his eyes the only difference. "Good morning!" she said with a hopeful smile.

"Morning, Snips. You're up early, aren't you?" No annoyance passed through the Force to her, only curiosity, and he moved aside to let her in. An unfinished droid component, neatly laid out in pieces like the bones of a long-dead creature, glittered in the dawn light atop his own work desk, soldering pen still glowing in its stand.

"You too, huh?" she said as she took a seat at the work desk, as comfortable in his room as she was in her own. "Want me to turn this off?"

"Yeah, thanks."

She touched the side of it and the little ember at the tip of the tool died away, its salt-earth tang still lingering in the air, as Anakin took a seat on a plain bench against the wall by the room's only window. Usually Ahsoka liked to sit there and study while he was busy doing paperwork or tinkering with his projects, the size perfect for her and in reality almost too small for him.

He stretched his long legs out with a yawn and leaned against the wall behind the bench. "Hit me, Snips." For all of his casual slouching, his gaze was alert and almost anxious. "What'd you find? I mean, that's why you're here, right?"

"Yeah. Well, the bad news first. Actually, maybe it's all bad news. I don't know. But the first bad news is that I couldn't find anything on your Obi-Wan and Arev guys."

He shrugged, and she felt a hint of disappointment directed not at her but the situation in general. "I didn't think you would, honestly."

"And the good? No, probably bad… Good that we found it, I mean, but bad…"

"Snips. Just tell me."

"So after I went looking for those guys and didn't have any luck I got bored and I couldn't sleep anyway so I thought I'd look us up, for fun. Me and you."
"You'd need a Master passcode for that, wouldn't you?"

"Nah. Basic profile stuff anyone can see. It'd be a huge pain if only Masters could look up anything." It was her turn to pretend to be nonchalant about what she was saying.

"Uh huh," Anakin said, folding his arms. "Ahsoka, are you slicing again? You remember how disappointed Plo Koon, the Force rest his soul, was when you got caught doing all of that."

She hugged the cool rectangle of her datapad against her chest, heart twinging at the memory of the kind Jedi that had first found her all those years ago. "I promise it's just top layer. Stupid, harmless stuff. I can't get any deeper in. Just listen, ok?"

"Sure. So you looked us up, and... what? They have me down as shorter than I am?" he said, attempting to make a joke and not liking the concerned set of her mouth as she ignored it.

"No." She held out the pad and pointed at it. "Someone's altered your file."

Anakin took it, not understanding the wall of symbols that scrolled down, a few lines highlighted red. "What?"

"This is the bare code of the top page of your profile, the summary page. It's the only one I can get to. So it's a long story, but think of this... uh... like a droid. So you pop open a droid that was built ten or twenty years ago, and you see a part inside that was made just five years ago. You know someone's been working on that droid, right?"

"Yeah."

"So these red parts that I marked in the code of that page are parts that have been overwritten. Whoever did it used the regular user interface to do it, the one with the menu screens and the big buttons that we all see when we use the Archive, but that system was updated around ten years ago. The actual code it writes is different than the older system. What I'm trying to say is that at some point in the last ten years someone changed your file."

"Or the last ten days." Obi-Wan.

"Yeah, I can't tell when exactly it was done, just that it was in that new system. You want to know the weirdest part, Master?"

"What's that?"

"The two sections they overwrote are a little weird. Homeworld and Master lineage. The other sections, see? Birthdate, Gender, and Species were left alone."

Anakin's eyes dropped down, attempting to sort through the visual noise of numbers and symbols until he found what he wanted to see, next to red patches of commands. Homeworld: Coruscant. Master: Qui-Gon Jinn, deceased.

Nerves already on edge at the possibility of Obi-Wan slicing into Temple records, Anakin exhaled slowly and rubbed his forehead, reminding himself not to get angry with Ahsoka for just trying to help. "Look, Ahsoka. The homeworld thing is a little odd because I am from Coruscant, so I don't know why anyone would alter that unless, I don't know, there was some kind of spelling error they found way after I was put in the system. But, yeah, the Master section would have been updated in the last ten years. My Master died four years ago, remember?"

The color drained from Ahsoka's face. "Oh. Yes. Oh. I am... I am so sorry."
"It's," he waved his hand and sighed, handing it back to her, "...it's ok." And it was, she felt through the Force. This hard, awful fact was something he'd learned to deal with, his response said, and he didn't hold her mistake against her.

Whatever had her master already on edge it had nothing to do with her, and she felt grateful relief as he moved on. "The homeworld thing is weird, I agree, and if it wasn't a correction and someone is slicing into records the Council definitely needs to know about it. I'll go right now before the day picks up and see if I can get in to see them about it."

"Ok." She tapped a few things and turned the datapad off, nervously brushing away some invisible dust. "Master? There's one thing before you go..."

He smiled reassuringly, patting her shoulder as he stood and walked past to the door. "I promise I won't tell them this came from you. There are lots of informants we've got, and I can just hint one dropped me word about a slicer targeting my files. So I went in myself and looked."

"Thank you, Master. I swear I'm not doing anything wrong."

"I know you're not." This was a simple truth for him. "Can't have my favorite Padawan grounded right before a mission, right? Stay here as long as you can, but I don't want you to be late for your class, so if I don't come back come find me during your lunch period and I'll tell you what they said."

"Ok, Master." She pointed at the table, eager to move on from the awkwardness of a minute ago. "Want me to put this droid thingie together for you?"

He wanted the same, his eyes said, and he played along easily. "If you don't know what it is then no, no thank you."

"That's never stopped me before!"

"Why don't you study instead, huh? Those assignment thingies," he answered over his shoulder as he put his cloak on and adjusted it to hang neatly in the front.

She pretended to pout. "You're no fun."

"Nope. Never," came the deadpan reply as he left, the door sliding shut behind him.

Ahsoka considered gluing the droid parts to the table as a joke, but wisely decided not to push her luck and instead got settled in on the bench Anakin had just been on. Looking over her homework, already done, and seeing nothing that needed to be finished before her first class, she opted to meditate rather than study, the minutes drifting by easily and without interruption until the chime of her com reminded her it was time to go.

On her way there she couldn't help but take the long way, allowing her a peek down the long halls to the lift that took visitors and Masters up to the Council. Anakin was walking into the elevator, brown cloak trailing behind him, and Ahsoka silently wished him luck before turning again to rush along to her class, happy the Council had been able to fit him in.
with everything it touched. It lingered in his auburn hair as he sat cross-legged on the floor, on the pale skin of his throat, and even gave highlights to the wine red velvet he wore today.

Where the sun stopped, swallowed up whole, was the black-clad shape of Maul seated across from him. It fell into the black of his boots and his own fitted Coruscanti layered coat and clothing as if into a hole no light would ever escape from. A cloak of the same inky pitch lay draped across the bench behind them, a sprawling shadow detached from its owner.

"We will work on your meditation today, apprentice."

"Yes, my Master."

Maul watched Arev's eyes flutter shut, waiting for his breathing to drop into the steady rhythm of practiced focus. When it was there, he spoke softly. "Today we will look back to the first time you felt hate. It is crucial these events in your life are carefully remembered and dwelled upon if you wish to maintain your strength in the dark side."

"Yes, my Master."

"Do you remember the first time you felt hate?" Maul knew the answer would not be the day they'd met. Maul had heard the particular story he was asking for today dozens of times before, but it was one Arev still struggled with and was worth returning to. Other emotions, other ideas kept clouding Arev's pure perception and acceptance of his own hatred when it came to this particular memory, and he needed to work on filtering them out.

"Yes. I remember." His face remained expressionless, empty.

"Tell me."

"I am in a room, in the back room of a filthy little hovel. I can hear gasping. It's my mother gasping for breath."

Maul sat, relaxed, reminding himself not to let boredom taint his instruction. There is no sense doing something if it is not done well. "Picture it. Tell me what you see."

"She is lying on a bed with worn sheets. She is sick. And I am young. Too young to pick her up and take her anywhere. Not that anyone would help us anyway." The mental shields that remained permanently in place around Arev did not budge, but wisps of sadness and fear seeped out in auroras of ice.

"Why are you there?"

"Father." A surge of disgust passed from Arev to Maul, this emotion shared freely.

"Where is your Father during this?"

"Here. Already dead. Next to Mother, on the other side of her from me. He passed earlier in the day. Mother doesn't even realize it. But she's beyond talking at this point. And it's all Father's fault."

"What did he do?"

"He got into gambling after the last of his family died and he inherited most of it." Arev shifted, unaware of the movement as his body tried to deal with the anxiety that retelling the story planted in him. "Gambled every month, then almost every day. We didn't need the money. We were rich to
begin with. A sky-side family. But he just wouldn’t stop."

Arev took a breath and then another, his voice calm as he recounted a horror from so long ago it had lost the abrupt terror it had once caused even if it still stealthily poisoned the soul. "I was too young to really know what was happening when he started losing. Father knew so much about so many things, and he always brought Mother pretty dresses and candies for me and looked so handsome in his fine clothes and fancy speeders that I thought he was perfect, a hero right out of the holos."

Arev's hands tightened over his knees, disappearing in a snarl of rich red from his coat, his voice sounding younger as he traced the outlines of his past. "And then the dresses and the candies vanished. And then our speeders, my nanny, the apartments. Everything. We fell hard, and Mother was too ashamed to tell her own family was what happening. Father, the prideful bastard, forbid her from doing so anyway. He said he just needed a little more luck and we'd be ok. He said that with a laugh and a smile every time Mother begged him to stop."

Maul reached out with the Force, reminding Arev without words to maintain his focus and not regress too far back, and Arev nodded, drawing all of the negative emotions in to gather around his words until they were the sharp, bitter tones of the young man that sat before him. "We fell hard, all the way out of our pretty high-level apartments down and away and finally landed in this… place. The fall was like an avalanche in slow motion, crushing the life out of us one move at a time."

He finished the tale with a soft sneer, eyes still shut. "And now, thanks to dear, dear Father, we're too poor to even get in touch with anyone given that the local syndicate controls all the coms. It's just the three of us here now. Mother, and Father, and I. The two of them dying of whatever it is that hasn't touched me."

"How do you feel about your Father as you stand there, in that little room?"

A burst of pure, molten emotion, hot and searing, crossing the bond from apprentice to master. "I hate him. I'm watching Mother, and she's so sick and in so much pain and she's going to die and I hate him."

"Who else do you hate?"

"No one."

The response was too fast to be honest or considered, and Maul shook his head, disapproval clear. "Focus, Arev. Don't waste time denying truths. You should be beyond that by now."

Silence met Maul's words, here at the usual sticking point in this particular recollection and meditation. "Again. Standing there, looking at your dying mother, who else do you hate?"

Within the cauldron of hatred for his father, a new vein of red slowly appeared, wavering into sight through the Force as Arev pondered this question. Maul waited, as patient as a spider in a web, defying the morning light around him.

The sun crept a little further into the sky, its banners shifting slightly on the floor, before Arev answered in a rough, low whisper, tears sliding down his face. "I hate myself."

Good. That was faster than usual. "Why?"

"Because I can't save her." The little boy voice, there and gone. Beautiful in its pain, the first strike on a blade that would not be hammered out for many more years after that.
"Why is this fact so hard for you to admit? You were a child when this happened." The first time they had walked through this scene from his past, Arev had thought in bewilderment that perhaps Maul meant to comfort him when they came to this part, but that was not the case and he knew better now.

"I had the Force. I didn't know what it was called then but I had it and I didn't use it."

"Exactly. You were weak when she needed you."

"Yes. And I hated myself for it."

Maul chose to push ahead, beyond the point they usually ended on, as the tears dripped down Arev's cheeks and into his lap. "Did you learn from your weakness?"

"I tried," came the trembling, almost inaudible reply.

"And are you strong enough with the Force now?"

"No. Not enough."

Maul listened to Arev, to the deep, soul-rending ache of self-hatred that tinged the confession, and decided that was an excellent point to finish. "Remember this feeling, apprentice. It eats at you because you will not let it in. You will continue to lack your full strength in the Force until you truly embrace your hatred and make it yours. All of it."

"Yes, my Master."

Ahsoka survived the long, interminable era that her discovery made her morning classes, wondering what the Council would say and what it meant and why someone would be poking around in her master's files, if they were and it wasn't a mistake like Anakin had thought it could be.

Her embarrassment at forgetting Qui-Gon's date of death still stung, despite Anakin's kind overlooking of her blunder, and she frowned down at the notes she was supposed to be studying as the last period before lunch wound down.

Ahsoka had been assigned to the famed Anakin Skywalker almost two years ago, coming in just on the tail-end of the nightmares and the blackest of his moods, and he had almost never spoken of his own master to her. While she knew most of Anakin's bleaker tendencies stemmed from that time, it had taken months of watching him slowly come out of the shadow of depression to understand just how much she had assumed was Anakin's personality was actually the hard lines of scar tissue from that traumatic day. He was smart, and funny, and loved to challenge himself, and if he was in the right mood the Force around him glowed with a fierce, endless affection for her and his men.

She felt safe around him. He never mocked her or made her feel small, like some Masters did to their Padawans.

So when lunch finally came and she finally found him and finally got to ask what the Council said the chuckle he gave her stopped her cold, ice creeping along her spine and spreading out in frigid lines through her body. "What are you talking about, Snips?"
He was in the hangar, where he often was, working on the little ship they usually took on missions. "One more time. What now?" he asked, coming down from the stepladder he was on and brushing his gloved hands on the plain mechsuit he wore for hangar work.

Ahsoka looked up at him, brows furrowed. "What did the Council say this morning?"

"About what?"

Sarcasm tinged her reply. "You know, the 'thing' with the thing in the datapad, ha ha hoo hoo?" *This is not funny, Master. Don't be a jerk.*

He shrugged, relaxed. "I haven't seen them today. What are you talking about?"

Counting to ten in her mind, an old trick she'd learned long ago as an Initiate, Ahsoka tried to control the quick flame of her anger at the thought Anakin was mocking her, and tried to step back and read the situation before she spoke. Was Anakin pretending she hadn't shown him the file? Why would he do that?

Did he think she'd get in trouble with the Council somehow for slicing again? *It doesn't matter! Someone could be messing around with your file, Master!*

*Is he angry because I forgot about Master Jinn? Is this my punishment?* That made even less sense. She had seen Anakin become vindictive on a few occasions while they were on missions, but only to enemies that she felt probably deserved it.

*And I saw you get into that turbolift. You went up to the Council. What, did you change your mind and talk to them about something else?*

She leaned in close, lowering her voice to a whisper and trying to make sense of what was happening, daring Anakin to laugh at her or keep pretending he didn't know what she was talking about. "This morning I showed you proof that someone might be messing around in your file."

Anakin winced and brought a hand up to his forehead, checking it first to make sure the glove was clean. "Sorry, keep going? What were you saying?"

She held up the datapad, furiously stabbing at it, and turned it toward him. *I can't believe you're making me show you this right here out in the open! What is wrong with you? "This? Remember? Someone changing your file?"

Anakin pushed the screen down with one hand, black soot from his glove streaking the top, as he continued to rub his temples with the clean one. "I don't know what you're talking about. Get that thing out of my face."

The sudden annoyance, the headache, the dazed look in his eyes: *I've seen this before. Where?*

*Oh, no, No.* The whole world dropped away and Ahsoka gave a faint, nervous laugh as she felt fear, real fear, bubble up inside her. *On missions. When Master's mind wiped an enemy and we're checking to make sure it stuck.*

Taking a deep breath, watching Anakin as closely as a trainer handling a nexu, Ahsoka repeated her explanation of the file, keeping the datapad down and to the side, and willed herself to remain calm as Anakin cringed again. "Look, Ahsoka, whatever it is, can it wait? I don't want to talk right now, ok? I have to get the ship ready for us leaving tomorrow."

*Just like on missions.*
"Ok, Master," she said, taking a step back and into total isolation, the world as she understood it shifting into looming, frightening silhouettes she no longer recognized. *He's looking at you. Say something.* "I'll… uh… see you later, ok?"

"Yeah," he said, rubbing his head. "Sorry for snapping. I just, I don't know, this headache came out of nowhere."

"It's ok, Master. You're… busy right now." She brushed the soot off the edge of the datapad, trying to find something to do as her mind raced, panicked.

"Yeah. Maybe it's the noise in here." He tried to smile apologetically at her, sorry he'd been rude. It hurt her heart to see it.

"Yeah, could be. I'll see you later, ok?" *Get it together, Ahsoka. This can't be what you think it is. There has to be something else going on here. There has to be!*

*No. It's exactly the same, only this time it's Master instead of some random Separatist guy.* Ahsoka shivered as she hurried back to class, hands tucked into her sleeves and unable to come up with any other explanation that fit despite the insanity of it all. Mind wiping was a last, final resort on the battlefield or in missions, viewed by the Jedi Order with almost as much disgust and revulsion as the Sith themselves were, and not a common danger to anyone as only the most powerful could manage it.

But somehow, despite all of this, Ahsoka was sure someone had wiped Anakin's memory of this morning right here in the Temple.

*I must be going crazy.*

*Because I think it might have been the Council.*

Anakin enjoyed working on the ship, getting lost in the precise work that went into tuning it up and the headache that had set in suddenly fading away after Ahsoka left. He forgot about her appearance and the fine twinge of apprehension that lined his gut at meeting Obi-Wan again that evening, at least until the prep work was over and he was in his room alone for a late lunch.

Leaning back in his chair, finishing off the last of a beat-up sandwich he'd taken from the dining hall and tucked into the mechsuit on his way back, he looked around at the unassuming walls and furniture of his room, trying to imagine the same dream that had haunted him last night and what he had done afterward.

His failure as a Jedi was still clear. Anakin had accepted long ago that he was not the perfect Jedi he so desperately wanted to be. He wanted to live up to the ideal Qui-Gon had set, had been. He wanted to be the Chosen One the Council murmured about when he won a battle or captured an enemy against all odds, even if no one, the Council included, seemed to grasp exactly what being the Chosen One meant.

This was the latest setback to that image and goal, and because it was not anywhere near the first time he had hated himself for his weaknesses, it stung less painfully in the bright light of day than it had upon first realization the night before.
The dream itself seemed almost ridiculous with the sun streaming in from outside and the dull rumble of everyday conversations out in the hallway. A dream of Obi-Wan and him being... friends. More than friends. **Definitely not enemies,** he rolled his eyes as he faced the uncomfortable fact once again that the dream was not a Sith illusion of some kind. **That was all me. No tricks, no drugs in the food, nothing like that. Nothing Obi-Wan did. Well, to directly make me have that dream anyway. I'm just attracted to him. Kriff.**

He tentatively let the dream wash over him again, the images already fuzzy and unclear save a few particularly intense ones, testing his body to see what its reaction would be and how bad this specific failing of his Jedi ideals was.

Despite his disappointment in himself and the uselessness of trying to clutch at dreams in the light of the next day, a lovely tension began to rise and he let out a soft curse. "No. No, not doing that right now," he told himself with a frustrated sigh and attempted to bargain with his body lest the night before repeat itself in broad daylight. "Nope. Windu in a Twi'lek dancer outfit. Rex in a Twi'lek dancer outfit. Going swimming on Hoth. Me in a Twi'lek dancer outfit. On Hoth."

He had to snicker at that final image even as he chastised himself again for needing it in the first place, the beginnings of frisson dissipating, and forced himself to get back to work on the million details a mission required in terms of paperwork and clearances.

The steady, boring rhythm of the day allowed him, though not perfectly, to dodge the real question his dream had asked, at least until the evening came and he found himself headed back out into the night crowds of Coruscant.

By this time a subtle anger had worked its way into him, triggered by the odd conversation with Ahsoka he couldn't quite recall and the dream he could all too well, now that night had returned and he was heading back to the Sith that had appeared in it.

**No matter what I want to be true, last night showed I'm not strong enough to resist... what... a pretty face? I've seen a lot of those. If you listen to some people, I have one, I guess. I don't know. Is that why he wants me? If he does?**

**Do I want him because he's dangerous? Do I want him because he's the opposite of everything I try so hard to be?**

Walking down one of the thoroughfares away from the Temple, Anakin thought of Obi-Wan's knowing glances and teasing words and felt the anger grow stronger. **He knows he has this effect on me and just stands there and smiles and acts like he doesn't care at all, like he doesn't want me either even though he's said he does. Cocky bastard. I'm not some toy to be led around on a string. No matter how good-looking the one holding the string is.**

**But, let's be honest here, I want that dream to happen. I want him. I acknowledge that I want him even though it's wrong. I even knew in the dream us being together was wrong, didn't I? I think? But I still want him.**

Glad the hood of his coat was up so no one would see the blush that rose there, Anakin kept his gaze on the ground as he joined the crowd getting on the lift that would take him down to the level their training spot was in. He'd learned long ago in his studies that acceptance was the first step in mastering emotions that tried to control one. But if accepting his own feelings about Obi-Wan was helpful, it sure didn't feel like it. It felt dark and sweet and infuriating all at the same time, no closure anywhere remotely in sight.

Obi-Wan was waiting for him down the long, shadowy twists of road, behind the huge, shrieking
door, sitting cross-legged in the middle of the huge room, the twisted mounds of machinery piled along the walls a strange ridgeline behind him as he came out of a meditative trance. "Good evening, Anakin." He wore the same unadorned type of clothing he had last night, their two training sabers neatly lined up on the floor in front of him.

Anakin took his coat off and tossed it aside, coming in and holding out his hand to pull over one of the sabers. It skittered across the floor, rasping along the concrete, before flying up into his hand. The tension and anger were simmering nicely now, needing an outlet, and he lit his blade and swung it in a challenge. "Good evening. We duel at the start, right? Let's go."

Obi-Wan rose in a graceful stretch, the other saber leaping into his hand, and turned it on. "Instinct, Anakin. Remember."

To both their surprise, Anakin did a little better than he had the day before, trusting his anger, and almost landed a hit square on Obi-Wan's back before the tide turned against him and he ended up with his back against a rusting piece of sheet metal in one far corner of the room with Obi-Wan's blade stopping just above his hip. "Better. Are you angry tonight?" he asked, not backing away. "Yeah."

"Good." Anakin was almost disappointed Obi-Wan didn't ask why as he stepped away. "Now let's begin your defensive training."

The time passed as quickly as it had the night before but without the crazed fighting Anakin both loved and hated losing at. Obi-Wan took the other saber back from him and hooked the two together with a generic adapter so shiny he must have bought it that day, allowing him to create a double-bladed one and demonstrate Juyo with an approximation of Maul's preferred weapon.

Anakin had never had much opportunity to train against this kind of saber, the type so rare the battle droids at the Temple didn't come equipped with the programming for it and hardly any of his peers choosing to use it. It was too dangerous, everyone said, too easy to get out of control with and lose your focus.

But Obi-Wan made it look beautiful as he spun the long staff about and brought it to rest behind his back, the twin green swaths of movement fading to reveal his golden eyes fixed on Anakin. No memories of the last time he'd seen such a weapon in action lurched up from Anakin's subconscious, and he was thankful for that.

Without speaking, Obi-Wan repeated the same move three more times and then worked through nine others, allowing Anakin to begin to see their paths and the feeling of the style in much more detail than grainy Temple training holos. By the end he was breathing harder, face lost in concentration, and Anakin watched with interest as he walked back to his starting point and bowed. "These are the most common building blocks that other moves come from. Are you starting to get a sense of how Juyo works?"

"Yeah. I think. Now you're going to have me block them with my own blade, right?"

"For the most part, yes. This first one you always want to stop with a downward strike. Never to the side or the second blade can very easily be angled into your leg." They fell into an easy pattern, Obi-Wan going slowly enough he could direct and point out where Anakin was too quick or too slow or at the wrong angle. They stood, blades crossed and humming gently, and discussed different points and issues, Anakin learning several interesting things about his arch nemesis Maul along the way.
For example, Maul would almost always begin a fight diving in with a stabbing attack from the left, an old habit probably left over from his first training days: the idea Maul had ever been a child was bizarre to Anakin and one quickly put aside.

He also learned that Maul favored his right side for the eighth form, a vicious whirl of the blades upward, because an old injury on his left hip from some time before he'd met Obi-Wan had never healed properly. "Not that he told me this, of course, but when we go somewhere cold it's more obvious."

"You don't have healers?"

"Not decent ones. Usually the first unlicensed one we can find. Too many questions at hospitals and Jedi aren't exactly happy to see us," Obi-Wan said dryly, reaching out to take Anakin's wrist and gently adjust the angle of his blade to better block the green line buzzing overhead. "Up and left a little more. There." Anakin glanced down at the warmth of Obi-Wan's hand on his skin, but didn't remind him of the rule against touching him. This was training. This was different than other times. "So if he goes into a move using that form your best bet would be a spin and thrust attack that targets his left side."

Anakin stored that information away as another question sprang to mind. "Do you have old injuries?"

Obi-Wan let go of his hand and gave Anakin a wry smile, pointing at his own cheek. "Just where overly excited Jedi like to punch us as we sit innocently in gardens." There was no anger in the gesture, and Anakin realized something like that was probably a normal day for a Sith with his master.

The thought that he, the vaunted symbol of the Jedi Order, could be anything like Darth Maul, even for a second, stayed with Anakin and gnawed at him for the rest of their training and then after as they once again ascended into the sky for the last half of their odd standing arrangement.

"Food?" Obi-Wan asked as they collapsed into the soft chairs of the apartment, the dishes from the night before gone and the room neatly arranged thanks to some unseen droid that had left faint roller marks in the rug beneath them.

"No, I'm not hungry."

"As you wish."

Anakin wasn't sure which was worse as they sat there drinking water and watching the skyline, feeling guilty about punching Obi-Wan or wanting him in his bed, but at least one of those he could take care of without getting himself deeper into trouble, he decided. "Hey."

"What?" Lying back in the chair, Obi-Wan rolled his head to face him, tired and calm.

"I can heal that, you know. Your jaw? I'm not a healer but something small like that I know I can handle."

Obi-Wan mulled over the suggestion. "Is this your way of apologizing?"

"I shouldn't have hit you. It's not the Jedi way to strike out in anger."

Obi-Wan gave a little laugh, lacing his fingers together behind his head as he laid back and stretched his legs out. "You are a gentleman, Anakin Skywalker, even to Sith. If you would like to I would not argue."
There was a test in his naming of himself, a reminder to Anakin of what Obi-Wan was, and his yellow gaze held Anakin's steady as Anakin moved to the long bench without commenting on it. "Come over here. We both need to be sitting for this."

Obi-Wan stood and joined him, sinking into an elegant pool of coat and layers like a red-hawk come to land beside him. He sat with his back straight and hands in his lap, studying Anakin, as the traffic passed by in colorful sparkles of light in the distance. "Will this hurt?"

"I've never healed… someone like you, but I don't think so. Hold still."

Anakin watched as Obi-Wan closed his eyes, once again becoming a normal person as the yellow disappeared. Freed from his intense gaze, Anakin took a moment to consider Obi-Wan, the fine line of his body, the soft way his lips parted as he murmured, "Go on."

Suddenly timid, afraid he might hurt him somehow, Anakin slowly reached over with one hand to gently cup Obi-Wan's jaw and turn his head toward him. Obi-Wan kept his eyes closed as Anakin sent the smallest of touches through the Force, attempting to remember which side he'd hit him on.

_"Left. Well, yeah, I am right-handed."_

Anakin focused, the room and the beautiful city view sliding away, only the warmth of his body rising and stealing through the Force to Obi-Wan and the tender part of his jaw. He knew when the healing had found its way to the sore spot because there was a sudden, beautiful gasp from Obi-Wan. The smallest, most fragile sound, unlike anything he had heard from Obi-Wan in their short, odd history together.

It was a sound of relief, of sinking down into somewhere safe. It was not an act. It was not a trick. As they sat there, the smallest of bridges made between their souls, he knew Obi-Wan had not been treated this gently in a very long time.

Fascinated at seeing this side of him, unable to believe it was really there, Anakin let his thumb trace along Obi-Wan's lower lip as the healing drifted out beyond his jaw, finding an old injury somewhere down in his ribs and bringing another quiet moan of approval as it set to work on it. It would not be wise to linger in the healing trance too long, as inexperienced as he was, but Anakin couldn't resist staying there, stunned to find his enemy and the man who had laid him out flat in battle without once losing now so open and vulnerable before him. Anakin brought his other hand up to press against Obi-Wan's shirt, searching for more places his essence could sink down into, more glimpses into the secret lands of Obi-Wan's body.

"Oh, Anakin," he murmured with a fair amount of effort, fighting his way past the delicious heat of the healing, "you'll be here all night if you're trying to find all of them. You can stop." It was Obi-Wan's turn to be a gentleman. He didn't want Anakin to stop: Anakin could feel the need in his soul coloring the Force in deep, rich tones. The healing was good, but it was more than that.

Stunned, Anakin saw that Obi-Wan wanted him just as badly.

_He's just as lonely as I am._

Obi-Wan's mental shields were still up, still as unyielding as they always were and his thoughts and memories hidden, but in the gardens that surrounded those walls, where only instinct and urges blossomed, this need for Anakin shone brightly through their temporary link even though someone standing right next to the pair wouldn't have been able to sense it at all. This desire was secret and beautiful and his.
"I dreamed about you," Anakin admitted. It was safe to say, or at least it felt that way as their minds lingered together in the Force aura of his healing.

"Did you?"

"Yes."

"Was it a good dream?"

"The Council wouldn't think so."

"Fuck the Council, Anakin," he said lazily, drunk on Anakin's touch.

"Harsh language for someone so refined," he teased, wanting to pull Obi-Wan closer but forcing himself to focus on healing instead. That's what he needs right now. Don't be selfish. His hand tightened in Obi-Wan's shirt as the healing ran along the unseen line of old bruises along his back, filling them in with soothing heat.

"What, 'fuck'? 'Kriff' is so provincial. So Outer Rim, Anakin."

"Heh." He felt his strength running out, his reserves dwindling, and reluctantly pulled the Force back into himself, the sea rolling back out with the tide and reluctant to leave the beach it had caressed with such tenderness.

There was a new peace between them, fragile as spun glass, and neither spoke as Anakin's hands slid away, fearful they would break it.

The anxiety that had unsettled Anakin earlier was forgotten now, the unspoken fear that his desire was one-sided and that he was being used for it. The possibility was still there, his mind warned, but his instincts dismissed it out of hand. That kind of need is real. Honest. You can't fake that.

Even if Obi-Wan planned to use Anakin to kill his master, his longing for him was true, one man for another. It changed everything. It meant Anakin had time to think this through, about how to approach this new side of their... what? Friendship? Could you become friends in just two short days?

That's a question only people who don't have the Force ask, he thought. I trust it more than I do myself.

A spark of hope flickered to life in Anakin's mind as he thought further about the profound longing for companionship he'd sensed during the healing, the craving of a positive emotion like that. It stunned him with its very existence and the slight chance it promised that glimmered all the more for its rarity. Could he be saved somehow? Brought back to the Light?

He smiled at Obi-Wan, a warm, gentle expression as he imagined the possibility of his yellow eyes another color, any color, and Obi-Wan tilted his head, returning the smile with a curious one and lifted eyebrow. "Pleased with yourself?"

"A little."

"Thank you," Obi-Wan said, bowing his head and touching his chest in a small salute. "I think you fixed at least four different things that have been bothering me for some time now."

"Hey, maybe I'll start winning. You'll be too flexible and miss your moves."
Obi-Wan laughed, and Anakin was pleased to hear it. It was like the laugh from his dream, playful and without guile. "Optimistic, aren't you?"

"I am."

"Well, I hate to say it, but our time is up, Anakin."

"Yeah, I thought it might be. I'm actually late, aren't I?" He checked his com and nodded. "Not by too much though. I have to get going. We're leaving for that mission tomorrow."

"One week, it was?" He stood and stretched, sighing in pleasure. "Amateur healer or not, you did well, Anakin. I won't forget it."

"Thanks. Just remember, don't go easy on me."

"Never. I promised. When shall we meet again?"

"Ten days from now?"

Obi-Wan counted in his mind, walking Anakin to the door as he did and handing him his coat, turning out the main lights in the living area and deciding he would get ready for bed after Anakin left. "That would be fine."

"See you then." Anakin looked back at him as if he wanted to say something else, tugging the coat on and pulling the hood up, but only nodded a goodbye and left, tall form retreating down the hall.

Obi-Wan watched him go and closed the door, turning back to the view of the city with the traces of Anakin's healing still a warm pulse in his body.

There was something wrong with the windows, the long strings of jewels passing by broken up by a tall black shape in front of them, and he realized with the cold twitch of instinct someone was standing there when no one else should be in the apartment.

But there was.

His master. Shielded, cloaked, and as invisible in the Force to Obi-Wan as he was to Anakin.

He froze, Maul pinning him into place with nothing more than his harsh, glowing eyes. His master's hands were folded behind his back and in the shadows his head tilted side to side, a snake assessing its prey. "Well, that was... interesting."

Obi-Wan came and knelt before him without speaking, dropping to his knees and head down in deference.

Maul's voice did not change, a low, even timbre that never suggested what might be coming next as it drifted down to him. "I thought the two of you were only coming here when you met. And for the most part I liked what I saw tonight. Very gentle. Nicely done, Arev."

"Thank you, my Master."

"But there was something else. Something rather odd. It would seem you're fighting somewhere... now, where might that be happening? And why?"

A tremor might have passed through Obi-Wan, but it was difficult to tell in the dimness, the faint light spilling in from the back rooms not enough to reach him. "Down in the lower levels. He thinks to fight me until he can beat me, Master, angry because I have always won. He is a fool. I
am using it to create a false sense of comradery with him." He bowed lower, his head almost touching the cool floor and his palms splayed flat against it.

Maul stood there, considering his words and Obi-Wan's bent form before him. "How long before you see him again? Ten days?"

"Yes, my Master."

"Hmm." He lifted his gloved hand, fingers splaying out slowly, and Obi-Wan let out a harsh cry as the Force closed around his throat. "Then I will have to make sure your injuries will be mostly healed in ten days, it would seem." Raising his hand with a small wave, he lifted Obi-Wan from the floor to dangle just above eye level and rammed his fist into his stomach once and then again. Still choking, Obi-Wan cried out as Maul dropped him back to his hands and knees on the ground and walked around to the side of him, picking the perfect spot to begin kicking him.

"Never," he hissed, each word punctuated by the dull weight of his boot driven into Obi-Wan's gut, "try to hide things from me, boy." Growling at the last kick, delivered especially hard, he stood back and pushed Obi-Wan over with his foot.

Obi-Wan gasped incoherently at the ceiling, curled in on himself and choking back tears as he struggled to get his breath back.

Leaning over, resting his hands on his knees, Maul pinned him with his mind in an echo of what he had done so long ago. "I let you keep one secret, my stubborn apprentice. How you got to me. That is the only one. All others are mine. Do you understand?"

"Yes," he coughed, tears burning his vision.

"Good. This little stunt has shortened your time, Arev."

"No… please…"

"You had six months left. Now you have three. Then he's mine." Maul straightened back up and lifted his hood over the horns that circled his head, dropping it down to hide almost his entire face. "Thank me for your lesson tonight."

"Thank you, my Master," came the instant, rasping response, the fear of more pain making Obi-Wan more articulate than he thought possible at that moment. There was the dull thud of boots across tile, and then he was alone in the dark, Anakin's warm touch nothing more than a memory drowning in his pain.

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Chapter End Notes

Dear God my chapters are getting long. I could have broken it up, I guess, but I'm really attached to that 20 total chapter count lol.

Thank you all as always for your kudos and comments! <3 It always brightens my day to get them and hear your thoughts on precious baby Anakin and his dear friends/enemies/what day of the week is it? ;)

Theories too! I love hearing theories on what you think is going on or what will happen. If you guess right, I can't tell you, of course (sorry! spoilers!), but I still love
reading them. XD Have a great week and thanks for reading!

Oh, and if you're on Tumblr feel free to come find me at writegowrite and say hi!

Fireflyfish, you are the Michael to my Phelps as we storm the Temple. Thank you for your help with this monster of a chapter! <3
Anakin and Ahsoka's week-long mission passed in what should have been relative ease: a simple escort mission for a diplomatic team going to talks on a planet long-pledged to the Republic and well behind the front lines of the war. It was a lovely planet, the site of the meeting in a temperate forest that sprawled in lush native blues and violets all around the city they stayed in and the weather that fine balance between cool and cold that made every morning feel crisp and gorgeous.

But Anakin and Ahsoka's moods were out of sync and he was frustrated that the one time he was feeling a little optimistic and slightly less depressed about life, she wasn't.

Anakin didn't bring it up because he didn't dare tell her where the mood came from. Not only that I'm learning to fight Maul, but that I've... well... I think I might have made a friend. And I think maybe I could save him given enough time. Maybe one day, who knows, Obi-Wan could even stand next to me as a Jedi somehow? He'd be an incredible one as talented as he is. This idea pleased him greatly, and he set about ignoring how unlikely it was with the single-mindedness he was famous for in more than one circle.

His sleep had gotten better, too, Anakin noticed. He hadn't had a single nightmare so far this mission.

Ahsoka, on the other hand, was quiet and withdrawn, much surlier than usual and quick to snap when he tried to make an innocent joke or suggest something for them to do in the long hours their assigned delegates were under the protection of the local chieftain's guards. Instead she spent most of her time on her datapad, curled up with it in her room or under the vibrant purple canopy of the trees that lined the stone walkway outside of their rooms.

The fourth day, when he'd jokingly asked if she was slicing into something as he strolled up to her outside and pretended to peek, she'd buried it against her chest and glared at him. "I'm just busy, ok? I have a lot on my mind."

"All right," he said, puzzled at the sharp twinge of fear around her. "Ahsoka, is everything ok with you?"

"Yes. I promise. Just please let me study, ok?"

"Does she know what I'm up to with Obi-Wan and the training? She can't know. I mean, how would she? "Is there anything you want to tell me? You know you can, right?"

"No," she mumbled, not relaxing and clearly waiting for him to leave.

Like any good Master, he backed off, gave her space, and then stole into her room while she was out on her shift standing watch over their delegates. Tired, ready for bed, he pretended to wander into the wrong room and pretended to think he was picking up his datapad and entering his own passcode.

One try and he was in: Master Shaak Ti, gone three years now in the war, was one of Ahsoka's biggest inspirations and heroes. Her name was Ahsoka's password for just about anything.

Anakin crossed his legs as he sat on her bed, unhappy that he'd had to do this. The datapad took a
moment, pulling up the various topics and papers she'd been working on.

There was her Exocultures III essay, and a dozen long trails of notes for her classes, but there was also a whole holocron icon stuffed with thousands of documents that were all strings of numbers that appeared to be bare code. Anakin frowned at it: he wasn't sure where all of this was from, but two words were highlighted red over and over again on random lines as he tapped through a subgroup of pages that had been culled from the mass. "Anakin Skywalker?" he asked the empty room, reading his own name aloud in befuddlement.

What is this? And what is she doing?

He looked at one document, hating the random hodge-podge of code sentient beings wrote compared to the beautiful two-tone simplicity of binary. There were names of spaceports on different planets at the beginning of each line, and as he skimmed over more and more of the endless walls of text he realized these were Jedi Order ship rosters. Daily ones from the Temple docking bay, from what he could tell. One document per day, going back for years, it seemed.

Let's see if I can parse this out inbetween all the garbage. Outbound, to Janmik VII: Anakin Skywalker, Haane Lokai, Nadao Winvaln. The date, about two years ago. Yes. I remember that trip. We were all Knights sent to help out with a siege on that planet.

Ok, so next is Inbound to the Temple from Janmik VII, and the next one should be... yeah. Telladoria II. Outbound and Inbound.

He scrolled through the lengthy streams of code for a minute or two, not really concentrating on them as his curiosity fought his disappointment. Whatever she's doing, there is no way she got this by asking nicely. This had to be pulled directly from the Temple docking bay systems. Only the hangar staff has the codes to that.

Anakin put the datapad back, locking it first before he left to take a long walk, trying to make sense of what his Padawan could possibly be doing. When he had worn the worst of his anger and confusion out, he returned to his room and pulled out a small holocron from his personal items, tugging a cushion from the bed and laying it out on the floor.

Sitting down, placing the holocron in front of him, he clicked it on and sat back, taking a deep breath and trying to focus on the warm sound of his master's voice, gone even longer than Shaak Ti.

The static glow made his master's face softer than it had been in real life, his gentle words low and soothing despite the faint hiss of the tiny speaker and the fact they hadn't been heard when they were supposed to. This holocron had been meant for Anakin's initiation day as a Knight, something they'd thought would happen fairly soon when it was made, but upon Qui-Gon's death on Takodana he had been instantly promoted, the Council declaring no Trials would be necessary given the unfortunate situation.

"Anakin," Qui-Gon said through the eye of the holo directly to him, "today is the day you have become a Knight."

The first time he'd watched this recording, that sentence had made him snap the device off so hard he'd almost broken it, the bacta fresh on his face from the wound Maul had given him and the scent of burning wood from his Master's cremation still fresh and hidden in the folds of his robes. It had been three more months and five more tries before he'd made it all the way through the entire recording.
"I know it has been difficult for you, but you have done it and I am so proud of you. I know life has not been easy here and the fight against attachment was long, but you persevered and have become an example for all of us. Congratulations, Anakin. There are great things in your future, and I am sure that one day you will sit on the Council itself, if not lead it. Do not let regret or doubt into your mind. You are the Chosen One, and you must always remember that. The Council needs you, Anakin. We will all need you one day. Do not be afraid of your destiny. Go forth and bring Light wherever you go. You have certainly brought it to me. Good luck, Padawan. Though I guess I can't call you that, anymore, can I?" A warm chuckle filled the room. "Good luck, Knight Skywalker. Thank you for being my Padawan."

Anakin mouthed the words sometimes, but not today, and reached down to click the holo off and tuck it back inside his bag. 

Master, what do I do about this slicing thing? Why is she doing this?

The idea that she had mentioned something about this before tugged on his mind, but it was gone as soon as it came and he was left with nothing to explain it. I guess I'll have to talk to her about this. Sooner rather than later.

But if I understand this kind of thing right, though, she's already burned the files onto her datapad. It's not like she's actively poking around in the docking bay systems right now.

Maybe we can talk about this after the mission and get it sorted out without anyone knowing about it. The Council would not be pleased at all to hear she's at this sort of thing again.

Settling on that, Anakin leaned back against the bed and gave a long, weary sigh to the ceiling. His life used to be so simple, and now there were so many secrets, so many things to carefully keep track of and lie about. Maul, Arev, and now whatever was going on with his Padawan. It was like walking through a field at midnight, laying out mines as you went, hoping you didn't step on them when you came back in the light of day. He hated it.

As it turned out, the mission finished two days ahead of schedule, and yet again while Anakin was pleased about this, quietly happy to get back and return to training with Obi-Wan, Ahsoka dragged her feet packing up and meeting him at the door to her guest room.

"Do we have to go back so soon? I like it here," she grumbled, falling in next to him as they carried their packs out to the transport. She was obviously tired, dark circles under her eyes and her feet slapping dully along the ground.

"Really? I couldn't tell," Anakin teased, but she only shrugged.

"Busy. Too much work."

He didn't push the issue, easily stealing her bag off her shoulder and adding it to his own. She frowned at first but then tried to smile as she realized what he was doing. "Thanks. You don't have to."

"You look like you're about to fall over."

"I'm just tired, Master."

"Physically or mentally? I mean, this was a nice, easy mission but too much downtime between action makes me restless sometimes. You know?" He took in the waves of indigo leaves dancing in the cool morning air, the peaceful city spread out below the base. "Sometimes you need to be busy."

"Yeah, it's not that. It's... I don't know. Nevermind."
Anakin squeezed her shoulder as they climbed the ramp into their ship. "I'm always here if you want to talk, Snips. Always. You ever need me, just come find me."

"I will, Master. I promise."

When they arrived back at the Temple and had finished making their report, Anakin giving all the details while Ahsoka stood in total and respectful silence, they had been told some surprising news: all Jedi not currently in combat situations were being recalled while the Council considered a new plan of action regarding the Jedi's assistance to the Republic, given the heavy losses the Order had suffered in the past several years.

"This is a delicate time for the Order. We hope, Skywalker, that you will be willing to help us speak in the Senate these coming months," Master Windu had intoned with an even more serious expression than usual.

Anakin had bowed, a little uncertain about this new, very public aspect of being the Chosen One but eager to fulfill his duties as best he could. "Yes, Masters. It would honor me to represent the Order in any way you find suitable."

"Thank you, Skywalker. Thanks to your victories, you are the name and, soon, will be the face of the Jedi to many in the galaxy." The handful of Council members present nodded their agreement as Windu spoke, all of them as grim-looking as he was.

Anakin said nothing to this, willing his thoughts to stay hidden in the lowest reaches of his mind and hoping his silence was mistaken for humility as he considered all of the ways he had failed recently at being the Jedi the Council had raised him to be.

"Because of this you and Padawan Tano will not be sent on any further missions for the foreseeable future. You may pursue meditation or study as you see fit, Skywalker, and you, Padawan, will attend your classes as usual."

Once they had left, Anakin gently told Ahsoka to go get some rest before heading off to his own room, wondering if he could sit her down that evening and have a serious talk with her about whatever she was up to in the Temple computers. Her puzzling anger through their bond during the meeting had been palpable, not directed at him but the sentients around him.

Master, I'm no good at this. I hate telling other people what to do unless it's in a battle, he admitted to himself as he opened the door to his room, set down his pack, and almost stepped on a sealed flimsiplast that had been slid under the door.

It was not the most unusual thing he'd ever seen, the system of Initiate runners and sealed messages a holdover from long-ago days that the Temple still used more as busy work for the Initiates than anything else, but it was odd finding one under his door. The flimsiplast system was used for outsiders who holoed or commed the Temple and wanted to leave messages for a particular Jedi.

Since the Temple did not allow love letters, gushing songs of praise, or offers of marriage to make it past the receiving com workers, feeling it promoted unhealthy levels of emotion, the man with the name Jedi Knight Anakin Skywalker had seen very few of these under his door.

He knelt and picked this one up, noting the date was the day after they'd left. Flipping it to find the
seam to tear it open, he saw the sender, typed out by one of the receiving Padawans, and had to blink and look again to make sure it read what he thought it did.

Arev.

Tearing the thin plastic open, he read the simple words printed inside, and heard Obi-Wan's refined lilt in his mind as he did. "It's been awhile, old friend. Hope you're doing well and everything goes sky-side for you."

Anakin sat down at his desk and read it again, trying to figure out what Obi-Wan was saying here. It was clear he believed Anakin wouldn't see this for several more days. But why would he risk coming the Temple, even with a name no one else knew and likely sent from one of the public coms available around the upper levels?

"Sky-side," he murmured. It was a saying people used, of course, but there was no reason at all for Obi-Wan to send him generic well-wishes. Did he mean the apartment? Am I supposed to go there first when we meet again instead of the training ground? Did something happen?

His issues with Ahsoka forgotten for the moment, Anakin stuffed the note into the pocket inside his tunic, his cloak a wide swirl as he turned and headed back out the door.

He was already in the second public shuttle going toward the apartment when he realized he was still in his Jedi robes and it was the middle of the afternoon. For a moment he considered going back and waiting for the date they'd agreed on, but the five days that would mean chafed at him given his nameless, growing discomfort. Some of it was the new role the Council had thrust upon him, but there was more worry for Obi-Wan and he wanted to confirm with his own eyes that nothing had happened to him while Anakin had been away.

I'm just a Jedi going to visit someone. No one will notice. No one will care, he reassured himself, staring out the window at the undulating spires of buildings along the horizon and listening to the low rumble of the shuttle's airbrakes beneath him. But this might get trickier once I start speaking at the Senate.

By the time he reached the high-level apartment and punched the door chime, he was tapping his fingers impatiently along his hip, hand over his saber under his cloak and the initial unease now so strong he almost expected someone to jump out at him when the door slid open.

"Anakin?" Obi-Wan stood there in simple black, his shock of red hair messy and faded yellow eyes hazy with sleep.

No. Drugs of some kind, the Force told Anakin, showing him ugly swirls of static along the rough edges of his aura. Powerful ones.

Are you all right? Anakin asked through the Force, trying to see past the tumble of pain and surprise and worry that emanated from Obi-Wan.

With some concentration and narrowing of his golden eyes, Obi-Wan's mental shields crawled back up into place as he wordlessly let Anakin in.

Anakin looked around in disbelief as he entered the large living area: the formerly pristine apartment was a mess, the cleaning droids in ugly, dented pieces in one corner and most of the fine glass and ceramic decorations that had dotted the room crushed into powder drifts across tables and the floor where they sat. Empty bottles and glasses and half-eaten dishes of food sat scattered
about, empty vials of whatever it was currently lacing Obi-Wan's veins lying in small drifts around
the room's long bench. Its crushed cushions showed he'd spent a lot of time there in the past few
days.

*Has he been there since I left?* "Are you all right?" Anakin repeated, frustrated and not wanting to
give Obi-Wan time to arrange a lie.

"You're in the right place, but I must say you're a little early, Anakin," Obi-Wan managed, clearly
thinking hard to put all the words together as he moved back to collapse on the pillows. "What, five
days?"

"I couldn't wait when I saw your message. What is this?" He picked up one of the vials and held it
front of Obi-Wan's face.

He received a lop-sided, dazed grin in return, Obi-Wan's voice soft. "Fucking excellent. That's
what that is. I told you, you can get anything you want this high up."

"What is it?" he growled.

"Painkiller," Obi-Wan sighed, lowering his head and trying to find what he wanted to say through
the disjointed echoes of his mind. "Sith kriffing hells, you are stubborn."

"Why painkiller? What happened?"

He reached out but Obi-Wan flinched away. "No. No. You can't see."

Anakin kneeled in front of him and took his shoulder, hard, and his worry and concern flooded
through him to the rocky facade of Obi-Wan's shields, dropping down into that primal sea where
thoughts and memories had no hold in the shifting tides of emotional and physical truths.

*His stomach. Internal bleeding, or there was when it happened.*

*Somedone beat him.*

"Maul," he hissed, almost too late to pull his Force presence back before the hatred that lashed out
landed in Obi-Wan's soul. "He was here? He did this to you?"

"Yes," Obi-Wan said, trying to sit up on the bench with limited success. Anakin watched his
thought process, watched Obi-Wan scramble to find words and put them together in the way that he
wanted.

"Don't lie to me. Tell me all of it."

Obi-Wan fell back and laughed at this, a long and breathless wheeze stopped only when he
clutched at his stomach, and then the smile faded into a grimace. "He found out about you, and us
training. I told him I'm doing it to trick you into thinking we're friends." Rolling onto his side to
face him, Obi-Wan's hand slid to dangle limply over the side as he attempted to gesture with it. "He
doesn't know why we're training. So he can't know where we're training. So I told you to come
here instead when you got back. We'll have to be more careful when we go down there from now
on."

*I cannot be angry. I have to stay calm. I have to stay calm somehow.* "Is he planetside right now?"

Obi-Wan's reserves drained from the last explanation, he had only a few short words left to give.
"No. He left. I think."
"Who healed this? Or tried?" Anakin moved to sit next to him and put his other hand along Obi-Wan's stomach, cautious and trying to be as gentle as he could given the rage boiling inside him. He tried to center himself and started to gather the Force inside himself into as soothing of a flow as he could manage, reminding himself that anger would only dilute whatever healing he could do for him.

"I tried to. I'm afraid I'm not very good at it. You're still in your cloak, you know. Heathen."

"Quiet. Hold still." Anakin closed his eyes, fingers spreading along the smooth fabric of Obi-Wan's shirt, and the first touches of healing sank down, searching out the wound.

Obi-Wan held his breath as the subtle wave of heat pooled in the worst spots of drug-stained agony, letting it out again as Anakin pushed against him a little more with his mind. This was different than the last time he'd healed him: for Anakin was no calm beauty to it, no growing sense of peace between them. There was only the bare need to make sure Obi-Wan was ok and that he would be ok.

They sat together wordlessly as Anakin worked, grateful he'd had such an easy week with the diplomats as more of his own strength slipped away to fill in the gaps of Obi-Wan's body, the black holes where the roots of his pain and the worst damage lived.

When the Force had mostly achieved balance again between them, the tide settling out between their spirits and the most dangerous of Obi-Wan's unseen injuries healed, Anakin withdrew his hand and studied Obi-Wan. "You look like third hell."

"Still better than you," he grinned absently, lost in the beautiful sensation of no longer hurting so badly paired with the drugs, and the sarcasm proof he was still there under all of it.

"No more of that trash."

"Fine," he murmured, suddenly drowsy.

Anakin frowned down at him, blue eyes intent on his. "When was the last time you slept? Really slept?"

"Ah... the night before we trained?"

"Come on." Anakin slid his arm around Obi-Wan's waist and helped him up to walk to what he guessed was his room, no sexual tension at all in the motion as they pressed against each other. For the moment Obi-Wan was a wounded comrade, no different than any of the clones Anakin fought and bled with on the more dangerous missions Ahsoka wasn't allowed on.

Down at the end of the doors leading into the back half of the apartment, Obi-Wan's room was a simple one, with a bed large enough for two, another floor-to-ceiling window making up the back wall the headboard sat against. Anakin threw back the covers and delicately lowered Obi-Wan into the sheets, Obi-Wan's hands reluctantly sliding free from Anakin's shoulders to fall limply to the bed. "What, no shower first?"

"You can do that yourself," Anakin chuckled, pulling the blankets up around him. "Sleep. I'll clean this place up."

"Training..."

"Can wait a few days until you're better. You rest. I'll take care of you."
Obi-Wan opened his mouth to protest, but Anakin watched the desire to do so melt away as the need for rest overtook him, the feeling of being warm and without pain and safe too strong to resist for long.

He sat down at the foot of the bed, watching Obi-Wan's eyes flutter shut and the rise and fall of his chest slow until he was asleep deeply enough he didn't feel Anakin get up from the bed and go to dim the window's opacity down to a flat white setting.

Taking quiet steps to the door, Anakin turned off the lights and shut it behind him. He returned to the living area, sitting down and resting his elbows on his knees, burying his face in his hands and allowing the hundred frantic thoughts scratching away at him to return to his attention.

*Maul knows. He came here. He was right here in this same room, probably on the same night I was.*

*What if he comes back?*

That frightened Anakin. It was one thing to imagine a grand, sweeping duel in some abandoned ruin somewhere in the Outer Rim or even down in the gritty levels he and Obi-Wan were training in, but the fact the monster had been here, sky-side, in a room Anakin had felt safe in rattled him more than he wanted to admit.

*At least we can train every day now that I'll be planetside. Whenever the Temple doesn't need me for anything.*

He looked up, back toward the bedroom where Obi-Wan lay sleeping peacefully, one last doubt pressing in on him. *Do I really believe this is the first Maul has heard of me from Obi-Wan?*

*Admit it. This pretty much confirms what you suspected. Maul wants Obi-Wan to turn you to their side. When he found out Obi-Wan was training you instead, he punished him for it. Obi-Wan's supposed to be seducing you, not training you. Or something like that.*

It was logical, as perfect and sound as the saber at his hip, but it didn't sit right. *Maybe he was supposed to seduce me in the beginning. Maybe that was Maul's plan. But Obi-Wan wants me. He cares about me. I've felt it. Whatever Maul's plan was, it's started going sideways, and he's starting to suspect it.*

*Maybe I've started pulling Obi-Wan toward the Light too much for his liking.* Guilt tugged at Anakin at the idea the beating Obi-Wan had taken could have been his fault, but hope as well. *That would mean there is a chance for him. A way out of all of this.*

*Unless Maul shows up here again.*

Anakin realized with no small amount of irony that the Sith Lord wouldn't actually do that. *Think about it. He won't come. He's letting Obi-Wan do his job, right? As long as you're here, he's doing his job attempting to seduce you. He's safe.*

*I don't want him to get hurt again.* Too many what-ifs and worries coursed through him, restless energy circling inside him and he stood, finally shrugging his cloak off to pile on the bench behind him, and began picking up the remains of the droids. He recognized the distinctive handiwork of a Force rage, their crumpled motors and bent arms familiar to him from far too many incidents of his own.

It took an hour to clean away all of the debris of the room, the work soothing as he sorted and trashed and swept, less exciting than sparring in the training salons but physical work nonetheless.
He had time to make a plan.

He would sleep here with Obi-Wan a couple of days until he was better. The injuries Maul had given Obi-Wan were healing up and his own efforts had sped them along their way, but he’d seen that sort of trauma before in more than one of his clones, if from different sources, and knew Obi-Wan would need help for at least another day or two. The Temple would contact him if they needed him: Knights didn't need permission to leave Temple grounds. So that only left his Padawan.

Anakin commed in and left a message for Ahsoka, who was probably asleep herself, saying that he'd be scarce for a couple of days taking care of some things all of their missions hadn't left time for. The slicing problem briefly passed through his mind, but Anakin had always done better dealing with all his attention focused on one issue at a time, and he pushed it to the back of his mind for now.

It wasn't any easier to lie to her about this than the first time he'd done it, but Anakin's resolve was even stronger this time around. Things are getting complicated, Snips. I want you safe and out of the way. Completely out of the way.

It was late evening before Obi-Wan stirred, the faintest curious touch ghosting across Anakin's mind as he flipped through the holo news on a screen that came down from the ceiling. The Jedi recall was a hot topic, it seemed, which was likely exactly what the Council was counting on.

"We die in your damn war all the time and the only time you really talk about us is when we say we might leave it," Anakin muttered, clicking it off and going back to the far bedroom.

Leaving the lights off, he leaned in the doorway, silhouetted by the soft glow of the hall. "Hey. You awake?"

"Yes," Obi-Wan said, voice rough. He was sitting up, slumped against the headboard, sheets gathered around him in bundles of fabric. "Water, please."

"Sure." Anakin brought him a glass and sat next to him as he offered it, watching him drink some of it and taking it back when he was done to put it on the table next to the bed. "How do you feel?"

"Weak, but better."

"Hungry?"

"A little."

"I ordered in some mild food a couple of hours ago, soups and breads and things. At least, I think I did it right. It showed up and no one asked me for credits. Anyway, I'll get you some."

Obi-Wan nodded, unmoving, watching Anakin in the near dark of the room with a puzzled, tired expression. "Why are you still here?"

"Because no one should suffer alone," he replied, squeezing Obi-Wan's arm before leaving to prepare him a plate.

When he came back a few minutes later he found Obi-Wan's hands pressed to his face and as Anakin turned the lights up brighter his fingertips came away wet. "Thank you," he murmured, taking the plate without looking up and jaw clenched.

"Go slow. Sometimes healing makes people nauseous, from the Force shifting around, I guess?"
Anakin leaned against the wall, giving Obi-Wan and the uncertain tremble in his aura space. "We'll see how well this stays down, and if it does and breakfast does tomorrow you can have that shower you asked for."

"Bucket of cold water over my head?" he asked dryly, speaking to the food on his plate as he took a careful bite.

"Bucket of warm water. Only the finest," Anakin said with a grin, and was happy to see Obi-Wan finally glance up at him with the tiniest smile in return.

"Thank you," he said, and Anakin sensed the warm, grateful pressure of the Force against his mind. Another quick touch, like that of a frightened animal or wary stranger and so different from the mental hugs Ahsoka usually piled on him, but one all the same.

"You're welcome. I'm going to take the other bedroom, so if you need me just reach out like you did a minute ago when I was out there, all right?"

"You're staying?"

"Until you're better, yeah. Long story, but no more missions for a while." He shrugged, gaze shifting away to the night sky. "Want me to bring you anything? Want to go back out to watch some holos or read or something?"

Obi-Wan could only shake his head back and forth, and Anakin pretended not to see him scrub at his eyes as he walked over to the window. "Want this turned back?"

"Yes, please." The bright, beautiful galaxy that was Coruscant at night ghosted back into view, and Anakin leaned against the wall, watching it as Obi-Wan ate.

The growing spark of fondness Anakin felt for him left a hazy, bright mark in his heart as lovely as what spread outside, and Anakin had a sudden flashback to the galaxy he'd seen from the floor of the Separatist ship at the beginning of all of this strangeness, lost in his own waves of pain and delirium. The first time we met and you spoke to me, before I ever knew who you were, I felt this same way. Like I was coming home when I heard your voice.

It has to be the Force. We have to match, somehow.

He studied Obi-Wan, who had set aside the plate and leaned back against the bed, rolling his head to look up at him with those faint gold eyes made gentle with sleep as he faded away again. I know you're better than me, somehow, when it comes to fighting. But I swear I will find a way to protect you.

You don't deserve any of this.

I don't know how you ended up here with those eyes and that leash Maul is holding, but there has to be some way to get you out of it.

Chapter End Notes

Between this fic and "A Walking Shadow", I've written about 25 pages in the last few days to keep up with the update deadline I promised over on my Tumblr. I might go cross-eyed, but it's done!
Hope you like it! Let me know what you think, any theories you have, and thank you so much for all of the love for this story! :D You readers make it all worthwhile! <3
Late at night, in the darkest hours just before sunrise, a new dream came to Anakin, slipping through the black of his mind to rise up in soft, hazy detail that he would only half-remember the next day.

He was standing in a dim, windowless room jammed with strange silhouettes that all smelled of metal and solder, someone's hand on his shoulder and a group gathered around him. The shadowed forms were so much taller than Anakin that he had to look all the way up at them as one barked a command. "Well, come on, nyee, if you can. Do it!"

It was talking to him, but what did it want?

Another slapped him across the face. He snarled, fists curling, but the hand on his shoulder gave a quick, nervous squeeze, warning him against fighting back.

"You lied to us! He can't do anything," the first one said to someone behind him.

"He can! I've seen him!" came the oily, panicked response, punctuated with a hard smack to the back of Anakin's head. "Show them!"

_Silent and still, Anakin. Do not give them what they want,_ he found himself thinking with a fierce determination. The thoughts had a strange echo he couldn't understand: the entire dream did.

The voice behind him spoke again, sniveling, as Anakin glared up at the vague features of the giants all around him. "I swear to you, he can do things. He's worth double what I'm asking!"

"No, he can't. Do you feel anything, Kadae?"

Kadae, apparently the one furthest left to Anakin, shook his head. "Nothing. There's nothing there. Either of them."

"Deal's off," the first voice announced, gesturing around to the others with an indifferent wave of its hand. "Boska. Boss is waiting." It spoke over Anakin's head to whoever was behind him as the large, intimidating shapes began to lumber off. "Don't waste our time again."

As the shadows left, the hand still on his shoulder, Anakin felt a deep sense of relief. He did not want to go with them. He wanted to stay here, even as he felt a dangerous rage building in whoever stood behind him.

That feeling remained long after Anakin awoke from the dream, puzzled and bleary-eyed as the details glowed in sharp relief for only a moment before beginning to fade away. _Stay here. I want to stay here._

Where was here? It took a moment to place his surroundings in the early-morning gloom, to correctly orient himself to the reality of the sheets and the pillow and the endless rivers of light outside in the night sky. _Obi-Wan's apartment._

_He got hurt. I'm taking care of him._
"Am I sure this isn't a dream too?" he asked the ceiling, dazed, as the world hesitantly fell back into place one odd truth at a time. *You're nursing a Sith. Who was more than likely sent to seduce you to the dark side. You're hiding him from the Council and planning to kill his master, and oh, oh yes... in just a few short encounters you've decided that not only is he a friend, a very attractive friend, but you're going to save his very soul and bring it back to the Light. Sure you don't want to add 'End the war.' to the list?

"This is insane," Anakin muttered in a half-hearted nod to logic, no real belief in the statement as he stretched and yawned. He knew it wasn't insane. His entire life he'd followed his instincts, and his instincts told him Obi-Wan meant him no harm. He'd decided in less than a day he liked Ahsoka. Why couldn't that be true for Obi-Wan? Why couldn't he be attracted to him? Why couldn't there be a chance he could save him?

"I am the Chosen One," he said with even less enthusiasm, rolling his eyes and getting up to take a shower in the attached refresher. As the water misted over him, a fancy system of jets and warm streams, he scrubbed some alertness back into himself and went over what he needed to do that day. The Council sent me a message last night about speaking at the Senate in a few days so I'll need to open that and review it. I need to check in with Ahsoka and see how she's doing. And I need to get my meditation in if I can. If Obi-Wan's open to it, maybe we could try it together. I always do better with someone else there.

He sat in the living room as the sun rose, soft light washing in like the sea across the floor, reading through the speech the Council had sent him and starting to memorize it.

It began with a note from Master Koth, one of the seven remaining members of the Council. Anakin shook his head as he saw the old numeric honorific after the Master's name. *Five of our own Council gone in the last year, no time or true masters left to replace them, and the galaxy wonders why we have had enough. "Knight Skywalker, this is the speech we have prepared for you. Please let us know if there is anything you would like to add or anything you are uncomfortable with. While some feel that the prophecy is more of a tradition than a fact, I am not one of them. I, and many others on what is left of the Council, believe that you are the one to save us. While that may be through glory in war, I suspect it may just as strongly be through showing the galaxy what a true Jedi is and bringing more families around to allowing their younglings to join our way of life. The future is in you and your Padawans, not a stale collection of old men and women like us. Thank you and please let us know if there is anything we can do to help you prepare beforehand."

Anakin frowned at the datapad, one he'd found back in the kitchen and cached his files on from his comlink. He'd noticed the lack of Padawans in the halls for years, and the increasingly empty seats at the Council meetings that couldn't be explained away entirely by missions, but hearing it laid out this bare was disturbing.

The speech itself was eloquent and no doubt half-written by Master Mundi and the other half by Grandmaster Yoda. It reminded the Republic of the thousands of years of Jedi service, and of his own service, relying heavily on tales of their victories but adding in some heartbreaking losses to even out the tone, before ending with a vow that the Order would fight on as their brave few allowed.

Anakin didn't like the idea of sitting in a floating pod in the middle of that huge room, almost lecturing the galaxy's leaders on everything the Jedi had done and how little help they had received for it, but he had been chosen and he would do it to the best of his ability.

The sun had crept in long rays across the floor and Anakin had memorized half the speech by the
time Obi-Wan woke, his presence nudging Anakin's mind.

Awake. You?

Yes. Hang on. Anakin erased the speech from the datapad and dropped it back off in the kitchen on his way back through, coming to lean around the open doorway into Obi-Wan's room.

He was sitting up again, leaned against the headboard, eyes closed. "Can I skip breakfast and just have that shower?"

Anakin considered this. "Not hungry?"

"No."

"After the shower, you have to eat something." He came over and helped Obi-Wan sit up and push his legs to swing over the side of the bed, putting his arm around Obi-Wan as they stood together in an awkward mix of limbs. "Come on, old man."

Obi-Wan chuckled, an entire night of rest and the fact Anakin had actually stayed the night clearly lifting his spirits. "How old do you think I am?"

"One or two years older than me?"

"Oh, ancient, then," he grunted as he straightened up with some effort.

"Hideously so," Anakin dead-panned as he helped him into the suite's refresher, a wide space with a nanoscreen separating the standing shower from the long, modern lines of a counter and stool and a separate door that led off to the toilet. "There we are," he said, lowering Obi-Wan as carefully as he could to the seat before taking a few steps over to start the water and click the screen on. "I'll stay right outside. Call me if you need me."

Obi-Wan eyed the shower as if it were on another planet, frowning at the clouds of fog and mist starting to swirl up. "Ah… Is now too early to call?"

"No," Anakin said gently, pleased Obi-Wan wasn't going to try to tough his way through this. You can trust me. "You don't mind?" he asked, motioning between the two of them and then the shower. As handsome as Anakin found Obi-Wan, there was only the slightest awareness of his attraction for Obi-Wan in his thoughts at the moment: this was too close to what life was like with his clones, the absolute lack of privacy normal and expected on longer campaigns and the wounded always cared for, no matter what. The memories of blood and pain, sometimes his own and sometimes others', were more than effective in stripping romance out of the picture, at least for now.

"No, I don't mind. You don't?" Obi-Wan asked, trying to hide his grimace as he gently touched his stomach through his shirt. "We all know everyone looks their sexiest helpless and unable to tend to themselves. I mean, this could be a ploy on my part to make you fall in love with my inability to stand for long periods of time."

"You're clearly feeling better," Anakin smiled, helping Obi-Wan pull his shirt off over his head. He tossed it on the counter and took his own off, adding it to the pile. "Here's a towel. We'll get you in and have you sit on the floor, and I'll sit on the ledge in the back."

When he turned back Obi-Wan had tugged off the rest of his clothes and had the towel on around himself, bent back showing he was tired already. "Sure you want to do this?" Anakin asked, leaning in to check the warmth of the water. It ran hot over his fingers, pleasantly so. "I could put
"No, no. I want to be clean again," Obi-Wan sighed as Anakin came back to stand over him. Anakin remembered the first time they'd trained, just days ago, and how different Obi-Wan had looked then. The two versions were like completely different people, this one more human and less bizarrely perfect. He felt a swell of affection for Obi-Wan again, for this wounded bird still beautiful despite all of its injuries.

"How is it you always beat me? Every time?" he wondered aloud as Obi-Wan clutched his shoulder and Anakin's hands went around his waist. They moved into the shower, Obi-Wan dropping the towel aside before they crossed the barrier and Anakin lowering him to the floor as slowly as he could to sit with his back to Anakin and the main shower jet falling across his chest and lap.

As Anakin sat down just out of reach of the sprays, bare feet comfortable in the hot water that pooled on the tiled floor, Obi-Wan finished pondering his question as he lifted his hands to let the water spill over them and splashed his face. "I can read you, Anakin. You're terribly obvious," he said between his fingers, rubbing at his cheeks and stubble.

"That's a lie. No one else can read me," Anakin said with a shrug, handing Obi-Wan a pod of shampoo over his shoulder and watching as he worked it into his hair, fingers disappearing in a cloud of damp auburn and lather.

"I am a Sith. Have to get in my daily allotment of lies or my eyes might go back." Obi-Wan said, voice wavering as lifting his arms stretched muscles too close to his wounds.

"Do you like it?" Anakin leaned over and started rubbing the shampoo in for him, Obi-Wan's hands falling away into his lap and a soft, thankful sigh escaping into the humid air.

A pleasant eternity later, he remembered as Anakin was washing his hair out in small handfuls of water that he'd asked something. "Do I like what?"

"Being a Sith."

Obi-Wan tried to turn back toward him, but was only able to turn his head, his profile fine and beaded with tiny droplets of mist. "It's not a matter of liking or not liking, Anakin. It's having goals."

Anakin picked up the conditioner and worked the lotion in next, enjoying the feel of Obi-Wan's hair wrapped up in his fingers. When had he ever done this for someone else? "On Niidai II you said your goal was me. That still true?"

"Yes."

"I'm flattered," Anakin said, glad Obi-Wan hadn't laced that with the same sexually-charged smirk he'd gotten the first time this came up. We're beyond that pretense now, right? That you're just interested in sex? "I'm not sure how being a Sith gets you me, though."

"Becoming a Sith kept me alive when I should have died. So you could say it will eventually get me you."

Anakin washed his hands off in the water and started rinsing out Obi-Wan's hair, his hands cupped together as Obi-Wan tilted his head back toward him. I knew it! I knew it wasn't a willing choice! He washed out the last of the conditioner and handed him the soap bottle, appreciating the strong line of Obi-Wan's back as he started to rub some into a lather. "What happened?"
"Nothing I care to talk about," Obi-Wan replied nonchalantly, working the suds along his arms and then up and down his body as best he could sitting on the tile.

Anakin watched him, the elegant line of his shoulders and the scars that traced along them obscured by drifts of white until he leaned forward to wash the soap away. "Any other goals?"

"None that you'd like."

"Are those goals yours or your Master's?" A faint echo of the original tension between them flared to life, the mistrust of Nidai II made lazy by the soothing fall of water and the intimacy of the situation, but still there.

"Both of ours. Unless I'm lying again."

Anakin brushed aside his disappointment at Obi-Wan's response and plunged forward. "When he dies will you still keep them? You'll be the Master, then, right? You could choose not to keep them, couldn't you?"

Obi-Wan canted his head, face unseen, as he continued to wash himself. "It depends, Anakin, on what you do."

There was no trickery here, just weariness as Obi-Wan started to rinse himself off, and his answer was almost lost in the patter of artificial rain drumming on the shower floor.

Thoughtful, Anakin helped pour water over his back and brushed away some extra foam that had gotten caught in his hairline at the nape of his neck. "What do you mean? If I turn? You know that's not going to happen," he said in quiet reproach, fingertips lingering along the strong lines of Obi-Wan's neck as his thumb brushed away the soap.

Obi-Wan only pointed and Anakin reached up to turn the water off, leaving them in a cloud of steam and the gurgle of the last of the water draining away. As Anakin handed him his towel and Obi-Wan tucked it around himself, he mused, "If you are still the Council's man after all of my efforts, then I will happily let you put your blade through me as they will no doubt command you to do."

"What if you become the Council's man? I mean, a Jedi?" Anakin asked with the same aloof air Obi-Wan had just used to discuss his own murder as Anakin helped him back up to sit on the stool again and handed him another towel.

He readied himself for one of Obi-Wan's light, airy laughs at this suggestion, and was stunned at the flash of disgust in Obi-Wan's tone, so much so that he took a step back. "I will never, ever serve the Council. I would kill myself first." At Anakin's startled expression, Obi-Wan seemed to realize what he'd said aloud and looked off into the distance, trying to compose himself.

"Why do you hate them so much?" Anakin ventured, trying and failing to reconcile that hint of spiteful venom with the same vulnerable soul he'd felt through the Force during their first healing session.

Obi-Wan scrubbed the second towel over his head and through his hair, face disappearing beneath the soft folds. When it reappeared again, the towel loosely draped over his shoulders, the flare of rage was gone, smoothed into a field of ice. "They took everything from me."

"The Council?" Anakin shook his head. "I don't understand. What happened? What exactly did they do?"

"Why do you have to know? What makes you think I want to talk about it?" The ice splintered and cracked, white lines of anger shooting through it. "Why don't we talk about one of your horrible
memories? Your master, perhaps?"

"I… I'm sorry," Anakin said as Obi-Wan's retort cut clean through him, draining the blood from his face.

Obi-Wan glowered at the far wall, his jaw clenched and clearly fighting a torrent of words from breaking forth and hurting Anakin further. The ones that finally escaped surprised Anakin. "Don't apologize," he said with a heavy, resigned sigh. "I… shouldn't have said that."

"I just, I don't, I don't understand how you're a Sith. You're not like them. Not at all." Anakin stayed where he was, leaning against the counter, arms folded to stop himself from going over and grabbing Obi-Wan's arm. Why don't you see that?

"I didn't want to be one. That's certainly not what I grew up hoping to be." In his golden eyes, a shade brighter than they usually were, Anakin saw only infinite sadness. "Not at all."

"What did you want to be?" he murmured, eyes not leaving Obi-Wan's.

"Happy," Obi-Wan whispered, half to himself, as he shifted his gaze away. "Happy and safe with the ones I loved." The sorrow in his words and the haze of the Force around him hung as thick as the clouds of mist in the room. "But I think it may be too late for that now."

Sympathy and guilt warring inside him, Anakin could barely resist throwing his arms around him and hugging him as hard as he could. Instead he squeezed his arm, trying to smile for him. "Look, you're tired and I'm a bastard and you need your rest, ok? Come on, let's go."

Obi-Wan said nothing as Anakin slid his arm around him again and lifted him to his feet, lost in thoughts dark enough the edge of them seeped into view through the Force, black auroras suggesting something truly awful Anakin couldn't see. Worried, Anakin racked his mind for something to distract Obi-Wan: the wisps of sadness and hate were frightening to watch, like the end of the world about to come over the horizon in the form of a black sun. Maul or some other Sith must have done this to you, tricked you. The Council would never kill someone! That's what it is, right? You think they killed your family? Your loved ones?

The awful feelings slipping past Obi-Wan's shields left no room for doubt that he had experienced tremendous loss. That's why you're so lonely, isn't it? Why you want me so much?

You want a new family.

"Want to beat me at sabbac?" he asked out of nowhere as they started their slow amble back to Obi-Wan's bed.

The distance in Obi-Wan's eyes faded at the ridiculous suggestion and the worst of the despair retreated back behind his shields. "Beat you at sabbac?" Obi-Wan asked, puzzled, his face so close to Anakin's Anakin could feel his breath on his cheek as they walked. "Are you not any good?"

"Terrible." I don't want to talk about this anymore. Please. Just smile again?

Anakin was rewarded with the tremulous, faint beginnings of one: if he had been further away than right next to Obi-Wan he might not have seen it. "I think there are some cards in the room you slept in." They returned to Obi-Wan's room in silence, and he wordlessly took the folded clothes Anakin handed him from a set of drawers, taking a few deep breaths and calming himself as Anakin stayed close but turned to the view outside.

A long stretch of minutes later, when Obi-Wan gently touched Anakin's back to signal he was both
dressed and ready to talk again, Anakin decided to try to make him smile one more time and banish the last of the setting eclipse that had disturbed him so. "I'm not kidding when I say 'terrible', you know. I once actually got kicked out of a casino-port in the Iwiq system because they thought I was trying to pull something, I lost so many hands in a row. True story. They thought I was running a distraction for someone else."

"Oh, then we should definitely bet," Obi-Wan said, and Anakin was relieved to see he wanted to change the subject too. "Go get the cards and bring them in here."

*I'm sorry I brought all of this up. I shouldn't push you. "What were you thinking of betting?"

"Well, we'll start with our sabers and go from there. I figure I will own everything you have by sundown," Obi-Wan said dryly as Anakin walked out, raising his voice so he'd be able to hear him. "I think I'll start by making you my Padawan-Apprentice."

"I was a terrible Padawan," Anakin called, only half-jokingly, from the other room. "You sure you want me?"

"I'll be a terrible Master. We'll make a good pair."

They both laughed, just a bit, and just enough to break the earlier tension. The rest of the day passed in Anakin losing his saber, ship, the Temple, and half of Coruscant before they moved on to dinner and quiet reading, that delicious friction between their souls slowly finding its way back into the silence between them. Anakin found this little world, with its small demands of food and bed and healing, was the happiest place he'd been in a long time. He wondered how long he could stay here, with Obi-Wan, like this.

But reality intruded and he had to return to the Temple a day later, after Obi-Wan finally started moving around on his own and insisting they meet for practice down in their mock training hall a day or two after Anakin's speech to the Senate.

"Too many holo crews likely to try to catch a word with you the day of," Obi-Wan said their final evening together, the last night of the strange convalescence of a Sith by a Jedi, as he nodded to the muted holoscreen draped down in front of the Coruscant skyline.

Anakin glanced up from the history datapad he'd been reading, embarrassed to find another reel of his highlights splashed across the screen large enough to be a sail. Between dramatic text and far-off shots of battles, they made him seem unreal: the tiny figure almost lost in the chaos of battle leapt and danced and left only destruction behind on his way to victory. Every time, every clip. Win after win.

"They make it look so easy," he said with distaste, lifting his hand to wave across the screen. The channel skipped along to a drama of some sort and he sighed and turned it off with another flick of his fingers, settling back on the cushions of the long bench with his arms spread out. "How about the other Jedi? Or my clones? Where's the feature on them and how many of them die every campaign?"

"Everyone needs a hero, they'd say." Obi-Wan shrugged, nestled into the end of the bench with his chin resting in his hand and his elbow propped atop one of the lush pillows that lined the back of it.

"I'm just doing the best I can. I just want to help people."

Obi-Wan regarded him with a fond smile that sent a low simmer of desire through Anakin's veins. "I know you do, Anakin. It's what makes you who you are."
"You care about me, don't you?" he asked before he could stop himself.

"I do," Obi-Wan said in a hushed, tender way that made his strange eyes seem like a trick of the light rather than their true color. "How could I not after this?" He reached out, sliding his hand over Anakin's. It was a gesture of thanks and a test in slow motion at the same time, the touch a breaking of that one rule Anakin had been so insistent on out in the Tower garden.

Anakin's breath caught in his throat as Obi-Wan's fingers came to rest over his, and without looking away he slowly turned his hand over, so that their palms met in a gentle sweep of heat and the Force.

Obi-Wan's shields were up, as they always were: Anakin barely noticed it anymore, which was why that faint touch of curious hope that blossomed around them both stood out so much. He wasn't letting Anakin in, but he was letting that emotion out. Trust me, the feeling whispered, true and bright and the same as Anakin's as he squeezed Obi-Wan's hand and shifted over to lean in against him, entranced.

I want to kiss him forever, Anakin thought to himself as their lips met again in a blissful smolder and Obi-Wan's hands sank down through his collars to wrap around his waist, holding him close.

Anakin pushed him back slowly, carefully, down into the cushions as his hungry mouth found the flushed skin of Obi-Wan's throat and then his shoulder as he tugged his shirt open, never quite pressing his chest against his, trying hard to remember through his desire Obi-Wan's recently healed injuries. Sinking down slowly over him, doing his best to keep them in mind, he let out a quick, guilty curse when Obi-Wan twitched, and immediately sat back up. "We should stop," he whispered, hating every syllable but knowing it was the right thing to do.

"I… fuck. I don't want to," Obi-Wan sighed, the puff of air teasing Anakin's cheek as he sat up and stole another kiss from him, hands rubbing up and down his arms.

"I don't either, but we should. You're not fully healed." Anakin swallowed and leaned back, not completely out of his space but no longer so close temptation was impossible to resist.

Knowing he was right, Obi-Wan closed his eyes and moaned in frustration. "Damn it," he said, lying back against the cushions, chest a long, gorgeous hint of pale skin in the folds of his opened shirt. "Damn it. Damn it."

The lovely sensation of Obi-Wan's kisses lingered on Anakin's mouth and throat and chest, little promises of future lust. With a stupidly exaggerated grin, Anakin offered, "When you're better?"

Obi-Wan burst out laughing, a sound as beautiful and true as the feeling in the Force had been earlier. "Oh yes. When I'm better."
They shared a smile as loving and intimate as any kiss, the rest of the night passing with a new, fragile layer in the heady, unspoken tension between them.

The day of the speech itself came and went in an unremarkable series of hours spent waiting in one place in the Senate and then being moved to another and then waiting in that place and being moved to another, each new room smaller and smaller like a box slowly closing in on him until there was nothing but empty air around him for what felt like forever in every direction and a bright, hovering light in his eyes as he spoke passionately and forcefully the words the Order had given him to say.

There was nothing in the lines he didn't agree with: the Jedi had fought hard and long for the Republic and would continue to fight as long as they were able and good people were willing to trust the Order with their Force-sensitive children. And no one in the gargantuan cavern of a room missed the subtext of those lines, the subtle reminder that if planets did not send enough children, there would be no Jedi down the line and there would be no mystical defenders of the galactic society they were all part of. The Jedi were dying and needed fresh blood, Initiates and Padawans who could grow up to be the next Jedi Knight Anakin Skywalker. Younglings who could grow up to stop monsters like the Separatist bombers that had cost the galaxy brilliant minds and diplomats like Chancellor Sheev Palpatine and Senator Padme Amidala.

"We Jedi say there is no emotion. That there is only peace. No ignorance, only knowledge. No passion, only serenity. What does this mean? It means that we strive to be better than we were born, that we take our gifts and use them to serve others. We only wish to serve the galaxy, and we will, to our dying breaths. I will. I swear it." He touched his chest, giving a bow, as he spoke out into the crowd.

"But I and the other Jedi that now fight in your war will not live forever. Help us to make sure the Order will live on to serve others. To serve your children. To serve your grandchildren. Help us to keep the Light alive, I beg you. We all stand together in the Light, or we all die alone in the Dark," he ended, the grand chamber trapped in a perfect, crystalline moment of silence before it erupted into a storm of near-deafening applause.

Shaken, pulling back the Force that had rolled out away from him in impassioned drifts, Anakin would have gone on speaking forever if he could have avoided what happened next: the annoying cloud of holodrones and questions, the forest of mics and babbling faces he had to push through to get back out to the speeder the Temple had sent him in. What grated on him most was the incorrect names thrown at him as he flew away, back to the blessed peace of the Temple: "The Chosen!", "Master Skywalker!", "Jedi Anakin!".

I'm just a circus animal to them. Make noise and hope it looks. The vehicle slid into its proper lane, rocking as he corrected for the wind tunnel he dove down into, and he let out a sigh to be pulled out and away by the faint ruffle of wind all around him, trying to soothe his nerves. I really hope that was a one-time assignment.

It wasn't. The Council was so pleased with the Republic's reaction to Anakin's speech they planned for several more to be given over the coming months, with Anakin to stay planetside to rest up and recover in the meanwhile. He listened to their praise and their desire for more appearances with a blank, impassive face and found himself wondering if he could hide somewhere. Somewhere off-world? Way off-world?
From the studiously neutral expression on Ahsoka's face, standing next to him as she was part of the order to remain planetside, she felt the same way.

How you doing, Snips? he asked as they walked out, sending the Force to hug her. Sorry I haven't been around much lately.

I've been better, Master. And it's ok. She found a smile somewhere and put it on for him, though it was clear she was still tense about whatever was bothering her. Where you off to today?

"Oh. Well, I don't know. I thought I could stay here and do some sparring with you?" Talk to me, Snips. Please?

Ahsoka's flush of emotion through the Force, simple and happy surprise, made him feel both relieved and guilty. "That would be really nice, Master. But I'm going to wipe the floor with you."

They fought and joked and smoothed over the hairline crack that had begun to appear in their bond, and he started to feel a little better about Ahsoka and wondered if what he'd found on their last mission was just some sort of stupid thing Padawans did these days. There's no harm in it, after all. Right?

When Anakin met Obi-Wan again for their training the following day, taking a very long and circuitous route to get to the old factory, Obi-Wan met him on the floor with a grand, sweeping bow as he tossed him his practice saber. "Chosen Anakin Jedi Grandmaster! What an honor to have you in my training salon!"

"Oh, don't even start." Anakin caught the handful of metal easily and turned it on, spinning it to point back at Obi-Wan.

"Just warming you up for our duel," he shrugged, settling into a ready stance, clearly ready to forget about the speech himself.

"Trust me, I don't need it," Anakin said, and threw himself at him, embarrassment and frustration and that sweet friction back between them sending him in hard, bone-rattling thrusts and spins against Obi-Wan's matching blade.

What would become routine for the next month followed: Anakin losing the duel, though hits on Obi-Wan starting to happen more and more regularly, and then Obi-Wan working him through the form drills of defending against Juyo and a final freestyle match where Anakin would fight Obi-Wan using the double-bladed staff he'd rigged out of the practice sabers.

Anakin and his pride were both pleased to note he did better at dueling Obi-Wan when he was using his approximation of Maul's weapon. It was only a week and a half into their now six- to eight-hour practices when he found himself several hits into a combination that actually thrust aside Obi-Wan's twin sabers, leaving him wide open for a hit.

Stunned and thrilled, for a split second Anakin thought too much about how good it would feel to finally win and immediately received a boot to the chest, the hard kick shoving him back and erasing his advantage. "Stop thinking!" Obi-Wan grunted, already pursuing him back into the shadows that hung around the edge of their dueling ground and not relenting until he'd beaten him once again.

The low boil their attraction had come to stayed in the background as they trained, the two far too disciplined to consider the factory anywhere but a practice space.

The apartment was a different story, but the first week back at training Obi-Wan waved off Anakin
coming back with him for his half of the bargain, instead staying and talking with him for a bit after training about the after-effects of the speech. "Too many holodrones still about." The second week he changed it to, "I owe you for helping me. You spent plenty of hours with me." The third he simply shrugged and said, "When we have extra time." Which was roughly never, both of them too exhausted from their marathon sessions.

Anakin initially tried to conceal the disappointment he felt, his pangs of need something intense physical training did nothing to discourage. At first he figured Obi-Wan was embarrassed that Anakin had taken care of him, and then the second week that Obi-Wan was embarrassed by their kiss, but by the third week he had started to wonder if something else was going on. "Why don't you want me up there any more?" he asked, trying to sound as casual as he could, during one of their practices.

"I want you training as much as possible. You can make it up to me later," Obi-Wan said matter-of-factly, reaching out to push Anakin's hand higher as their blades hummed, crossed between them once again as they reviewed defensive parries.

"Is Maul coming back?"

Obi-Wan considered this for a moment too long, and Anakin had his answer, one that chilled him all the way through. "When?"

"In roughly two months."

_I will avenge you, Master. I swear._ "Then I need to be ready."

With a grim look made an unearthly green-gold by the sabers resting together between them, Obi-Wan nodded. "Yes. As much as you can."

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When Anakin came back late from another session one month after the Senate speech, the Temple quiet and asleep and no one in the halls as he slipped back toward his room, his comlink buzzed unexpectedly.

Frowning down at it, he realized it was Ahsoka. _Why is she awake at this hour?

He hurried to her door, starting to worry as he realized another two weeks had slipped by with not much more than a few meals and practices together with her. It was hard to think of anything but Maul and the progress he was making and how precious little time they had before Maul returned from wherever. _I have to be ready. I'm only going to have one chance._

His thoughts of Obi-Wan and their deal stopped cold, however, as he knocked on her door and took in the dark circles under her eyes as she wearily stood in her room's doorway and reported that she'd been comming in sick to her classes for the last two days and that she had to talk to him.

"Right now, Master. Please."

Anakin tilted his head, bewildered and concerned as the Force said nothing of physical illness to him. He wordlessly came inside, shutting the door behind him and watching her as she listlessly drifted back to sit on the corner of her narrow bed.
There was a nasty vein of stress and negative emotions that were too layered to easily sort through, but no illness he could see. "Ahsoka, what's going on?" Affection broke through his own side of the Force, wrapping tightly around her in a worried embrace. "Are you in some kind of trouble?"

"No. I don't know. I don't think so, Master."

"Hey, if it's the slicing then it's the slicing. You couldn't have done anything that bad," Anakin said, taking her shoulders in his hands and leaning down close to her. "Is that it, Snips?"

"No. Wait, you remember that?"

"What?"

"That I sliced into the records?"

Anakin blinked. "I asked you to search for two names, right? And you didn't find anything."

"Yeah," Ahsoka nodded, inexplicably saddened by what he had said, staring down at her lap. "I'm just great at people this week, aren't I? I'm not mad you couldn't find Obi-Wan or Arev in the records, Ahsoka. Why would I be? What's wrong with you? What's changed between us? It's not him. There is no possible way you could know about him. So what's changed?"

Anakin looked at Ahsoka and the datapad on the table and back at her, suddenly dizzy. He felt a strange, unreal tug on his mind, like something inside of him snapping and unraveling, setting loose whole, unseen masses to fall aside from his mind like clouds from the sun. 

The sun burst forth into a bright, undeniable fact. "Someone changed my record," he said.

Ahsoka's gaze darted up to him, her fists balled in her lap and the Force surging around her with hope.

"Yes," he continued in an awkward staccato. "You... you... showed me." The glare was beginning to get to him, but he fought through it, pushing back against it, and it fell away with each word, each fragment of memory that came into view. "And I went to the Council."

Ahsoka's hands slid up to cover her mouth and she could only nod, apparently terrified of what might happen next.

Sitting down hard on the floor, Anakin fought to sort through two identical sets of memories that ran parallel in his mind when he thought of that morning. The one on the surface was smooth and slick, hard to get ahold of, like catching reflections. That set said he had gone straight to the hangar bay from his room, and put on his mechsuit, and gotten to work on the ship.

Beneath that, the truth ran along in a cold river of sharp detail:

I went to the Council, and I told them an informant had hinted someone had been in my files. And I told them someone had changed my Homeworld and Master Lineage file and they asked me to wait just outside the Council Room while they discussed the matter. Then they called me back in, and... Master Mundi... he... he raised his hand and everything stopped.

And they- Masters Mundi and Windu- fitted this nice new memory right over the truth, as neatly as a speeder body over the engine. While the rest of them watched.

"They mind-wiped me," Anakin choked out, revulsion turning his stomach at the word, at the
memory of the Masters touching his mind and sliding it around like a puzzle, tearing the fragile seams of new, shallow memories to pull them apart and put new ones in, ignoring his flinch of pain as they forced the edges to line up and roughly stitched it all back together.

He looked up at Ahsoka in stunned disbelief, watching the awful scene happen again in his mind. "Over someone slicing into my record? Over something as small as that? Why would they do that? Why?"

Ahsoka flew off the bed and threw her arms around him, burying her face in his chest and letting out a sob that was loud in the little room. "They did it to me, too!"

"What?" Unable to believe what he'd heard, he pulled her away enough to see her wide eyes filling with tears.

Sniffling, Ahsoka nodded, trying to keep her voice steady. "I... I couldn't believe they'd do that to you. So that afternoon I..." She pointed at a cheap holocron up on her desk, the type Initiates and Padawans often used by the dozen for their studies. "I've been watching that every day since."

Anakin studied the innocuous collection of metal and glass resting on the simple wood table, suddenly afraid of it. "What is that?"

She reached up and tapped it before she buried herself against him again. They sat together, huddled in a tight embrace, as Ahsoka's face popped up into view, relaxed and smiling, the voice slightly distorted and tinny.

"Hey, self. It's me. So if you're watching this you saw the note I wrote that says, 'Hey, you! Watch this holocron.' and that's bad news because it means you don't remember what's on the holocron." Her tiny blue copy shook its head and rolled its eyes. "I can't believe I'm doing this. This is ridiculous. They didn't actually do anything to Master and I'm going to be so embarrassed I even made this thing I'm going to chuck it over the East Wall in the gardens. Ok, self. This is past me, talking to future you. And we're in a lot of trouble if we're talking. Because right after past me makes this holocron, past me is going to go to the Council and say that my Master is acting strange and past me thinks someone snuck in and mind-wiped him so he'd forget going to see them about something that was bothering him." Ahsoka's tiny blue twin pointed left and then right and then left again as she explained, the gestures fuzzy in the holo. "Aaaaaand if past me comes out of the Council room not remembering that I went to go do that, future you is in deep trouble because that means they mind-wiped us too."

The constant hiss of emotions always circling Anakin's heart fell away, leaving only a towering, bloody rage. "They did it to you too. Over just a question?" Of all the things in my life that should not be happening, this is the worst. Not Obi-Wan. Not the training. This. "Uh huh," she whimpered, crying into his tunic. "And I couldn't watch it at first because my head hurt so bad when it got to that last part, but then I was watching you get ready for us to leave on the mission and you turned the same way you turned when you went in the elevator to go up there and I remembered you going and me going. I couldn't tell you because you couldn't remember and it would hurt you if I tried!"

He held her close, burgeoning wrath as black as the void of space at the panic in her voice. "They will answer for why they did this to you." He added on, "To me," as an afterthought, lost in fury at the thought of anyone doing to his Padawan's mind what had been done to his. "I don't care if this is... what? Some deep undercover mission some Jedi is on they're worried about blowing? Some kind of attack they don't want outsiders to find out about? I don't care! Look, Snips, I'll go wake them up right now. Right kriffing now. We'll find out what this is all about."
Stinging and scraping as they went, his memories of that morning knit themselves back together, his subconscious reconnecting with his waking mind and allowing healing to begin. He couldn't believe it, but he had to. It was the truth.

*How could they do that to me? How could they do that to her? For any reason?*

"You can't go to them. They'll just do it again. To both of us. We're alone," she sobbed, all of thepent-up emotion of the last awful days finally releasing in tears and into the Force bond between them. "We're all alone and no one would believe us even if we tried to tell them."

"We might not be," Anakin finally said, mouth a hard line as she sniffled against him. "I know someone who knows how to shield better than anyone I've ever seen. He might be able to help us."

"I… I think this is bigger than someone changing your record. We can't trust any other Jedi, Master."

"He's not a Jedi."

Chapter End Notes

I'm a little late this week, but hope all the pages were worth it. See you next week and THANK YOU for all of the love and comments so far! <3

OH! Looking for more to read? Obikin or AU or Ladyhawke or all of the above fans, check out Fireflyfish's *The Eagle and the Wolf*. Fantasy meets the Force. Love it!
Hello, readers! This chapter ended up becoming such a monster I split it into two!
Everyone had a lot more to say than I realized when I plotted this part out...

The loneliest hours of night sprawled over the Temple complex, reducing the mighty building to just one more silhouette among many and dreams stealing like shadowy wolves through the sleep of those inside.

For once, though, Anakin was not one of them. Exhausted but awake, he sat in the softer of the two chairs in Ahsoka's little room, sunk deep into it with his long legs stretched out as he watched Ahsoka sleep. He strove to collect his thoughts, to pluck some sort of logic out of the tangled mess of his emotions that were as unsettled and anxious as his body was still.

Someone changed my record. Homeworld and Master Lineage. I know why Master Lineage was changed, but not Homeworld. It could have been changed anytime in the last ten years.

Ahsoka had finally agreed to try to get some rest once Anakin had promised two things: one, that he would stay the night in her room so she wouldn't be left alone, and that two, they would go see this non-Jedi he had mentioned first thing in the morning.

I am so sorry I left you alone, Snips. That I didn't push you harder on what was bothering you. Some Master I am, right?

Adrenaline burned out, sleep had come faster than she'd expected, and she didn't even stir as Anakin's bewilderment slipped through their bond before he could pull it back again. When I went to the Council to ask about this, they debated for some time before they called me back in and did... that. He closed his eyes and winced at the memory of other beings not himself skimming the surface of his consciousness, deleting and adding to his recollections, and the flinch of pain that had accompanied it.

This was not something they were ready for, or maybe that they even all agreed on.

He listened to the soft, hollow ticking of the old fashioned chronometer he'd built for her a year ago, imagining the firm, steady rhythm of the sound carrying away a little bit of his venom and disgust with each click. The idea was to purposefully shave away emotions and leave only the truth behind by zeroing on something so mundane the higher mind had no need to track it. It was an old trick Anakin had learned from his master, and it took off the worst of his anger as he examined the memory of that morning once again.

But they did it, or stood by as it was done. All five of the ones who were present: Mundi, Windu, Koth, and the two newest members, Krell and Narsa.

And maybe because of me they were ready when Snips came, and did the same thing to her.

The chrono ticked on and Anakin steered a fresh surge of fury off into its fine, precise sounds,
letting them chop it up and float it away into the Force one second at a time until there was enough calm again he could reasonably consider the next question.

**Why would they hide the fact someone changed my records? Why not just ask us not to tell anyone?**

He felt the warm pull of the chair and the weariness of his muscles, and when the trick with the chrono failed at containing his emotions he attempted to focus on those sensations rather than the confused betrayal he felt. His efforts anchored him within himself enough that Ahsoka only rolled over in her sleep, working her way deeper into the pile of covers she nested in more than slept under.

**After all of my service. Our service. After that speech. They don't trust me?**

**Could they know about Obi-Wan and Maul?**

There was no way they could, he eventually decided, and he set that possibility aside and tried to find another. It bothered him like a droid that wasn't working right even after he'd done all the repairs that should have fixed it, a problem that had no explanation no matter how many circuits he checked and parts he replaced. Anakin had done only a handful of very minor mind-wipes in his four-year field career as a Knight and had hated every second of it. Going into someone's mind, not as a guest or friend invited in for meditation or as a Master teaching a Padawan but as a brazen destroyer, tearing and reshaping and refitting the essence of another sentient being, was loathsome. Even when done in the smallest of ways and even for the arguably right reasons, it repulsed him in a way few other things did.

**Wiping me and Snips for our questions is like using a saber to open a door when the button is right there. Too much force for too little reason.**

**Snips thinks this is bigger than a record change. It has to be. Some kind of huge breach of the Jedi Archives, or some undercover Jedi pretending to be a slicer to impress a client?**

**Some kind of reason to justify- sorry, attempt to justify- their use of it on both of us.** He seethed at the memory of Ahsoka's frightened tears and folded his arms, frowning to himself under the cloak he'd borrowed rather than go back to his own room and leave her alone.

Anakin didn't have a plan for what exactly he was going to do in reaction to this nasty bit of business, but he had his instincts, his oldest friends when fear and rage loomed.

**Like I told her, we'll go to Obi-Wan first thing tomorrow. Maybe he'll be able to help us somehow.**

The lingering guilt that had been building since his first lie to Ahsoka on Nidai II returned with a vengeance, the tiniest black blossom now a lush, bitter fruit heavy on the branch.

**I have to come clean with her. On all of it.** Tonight he had told her nothing about Obi-Wan, not even his name, only that he might be able to help before changing the topic and badgering her into getting some sleep.

**Now I have to tell her about him. That he's a Sith. That I know him because I'm hoping to duel Maul and kill him.**

**How in the kriff do I do that?** He didn't want to disappoint her, and he knew she would be, but he also knew he couldn't pretend Obi-Wan was anything other than he was. **She wanted me away from him after just meeting him on Nidai II, without even talking to him.**

Anakin sighed and stared up at the ceiling, trying to find some way he could tell Ahsoka without
her being angry with him and knowing it was a futile exercise. All roads led to him having to own up to his own betrayal of her trust, which made him feel even worse given what the Council had done, and he tried in vain to find that one last path that would leave her with the knowledge of Obi-Wan without the outrage at Anakin.

She's never spoken with him at all. That's the problem. Or maybe the answer? She's never spoken with him. She's never had the chance to get to know him like I have. Maybe it's some kind of Togruta instinct telling her he's a Sith even if she doesn't know?

He wrapped the cloak around himself tighter.

I have to tell her before we get there. As stressed out as she is, she might start shouting about how he's mind-tricking me somehow and try to put her sabers through him. I don't think Obi-Wan would be in any real danger given how badly I've done against him, but that would be a hell of a way to start his morning.

Despite everything pressing down on him, or perhaps because of it, the image struck Anakin as terribly funny and he had to spare a chuckle for the girl curled up asleep across the room from him. He sent a hint of the affection that suddenly swelled up inside through the Force along with his gratitude. You are so protective of me, Snips. Thank you.

She gave a happy sigh, the mountain of sheets she was tangled in sinking as she relaxed further into sleep.

I wanted her completely away from Obi-Wan and the whole business with Maul, but right now he's no threat to her and the Council is, or might be, the way she feels.

A slight unease set Anakin's nerves on edge at that thought and he added out into the empty room, Well, not threat in a dangerous way, just in a stupid decision sort of way. I trust them, even if I don't always understand their decisions and sometimes find them poorly made. As hurt and infuriated as Anakin was by what they had done, he was sure there was some kind of explanation he didn't know about because he wasn't privy to everything that went on in the Temple and the Republic that touched on Jedi. Now that Ahsoka was asleep and he was close behind her in the race to peaceful slumber, he could reflect on what had happened more objectively.

I know they would tell me their reasons if we could just talk about it, but whatever is going on is so big they're not even risking that. Anakin had harbored anger at the Council before, usually for poor management of the clone troops that inevitably led to more of their deaths than was necessary. But blaming the Council for anything personal, even a shallow mind-wipe performed on his own person, felt forbidden somehow, a line he had never crossed and felt strange even entertaining the notion of.

I'm angry, and I acknowledge that anger, but there has to be a reason. A good one. They know best, right?

Just before he fell asleep, the cloak warm and soft and the chrono ticking ever onward, Anakin wondered if his Master would be proud of him for striving to approach the situation with such measured and thoughtful consideration.

The next morning found the two of them at the street-level of Obi-Wan's apartment, Ahsoka's
everyday clothing attracting no attention from passersby and Anakin's hooded coat allowing him the same luxury of anonymity. It was another mild morning, as they almost all were here on Coruscant, and Anakin hoped the day would go as well as the weather.

Ahsoka had no classes today, as it was students' one rest day per standard week, and she seemed to be feeling a little better given everything that had happened now that she'd had some actual sleep. "So is this the place?" she asked, wide eyes darting around in curiosity. "Nice."

"Yeah, but we're actually going higher." He pointed straight up, still looking at her as she followed with surprise, wondering what exactly to say.

Much like his first chance to interrogate Obi-Wan back on Nidai II, Anakin had watched time run out this morning as she had woken and he had gone back to his room to shower and change. He had floundered about for what to do or say as he washed and dressed, telling his reflection ten different versions of the conversation in the small mirror over the sink.

"'So, Snips,' he told himself, scrubbing at his face with soap and water, '"I… want you to meet someone who will help us.' And then she sees his eyes and sabers him. No.'"

"'Snips, he's a Sith, but he's my Sith. Uh… You'll like him, I promise.' No, that's even worse.'"

"'Snips, I know this looks really bad but I have the upper hand here, ok?' No… I think I actually said those exact words on a mission that went sideways last year. Kriff.'"

Now, out on the street with the hard duracrete of the walkway under his feet and the gentle morning breeze in his hair there was nothing left but to try to tell her. Fortunately, Ahsoka was never shy about asking questions and got the conversation started for him as she gaped up the side of the building as if she'd be able to see him. "Is he rich? Or a diplomat?"

"No. But, Snips?"

"Yeah?"

"You trust me, right?" There. He was on solid ground with that.

"Of course I do. With my life. Literally. Like every other month on our missions," she said in a slow, questioning tone.

"I need you to trust me now. When we meet him, you will be surprised at what you see. Don't... well... don't attack him."

"Attack him? Why would I do that?" She frowned, the unexpectedly strong word leaving a bad taste in her mouth. "Does this have something to do with where you've been sneaking off to for the last month?"

Anakin paused, the words he'd been about to say gone and the morning suddenly much chillier through his coat. "You know about that?"

She shrugged and stepped out of the way as two servant droids strode by to go inside the building, their servos so finely tuned they were as silent as ghosts. "Yeah… well, not at first. I tried to follow you once about a week ago, but you lost me by the third elevator."

He prayed the flush rising up inside did not make it to his face. "Well, I was going to see him."
"Wait a minute," she said, the words drawn out as she examined the awkward smile he gave her. "Is he a... 'friend'?!" Blue eyes growing wide and a smirk of disbelief spreading across her face, Ahsoka laughed. "Are you... are you sleeping with him, Master? And you think I'll be mad about that?"

"No! I mean, I, ah..." The slight warmth on his cheeks already there at nearly being caught by his Padawan blossomed into full heat as a ready answer came to mind. *But I want to sleep with him. Badly.*

"You are!" she said, pointing at his blush and relieved to have something other than the awful cloud of the Council's actions over her head for a moment. "Who is he? How did you meet? When did you have time to meet? What-"

"Look," Anakin interrupted, speech failing him when he tried more than a few words at a time and waving his hand to restart his sentence as she watched with fascination. "He's not a Jedi." Like a mechanic working on the finest wiring, he moved forward with careful, slow steps. "He was forced into becoming something terrible that he doesn't want to be and I think I can help him find his way back to good. So please don't attack him when you see him."

"That made no sense, Master. What is this, a holo drama? Is he a syndicate informant for the Temple or something?" She folded her arms and leaned against the elegant lines of railing that ran along the walkway, waiting to see where this was going.

Out of any real ideas, terrible at putting together words the beautiful way his master once did, Anakin contemplated the idea of letting her just meet him without any further warning, but he knew that wouldn't turn out well, to put it mildly.

So he put them together his own way: blunt and plain and wrong as always, watching them tumble out like rocks in an avalanche. "He's a Sith. An apprentice, anyway. You met him on Nidai II. He offered to train me to kill Maul, who is his master, so I can get revenge for my master's death."

The grin died on her face as his words rolled past her and through her. "What?" It came out more as a dead, flat statement than a word. "He's a Sith? There's a Sith right here on Coruscant? And you made a deal with him instead of telling the Coun-" Her shocked questions faded away as she aligned the possible answers with the Council's recent behavior. "Oh."

"Exactly," Anakin said, trying to stay calm and contrite as he watched her spirit flicker with emotion and her mind race, each idea and realization written across her young features at startling speed. "I wanted to handle this myself. I knew it was wrong to get revenge, but I wanted it." By the end he was speaking to his boots and the ground beneath him, eyes trained on a single, solitary crack winding its way through the duracrete. "I still want it, and I don't want to drag you into it. I know that wouldn't turn out well, to put it mildly.

Her shock bright as a supernova in the Force, Ahsoka suddenly wrapped her arms around him for a hug, startling him out of his guilty reverie. "The only one in danger is this jal'ra when I get ahold of him," she growled, stepping back and patting the sabers at her hips.

Anakin could only blink at her, the warmth of her touch unbelievable given what he'd just confessed to. *She's angry with him? Not me?* He'd heard the occasional Togruta word from her before but he was certain he didn't want to ask what this one meant.

"I know you miss Master Jinn," she nodded, words briefly gentle before her tone hardened into steel as she tilted her chin up to track the facade of the building rising up before them. "And he's
taking advantage of that. Where is he? Which floor?"

Anakin held his hands out, trying to calm her. "Snips, he means me no harm. I swear. And you'll be safe too as my Padawan, I'm sure of it. He doesn't hurt people for no reason."

"A Sith that doesn't hurt people?" She fixed him with narrowed eyes, as cold and shrewd as he'd ever seen her as the ramifications of what Anakin had said fully hit her. "So he's training you to kill Maul, you said? Darth Maul? The Darth Maul that's been picking off Jedi for years? Isn't that nice? What a selfless thing for him to do! Sending you into danger with no risk to himself!" Stalking into the building, past elegant plantings and across hand-carved stone tiling, she pointed at the fancy row of gilded elevators and glared back at him, fury burning through the Force. "Tell me where or I get off at every floor until I find him."

*She's scared. For me.* Anakin wanted to hug her, but that seemed inadvisable at the moment. "Give me your sabers and I'll take us there."

"I don't need a lightsaber to kill him," Ahsoka declared, but she kept her hands over her hips as the first elevator sensed people waiting and began ticking down, a car coming their way, and Anakin didn't push that point any further.

"I need him, Snips. I need him to teach me how to fight Maul."

"And you really think he'll do that?"

"He's been nothing but kind to me. I can sense he means it. He's not completely gone, Ahsoka. I think he could come back to the Light. He didn't choose to be a Sith. It was forced on him."

The first, there and then gone, hint of hesitation flickered across her eyes. "It was forced on him?"

"Yes. I don't know the details but something horrible happened to him. I think someone killed his family and he thinks the Council did it." It felt wrong to be discussing Obi-Wan's most intimate details with Ahsoka like this, out in the open even though the lobby was empty. "Please just believe me he is not what you think of when you think of a Sith."

"I trust you, Master. You know I do. But he could be mind-tricking you or some other kind of Sith thing." She threw her hands up in exasperation. "If... If I decide he's not immediately dangerous I won't kill him, I guess, if you're so sure. But this is a bad idea. A really bad idea, and you should stay away from him at the very, very least." Every point was made with a fingertip waving in Anakin's face, every stab into the air filling in for what she really wanted to do, which was grab him by the shoulders and shake some sense into him. "Even if he doesn't mean you any harm right now, it's a bad idea all the way around to have anything to do with a Sith."

"I know. I know it doesn't make any sense. But please, trust me. I trust him. And if it's a mistake, I'll just have to pay for it later. It's my choice and I'll do it alone."

"Like I'm going to let you do anything this stupid alone," she huffed, folding her arms and watching as the elevator slowed and opened before them. "You are in so much trouble."

Anakin could only nod as they got on, thankful beyond words at the deep, loving concern threaded in with her anger. As the doors slid shut and he pressed the correct key, he felt a strange sense of unreality at Ahsoka riding in the same elevator he had countless times on his way back from training. "Thank you for being here."

"Can't leave you alone, Master. You need me," she said, punching him in the arm with a mix of frustration and fondness.
"I know I do. Thank you."

She grunted, but he was relieved to see her thumbs slide off of the pommel of her sabers as the door opened to the light smell of fresh flowers in vases and the long hall that Obi-Wan's door was at the end of.

When the door chime rang softly and unobtrusively through the apartment, Obi-Wan was already awake and showered, just settling in for a deep stretch of meditation out on the warm, sun-drenched balcony that lined the entire face of the unit. He opened one yellow eye and then the other, puzzled and cautious as he stood and stretched, tugging his tunic on over his pants.

Reaching out through the Force, just enough push to his thoughts to send it out past him, he was surprised to sense Anakin and someone else who felt angry and familiar but not nearly powerful enough or cold enough to be his own Master.

_Another Jedi? Did they find out about us somehow?_

Walking back into the apartment, eyes never leaving the door and wondering how much charge the speeder had in it if he needed to make a quick exit, he held out his hand and drew his saber across the room to his palm. It landed in a cold, heavy thunk of metal and he held it down to his side, out of sight, as he opened the door with his other hand.

He found only Anakin, wearing the civilian clothes he often wore to come meet him and giving him a strained, concerned attempt at a smile. "Good morning."

"Anakin?" he asked slowly and on edge, and then the answer leaned around Anakin's broad shoulders into view with wide eyes and a gaping mouth.

"They really are yellow!"

"I see Togruta are not colorblind," he said crisply before turning meaningfully to Anakin, the difference in his expression only that between shade and sun in the dead of winter. "What does she know about me, Anakin, and why have you brought her here?"

Stunned at the flinty tone directed at him, Anakin wasn't fast enough to answer before Ahsoka jumped in, still safely tucked behind the wall of his shoulders and coat. "You're Maul's apprentice and you claim you can train Master to kill him."

Obi-Wan pondered this, examining her warily before he answered, his hand dropping back to a table to put his saber down before they noticed. "I can and I am doing so. Darth Arev, my dear." At Anakin's confused stare he rolled his eyes and added, "Obi-Wan is my first name, though I usually don't give it out so freely." He gave an elegant bow as if flourishing a cloak and straightened up to his full height, spine made of stiff, unforgiving ice.

"I'm Ahsoka Tano." Ahsoka stole a look at Anakin, remembering the names he'd requested she check on. _Was that before you found all this trust in him, Master?_ she wondered to herself.

Anakin began to wonder how overly optimistic he'd been in imagining this first encounter between his dearest friend and his newest one as Obi-Wan eyed him with no more satisfaction than he did Ahsoka. "Now on to my second question. Why are you both here?" There was no mistaking the
"We need your help," Anakin said, shutting the door behind him as Obi-Wan stepped aside and they followed him into the living room. The sun hadn't reached inside yet, and the space sat in cool shadows and the light, earthy scent of hot tea.

"Sit, both of you," he said, gesturing with a flick of his hand to the bench and seats scattered about as he picked up a tray with a pot and cup on it to take it back into the kitchen. "Tea, Ahsoka? I'll make more."

"Yes, please." Ahsoka took the seat nearest the window, wanting to be polite but still staring at him like she couldn't believe he was there. "Sith drink tea?"

"Snips," Anakin hissed, anxious enough as it was, but Obi-Wan only gave her an unamused nod before addressing Anakin.

"Tea?"

"Yes, please. Thank you."

Obi-Wan continued off into the kitchen, what Anakin had watched Obi-Wan do before already happening. Any messy, uncontrollable emotions were being ruthlessly swept away, down, out of sight and when he came back a mask of cool, impassive calm would be in place. The willpower it had to take to resist shouting at Anakin about the risk he'd taken telling Ahsoka about all of this, to not throw them both out, was impressive and made Anakin feel awful as it dawned on him that just as Ahsoka didn't know how much he trusted Obi-Wan, Obi-Wan had no idea how much he trusted Ahsoka.

"You can trust her. I promise. She won't tell anyone."

Ahsoka said nothing to this as she tried to reconcile the strange blackness emanating from Obi-Wan with Anakin's fierce defense of him as he left the room. "Master, he's not normal," she whispered as quietly as she could once they heard the clink of dishes.

"I know. But he has a chance to be," he murmured with such sadness and longing she reached over and patted his back. Oh, Master... you have it bad. Really bad.

A few minutes later Obi-Wan returned with the tray and set three cups down along the low table in front of them, the soft click on ceramic on real wood before setting the tray aside. He walked over to lean with his back against the window, leaving a healthy space between the three of them, Anakin and Ahsoka on one side and him on the other. Framed by steel and sky, he folded his arms and listened to them both tell the story of how they had come to be there.

Figuring things were tense enough, Anakin skipped the beginning part where he'd asked Ahsoka to search for the two names Obi-Wan and Arev. "She was poking around in my and her Temple files and saw mine had been altered. The Homeworld entry had been altered, or changed."

"'Poking around'? Slicing? How deep did you go?" Obi-Wan said with a raised eyebrow.

"Top-level only. Summary stuff. I can't get any further down anymore now that they've tightened all that up a couple of years back." She lifted the warm cup in front of her and drank a little, the tea too bitter for her taste but the flavor giving her something to focus on other than her nervous energy.

"Hmm. And something had been done to that part? The 'Homeworld' part?"
"Yeah. So she told me about it and I went to the Council and they… they mind-wiped me." Anakin shook his head, dropping his head down toward the floor and away from Obi-Wan's piercing gaze now brought to bear on him. "They did. It really happened."

"Oh, I believe you." He was as invisible in the Force as he always was, but his tone left no doubt as to his feelings on the matter.

He's angry. At them. Furious, Anakin realized with something bordering happiness despite the situation. He wants to protect me.

Ahsoka sat the tea down and pointed at Anakin and back to herself, glad Obi-Wan's strange golden eyes stayed on Anakin. "So then I saw he couldn't remember going to ask about the Homeworld thing, and I couldn't believe the Council would do that, so I made a holo."

"You did what?" Obi-Wan asked, losing the thread of the story and glancing over at her.

"I recorded myself saying what happened so if they mind-wiped me too I'd know it."

He shifted to his other foot, still leaning against the glass, but Anakin saw a newfound hint of respect in the raise of his eyebrows. "That was clever of you. But I must ask, didn't it hurt when you played the recording? How did you watch it?"

"Yeah, I couldn't watch it, so I didn't know what had happened but I knew it was something bad. I only remembered later because Master turned the same way he'd turned into the elevator to go up and see the Council and the mind-wipe suddenly, uh, broke apart. It was, well, like dust blowing away from glass, if I had to try to describe it. It's not there and then it is. And it hurts when it comes back."

"So the Council mind-wiped the both of you to make you forget simply asking about the fact Anakin's file was altered." Anakin watched as Obi-Wan valiantly resisted making any pointed observations about the Council, just as aware as he was of the fragile peace in the room.

"I know, it doesn't make any sense," Anakin complained, looking to Ahsoka and back to Obi-Wan as he played with the edge of his own cup, tracing his finger over the fine line of it. "We were hoping you could help us somehow. Snips thinks they might mind-wipe us again, and I don't think they would, but…"

"But?..." Obi-Wan repeated, canting his head.

"I don't care what reason they have for it. I don't want that happening to me ever again. It felt wrong."

"Yeah," Ahsoka nodded, hugging Anakin tight at the memory of it and the echo of disgust that rolled off of him. "'Wrong' is a good word for it."

He hugged her back as he regarded Obi-Wan, who remained against the window, out of reach. "Your shields are the best I've ever seen, Obi-Wan. Is there any way to stop a mind-wipe? To keep people out of your head so they can't do that?"

Obi-Wan examined them both, considered Ahsoka's arms tight around Anakin, took in the wry smile he gave her as she added, "I don't want them touching him again. He's my Master. No one should hurt him. Ever."

Obi-Wan was deciding something, unseen pieces moving together to form a picture Anakin could only guess at. "You are a good Padawan, Ahsoka Tano." And there it was: the first crack in the
frost between them. "I don't want them touching him either. I'm not very fond of the Council, you see."

"Did they mind-wipe you too?" Ahsoka asked before Anakin nudged her. *Snips, stop it!*

*Sorry!*

"No," he said calmly, surprising Anakin with his straightforwardness given how sensitive this particular topic was.

Not wanting to risk any further questions in that direction, he steered the topic back to their reason for coming. "So there's something we can learn to stop this from happening again? Something you can teach us?"

Obi-Wan came to take his tea and walked back and forth in front of the skyline outside several times, the slow, deliberate steps of someone working through a problem as he cradled the cup in one hand between sips. "I believe I can," he finally said. "If you can learn the basics of the shielding technique I use, it should keep out mind-wipes. Not the whole of the Council, but a mind-wipe created by one or two people. I believe I can teach you that."

"Will you really teach us both?" Ahsoka inquired as nicely as she could. "I mean, I'm not trying to be rude because you're really polite for a Sith, or anyone really, but what's the cost? There's always a cost."

Obi-Wan gave her a crooked grin and bow. "You agree not to murder me at first opportunity, my dear."

Anakin held his breath as she pondered the offer for a while before consenting. *Deal.*

"I am so very glad to hear it," Obi-Wan said as Anakin let the air out in a long, relieved sigh. "Are you two free for the day, I am assuming?"

"Yes."

"Then let's get started. I can guarantee you'll learn my type of shielding learn faster than my Master did." He finished his cup and put it back down, coming to sit down on the other side of Anakin. It felt good to have Obi-Wan that close again, closer than he'd been other than in training for quite some time now.

"Wait, he didn't teach you? You taught him?" Ahsoka pointed out, Anakin as surprised as she was.

"I came to him with the skill already acquired, yes."

Anakin wondered just unimaginably hard Obi-Wan's life had been to produce a young man capable of shielding like he could before ever even meeting a Sith. A question occurred to him, one he had to know the answer to even if it was the same sort of thing he'd scolded Ahsoka for just a few minutes ago. "Were you... were you a Jedi?" he asked, praying it wouldn't bring the ice of Obi-Wan's temper back.

Obi-Wan only smirked, no humor in the expression, and patted his leg. "Oh, no. I was never a Jedi, Anakin." He stood up and brushed his tunic off, indicating the balcony outside with an elegant sweep of his hand. "Let's begin."

Chapter End Notes
Remember, I split this chapter into two parts so while I recommend a break if you want you can go ahead and read it as well while you're waiting for the next update. :)

As always, a big thank you for all of the questions, thoughts, and comments! <3 I hope you're enjoying the story so far and am having so much fun with these poor, angsty babies. Fireflyfish, thank you so much for your help, my precious Jedi baby! :D

About updates, since a few people have asked: Ideally I shoot for once-a-week updates, but now that work is in full swing it's 7-10 days. So the earliest I'll have the next next chapter up is next Saturday, but more likely Tuesday.

Oh! My fic rec for this week is laventadorn's The Light You Leave Behind. Her writing is visceral and beautiful and I love it!

Thanks again! Come find me on Tumblr if you're over there and want lots of Star Wars and random writing posts. I'm at writegowrite. :)
A short while later they were back outside where Obi-Wan had started his morning, seated on low cushions beneath a blue sky with the district spread before them. The speeder floated in its bay down at the end, a low railing and an invisible nanoshield separating the three of them from the winds and noise of the traffic moving along above and below them in the distance. Like all quality apartments, the shield could be adjusted a certain amount, and Obi-Wan had set it down to let through a faint hum of noise and drift of wind that caught the curls at the base of Anakin's neck and tugged on them.

It was a beautiful day, and even Ahsoka seemed a bit calmer and more settled out here: she only studied Obi-Wan as he settled in.

"Has the Temple taught you any kind of shielding?" he began, hands resting in his lap.

"Some. It's part of one of our classes," Anakin said. "But it's meant to keep people from prying. It's nothing like what you can do, just disappearing as if you weren't Force-sensitive at all."

Obi-Wan nodded, as remote and impassive as they were when they were directing Anakin's blade during practice. "It's a reactionary technique, responding to stimuli. You wait until the storm comes and then try to build a house to save yourself from the storm. I would imagine the only real practice you get is when you and the other Padawans try to read each other's minds during the class, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Ahsoka shrugged. "They don't like us trying it on each other even just outside of class."

"Well, even with more practice it wouldn't matter. My technique is very different from what you learned. It doesn't come from a place of fear, from a place of antagonism and fighting against an outer force. That's where they're all wrong. That's not how you do it." He stopped and steepled his fingers, peering over them at Anakin and Ahsoka as he decided how to put it best.

"The truth is, my technique begins with the desire to protect someone. The more you care about them, the better and more effective it will be."

He sat back and glanced away as Anakin blinked, and Ahsoka opened her mouth and closed it again, resisting the urge to ask the obvious question about how the idea of Sith and caring didn't usually go together.

Staring off at a large holoscreen floating by between two buildings, gazing through it rather than at it, he continued, "My Master didn't follow any better at first. To shield my way, you start by learning not how to keep others out of your own mind, but to hide away and shield someone else's mind. Keeping someone 'in' is much harder than keeping others out."

"I still don't know what you mean," Anakin admitted after trying to puzzle it out on his own, running his hand through his hair in embarassment.

Obi-Wan drew his attention back to them and the distant look in his eyes sharpened back to normal. "Anakin, you are quite close to Ahsoka, I can tell. Are you not?"

"Yeah," he replied without hesitation. "She's the best Padawan I could ask for."
"Nah," Ahsoka mumbled, but smiled a little and picked at the corner of her pillow.

Obi-Wan gestured between the two of them. "Imagine her soul were a candle and you were sitting in the dark with it. If someone came looking for her, someone who meant her grave harm, could you build a shield quickly enough to hide every bit of the glow she gave off? Could you seal up all the fine cracks and holes so well and so fast the room would be just as dark as if no one were there?"

"I see… But wait," he said as Ahsoka frowned too. "You always need two people?"

"In the beginning, while you're learning. You have to trust someone enough to let them inside, to give you that flame to protect. Then you practice building around it. When you have a handle on how it's done, how your mind shapes the shield, you can do it alone for yourself."

"This sounds so vague," Anakin reluctantly answered, doing his best not to sound disappointed.

"I learned by chance when I was a young child, half out of love and half of it protectiveness for someone dear to me. It sounds vague because it is. I learned on instinct." Obi-Wan waved his hand as if to brush away their concerns. "Believe me, if my Master could learn, you two definitely can."

"So what do you mean 'let inside'? Like meditating together?" This, at least, was good news for Anakin. He hated meditating alone if he could avoid it. The idea of working with another person to learn this shielding technique was a relief to him: he could never find that perfect silence everyone at the Temple always talked about. It felt like he was always out of focus, always blurry when it came to that pinpoint of the spirit the masters all taught was the goal of meditation.

Obi-Wan weighed the idea and found it satisfactory. "Like that, yes, but more so. Allowing someone’s consciousness inside your mind to mix with yours as much as possible. You can't read each other's minds, but you get flashes and senses of that person and after enough practice you may even briefly feel like the same being. Once that level of a connection is made, the flashes or senses of the person, you start creating the shields around both of you."

Ahsoka raised her hand like she was in class, not even realizing she was doing it.

"Yes?" Obi-Wan said with a lift of his eyebrow.

"You did that with Maul?"

He nodded, golden eyes darting to Anakin's shocked expression and back to her again. "It took him months to agree to it. He thought I was going to try to kill him. But, in the end, he wanted to know how so that he could conduct certain affairs without his own master sensing his presence. So he agreed."

"And so he learned how, and that's how he became the master," Anakin finished for him, not wanting to talk about the Sith Lord any more than he had to. Especially if it involved something like this. The idea of Maul and Obi-Wan sharing a meditation that strong unnerved him enough he felt it all the way down in his bones. How much of the dark side could creep across a link that deep?

"So he would let you into his mind, and then practice building around you until he learned it?" Ahsoka chimed in, bewildered. "Why didn't you try to kill him? You had so many chances?"

Anakin was not pleased to see a hint of defensiveness in the line of his shoulders as he sat up straighter. "I needed him to teach me. I needed him to get the revenge I seek."
"The Council," she offered, shifting her gaze to Anakin for confirmation and getting it in the smallest of nods.

"Yes, the Council." Obi-Wan gave a Anakin a reassuring nod as he sensed his worry. "But I digress. Let's have Anakin try first, letting Ahsoka in."

Ahsoka studied Anakin and Obi-Wan with some apprehension. "So… you said we won't be able to read each other's minds, right?"

"No. Sometimes there will be an image or a feeling, but at that level it's primal more than anything else. The true essence of a person."

She considered this, looking out over the undulating wave of buildings across from them, stretching out to the horizon. "Ok, good. Because I really do not want to see you two having sex."

Obi-Wan laughed and laughed as Anakin blushed and sputtered even as he loved the surprised, happy sound of it. This was progress if she was willing to make jokes, and Anakin would be the butt of every one of them if it helped ease the tension between her and Obi-Wan.

When he had calmed again, still smiling a bit, he cleared his throat and reached out to rest his hand on Anakin's knee. "You need to relax completely. Drop all of your shielding, all of your fears and doubts, and open your mind to hers so that she can come inside. With the two of you and your bond, if this takes more than an hour I'll be surprised."

"I trust her completely," Anakin said, resting his hand on Ahsoka's shoulder and closing his eyes. "Just give me a little time to get rid of this embarrassment someone put here."

Ahsoka did the same in a slow flutter of lashes and with a wry smile. "That's what I'm here for, Master."

_They are so hopeful, _Obi-Wan noted with a bitter, jealous pang. _So sure of the fact good will win in the end._ Long minutes passed without any change, their breathing slow and regular, the calm of their meditation stilling the last unpleasantness left in the air between the three of them. They were almost to the hour Obi-Wan had guessed at when the two frowned almost in unison and drew their brows together as if squinting against a sun behind their eyes.

"There," Anakin murmured almost incoherently as Ahsoka remained silent, both of them unable to find the words to express what they were feeling. "She's... here..." he said, a note of frustration in his voice at his inability to describe it any further than that.

"Well done, both of you," Obi-Wan nodded, keeping his voice calm and low so as not to disturb their concentration. "Now, hide her from me."

Anakin frowned, and the first weak clouds slid over the sun of her Force-presence and the burned away just as quickly. More came and went, never lasting any longer than a second or two, until a sweat stood out on Anakin's brow. "This is harder than I thought."

"Orders of magnitude greater and of a different kind than the type of shielding you learned. And the stronger the person you're hiding is in the Force, the stronger you have to become to hide them."

"Should I be doing anything?" Ahsoka asked, voice quiet and calm as Anakin continued without much success.

"Actually, you can be afraid if you like. It might jolt Anakin into better results," Obi-Wan offered
without sarcasm, fascinated by how quickly they had reached this stage.

"That sounds really creepy. No offense."

"I could make it more so." He glanced at Anakin, who was still holding steady and pressing a few more shadows over Ahsoka's aura, and continued in a casual tone, "Imagine my Master has just come into this apartment, but hasn't realized Ahsoka is here yet."

A massive cloud, like a storm of black dust, shot up haphazardly and dulled her presence more than half.

"Better."

"Not funny," Anakin grunted from the depths of his trance.

"I don't mean it to be. You did better. Come back out of it."

Like swimmers making their way back to the surface, it took some time for Anakin and Ahsoka to find their way fully back to the waking world and Obi-Wan's seated form across from them. Anakin shook his head and rubbed at his temples as Ahsoka leaned over to hug him. "You ok?"

"Yeah, it's just harder than I thought."

"Now, Ahsoka, I don't recommend you let Anakin in. He's incredibly strong in the Force."

"Yeah," she concurred with a yawn, standing up to stretch and helping Anakin up to do the same. "There's an understatement."

Obi-Wan remained where he was. "So you'll practice with me. First I'll let you in, if we can get that to work. The next time we meet we can try the other way."

Ahsoka came out of the downward stretch she'd been in with a start, silka braids swinging against her lekku. "You're going to let me in? No… wait. Did I hear you right?"

"This is not going to work if you don't trust me," Obi-Wan said, pointing between the three of them. "I had over a month to prove to Anakin I meant him no harm. We don't have that luxury of time anymore."

"We don't?" she repeated, not liking the grim line of Obi-Wan's mouth.

"No," Anakin agreed, understanding what he meant with a twist in his stomach. "We have, what, under two months before Maul comes back?"

"Yes, and I want you two knowing how to do this in case my Master figures things out ahead of schedule and kills me for it." Anakin hated more than almost anything else the nonchalant way Obi-Wan always discussed his own death, as if it were pre-ordained and planned out for the way others marked name days or wedding anniversaries. It was clearly a topic he had considered at length. "I don't wish either of you left at the laughable mercies of the Council."

"But I could really… uh… mess you up if I wanted to. Or if I make a mistake." She looked at Anakin and then back at Obi-Wan, incredulous. "I mean, I'm just a Padawan. And I get angry a lot. Ask my Master. You don't want me in there."

"Anakin trusts you. So I will try to do the same." With a nod of his head to Anakin, he turned back to her. "You need me to teach you. And hopefully my tea did not offend you that much earlier."
A new hesitation overcame her: for all of her unease with this devil from Temple lore come to life before her, Ahsoka didn't want to actually hurt the person within that shroud Anakin said he'd been trapped in against his will. She watched him settle in and close his own eyes and hesitantly sat down again on the firm plane of her own pillow. "Fine, I guess. Let's do this." She scooted over to sit closer to him, and he reached out to let his hand fall atop her shoulder, fingers pale against the warm hue of her skin.

At first there was only the heat of the sun, and the faint wind brushing against her montrals and face, and then as she sank deeper into meditation time began to stretch as it often did into muted sensations and random thoughts that came and went in short-lived sparks until even those faded away. There was only the faintest realization she was now in shadow when the invisible doors opened in the presence that loomed over her, and her soul drifted inside, called in by a soft feeling of welcome telling her to come inside.

Inside, if there was an inside because now eternity stretched out all around her in every direction, was a single thunderhead, a towering mass of grey and black so tall it seemed to climb up forever. Her spirit took it in without sight and reached out without hands and suddenly she was in the center of it, lost in howling winds and bleak shadows.

There was something else here, hidden in the heart of it all, and as she watched the wisps of cloud battered about by the storm all around her she caught a glimpse of it. Something gold and precious and impossible: a sun rising in the middle of a storm, its rays fighting against the darkness that surrounded it on all sides.

Anakin. He loves Anakin, her mind registered with great effort, fighting against the wordless, mindless swirl of instincts and emotions here: hate and anger raging against that tiny, small sun dwarfed by the storm that encircled it but as luminescent as a true star.

He will never hurt him. Ever.

Anakin had turned away to check the time on a chrono that hung in the living room, marking the third hour they had sat in silence, and as he looked back Ahsoka vanished from the Force, swallowed whole and perfectly by the shielding Obi-Wan built around her.

It was unsettling, staring directly at Ahsoka but not feeling her in the Force, as if he'd been suddenly struck deaf in the middle of beautiful birdsong.

"There we are…" Obi-Wan murmured, and then she was back, the shields dropped.

Wait! she called as the boundaries of their souls began to reform and their fragile link began to fade. Wait, please!

Yes? he asked, a little dazed from the hours of effort and wondering why she was whispering to him through the Force, so quietly Anakin couldn't hear.

I need to talk to you alone. Without Master. She was young and without a lot of practice so she was spending all of her effort on keeping Anakin from hearing, and the underlying emotions were as easy to sense as her shoulder still under his hand. Ahsoka knew now that he meant Anakin no harm, and that he never would. She didn't like what he was, what he had become, but she was willing to overlook a lot right now because her Master was what mattered most.

You see? My feelings about him? he silently offered.

Yes. That's why I know I can talk to you now. I need your help.
Tomorrow. Whatever time I tell Anakin come an hour earlier. Can you do that?

Yes.

"And I think that's enough for today," Obi-Wan yawned, blinking at Anakin as he took his hand back from Ahsoka's shoulder. "Stars, did you sit there the entire time?"

"I memorized my next speech the Council wants me to give," he said with a noticeable lack of enthusiasm. "The last one went so well I am to be the one to directly ask the Republic for what the Council wants. Regular recruiting for the Temple, with Temples on each world Level 2 or higher."

"Oh, lovely," Obi-Wan sighed in his melodious, mocking lilt, shaking his head and looking over to pat Ahsoka on the back. "You did well, Ahsoka. Thank you for practicing with me."

"You're welcome," she shrugged, much more at ease than she had been. "So next time I have to try to shield you?"

"Yes. Anakin will practice more with you as well, like he did today. Can you two come tomorrow?"

Anakin nodded, grateful for whatever connection the two of them had made even if he hadn't been able to sense it himself. "I can excuse Snips for personal training with me. Given what the Council's asking of me, they hinted they might start having her appear beside me for these speeches."

Ahsoka clenched her jaw at that, Obi-Wan noticed. "Nope. Not my thing.

_Want are you hiding, child?_ he wondered, the bright, fierce lightning of her spirit still echoing in a faint afterimage across his mind. "Then let's meet at oh-nine-hundred here. Today do not under any circumstances discuss this or practice this once you leave this apartment."

They ate their evening meal together in relative peace, the two finally leaving for the Temple for the night and Obi-Wan's curiosity about Ahsoka's strange request strong enough he had to meditate it away before he was able to sleep that night.

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True to her word, Ahsoka arrived the next morning an hour ahead of Anakin, knocking on the door and entering in a much meeker, more respectful way than she had the day before.

"Sorry if I was rude yesterday," she mumbled as she walked in past him.

"I understand," Obi-Wan answered graciously, pointing over at the table where a tray sat with a pot and two steaming cups already on it. "Tea?"

"Thank you." She had a datapad with her, he noticed with curiosity, but said nothing as they sat and drank quietly, the silence between them awkward but no longer dangerous. She shifted the rectangle of metal and glass to the left of her, and then the right again as she drank.

"So. What did you want to talk about with me?" Obi-Wan asked, filling both of their cups again and setting the pot down.

"I'm sure the Council did more than erase Anakin's memory of asking them about the record
"Really?" He picked up his own cup, hands curled around it, enjoying the warmth of it and focusing on that while he watched her with an impassive, unreadable face.

"I don't think he's from where he thinks he's from. I don't think he's from Coruscant."

"Where do you think he's from?"

"Tatooine."

Obi-Wan's face remained as calm as the surface of his tea, but his hands tightened around the cup. "Tatooine?" He tilted his head, frowning. "That's a rather out of the way guess, isn't it? Why?"

"Slicing." She picked up the datapad and turned it on, tapping away on it, equal notes of anger and pride in her voice. "After the Council did that to us I tried to think of why they would do that. And the only thing that made any real sense was that his homeworld used to be something else."

"Yes?" he said, curious to see where she was going.

"So all of the grunt Temple systems, like the garden watering systems and the lighting in the Padawan dorms, they're behind this big security wall, right? Outsiders can't get in. But they didn't bother to use the same high-level security which makes it impossible for anyone, outside or inside the Temple, to get into major systems like the Archives. If you're already in the Temple, say a nosy Padawan, it's not too hard to slice into the grunt systems."

"It's my turn to admit I don't follow," he said, sipping his tea and watching her over the edge of the cup.

"'Well, I remembered from back when I used to slice in where I could just to see if I could that one of those systems is the hangar bay data back ups. And I thought, well, if Master really was from another planet, he'd have to be on the ship logs somewhere, right? There'd be an Inbound to the Temple without an Outbound from the Temple happening before it, on a craft as small as a one-seater. So before we left for that mission I downloaded every daily ship log for the last 25 years onto here." She pointed at her datapad. "They're really simple and in really old format. So I had to go through each one by hand. It took forever."

"And what did you find?" Obi-Wan asked, intrigued by the ugly blocks of names across the screen.

She tapped the last filtered document in one subgroup and handed the pad to him as she pointed to a red, garish streak across the white where she'd highlighted a name. "Twelfth cycle, eleventh day, 13 years ago, one Anakin Skywalker, nine standard years of age, was listed as Inbound to the Temple from Tatooine. There is no record of him before that in any of the logs," she explained with weary pride and fear. "Look up at the header. It's a Census ship. The Temple sends Jedi out to all of the Outer Rim systems once every ten years to look for Force-sensitive children. Master Jinn was the lead on this one. There's a bunch of names, but if you look at the age column of the passengers, most of them are under 10 too. So it had to be a Census ship."

Obi-Wan stared at it in total silence, unmoving, eyes wide and fixed on the screen as if it were a snake. "I am... impressed," he muttered as he tapped at the incriminating document with a pensive scowl. "Clever. Very clever of you." She heard a newfound respect in the words and sat up a little taller, glad to at last have someone to share this secret burden with.

"You agree? It means what I think it does?" She gave a soft, exhausted laugh. "I mean, I haven't been able to talk to him about it, you know? I've been all alone with this just sitting there in my
"Yes, I agree." He held up the datapad, waving it. "And you can't talk to him at all about this. You understand that, right?"

"Yes. If this is true, that means they did more than take out a morning. They took out his entire childhood. If I try to tell him…"

"It will do more than hurt for a bit. You could kill him with something like this if you confront him directly."

"I know. What do we do?"

"First, you erase this," he said, giving it back to her with a determined expression.

"What?"

"You have shown me your evidence. It is beautiful work, my dear. But every second it remains in your possession you risk either Anakin finding it somehow or the Council finding out somehow. Neither of which would be good. Do you see?"

"Oh, seriously? All of it?" She put her hands over her face. "That was my life for a month. But I guess there's no reason to keep it if he can't ever look at it."

"No. And there's no one else you could show this to that would believe you."

She let out a groan and jabbed at the datapad, her fingers flying over the commands before she could change her mind, and the endless march of numbers and names in crude black on blinding white vanished. Tossing it aside on the bench, not wanting to even think about it anymore, she leaned forward, clasping her hands together and resting her elbows on her knees in an unconscious imitation of Anakin when he was deep in thought. "So now what do we do?"

"What do you want to do?" He leaned back into his seat, regarding her with his golden, unreadable gaze.

"Could we take him there?"

"To Tatooine? Do you mean, would it hurt him?"

"Yeah."

He took a deep breath, weighing the question from every angle, before letting it back out again. "No, I don't believe it would hurt him as long as he is not told before he remembers on his own. With mind-wipes, in certain Sith lore it is said that the body remembers before the mind, you see, just like it did with you seeing the way Anakin turned that reminded you of how he turned into the elevator that morning of the mind-wipe."

Distracted, Obi-Wan stood and walked over to the datapad mounted on the wall, calling up something she couldn't see, talking as he went. "The body and the senses tell the mind things far more subtly than another person, an outsider can. If he is from Tatooine, going there without being told he is from there may be the only way to break through this."

"Then we go. As soon as we can, if you can help us?" she pleaded.

"Yes. I'm looking over transportation right now. That way we don't have to take a Temple ship. I'll
tell him that we'll be able to practice better away from Coruscant and all of the distractions here and fail to mention we'll be stopping off at Tatooine on our way somewhere else. As long as he believes and lists our destination as elsewhere, I'm sure the caring, kind Council won't begrudge their new poster boy a few days out of the limelight before they put him to work again in the Senate," he offered with no small amount of sarcasm in his final words.

"Obi-Wan?"

"Yes?"

"If this is true, if he is from Tatooine, I don't know what I'm going to do," she whispered, not wanting to believe it herself. "About the Temple. And the Council."

"Are you beginning to understand my dislike of them, my dear?" he asked, voice tinged with sadness as he came back over to sit next to her.

She nodded, curling up with a pillow on the bench and leaning against him, watching out the window and waiting for Anakin to arrive for their next session. The two sat in silence until he did, lost in their own anxious thoughts and Obi-Wan's hand resting on her back, making small, comforting strokes there.

Chapter End Notes

So that was part 2 of the original monster chapter I wrote this week. Whew! See you next week and thanks for all of your kudos and comments so far! :)

I'll post again anywhere from next Saturday to Tuesday with the next update. Have a lovely week! <3
Anakin walked the length of the ship, running his hand along the cool contours of the walls and the elegant, spare lines that hid plates and control panels. He liked to get to know a ship, for lack of a better word, any time he first traveled in it and he strolled toward the main cabin, a young man in dark robes surrounded by pristine white, a traveler in a snow field. As his eyes drifted thoughtfully from the ceiling to the floor, he felt that this ship told him of quality and money, not as much as the Lutani speeder back at Obi-Wan's apartment, but enough.

There were no rusted bolts or rushed welding jobs hiding in the corners, and the jump to hyperspace had been as smooth as could be given the physics of what was occurring.

He let his fingers drift over the smooth edges of the paneling blocks leading into the main cabin, sending his Force presence out to travel through the rivers of faint lightning that was the lifeblood of the vessel. No one had ever believed him when he'd mentioned this before, but ships felt alive to him in that way, or perhaps he was just imagining it, his subconscious filling in what his senses told him. Either way he felt confident this was a sturdy ship, one well-maintained and cared for, but discreet enough it wouldn't stand out wherever they were going.

He was so used to the workhorse ships and aethersprites of the Temple it was a bit of a novelty to be in a civilian transport like this. Earlier that day, when he and Ahsoka had walked up to it in the public landing bay Obi-Wan had told them to meet him in, it had blended right in with the craft around it: unassuming, bland, something most people would never look twice at. He'd sized up the thrusters and wings made pale orange in the late afternoon light with a bit of a snobbish disdain, but now that he was inside it he had to admit it was nice.

Up ahead, he could hear Ahsoka laughing, and smiled down the hall toward the sound.

This was a great idea. Peace and quiet for a few days. Even if it is the Outer Rim.

Once they'd left Coruscant and spent a few hours completing their first jump to the edge of the Core worlds, Obi-Wan had offered the change in plans over the simple dinner they'd eaten at the table tucked into a niche back behind the main cabin, saying that it would be best to go somewhere more out of the way than Naboo, their original destination.

"The way the holonews has been, a few of the more industrious ones with contacts in the Temple might already be waiting for you on Naboo," he'd offered, and Anakin had agreed, not having thought of that possible complication. Ahsoka had offered a few planets in between bites of her food, and Obi-Wan had picked Tatooine from them. "If you have no objections, Anakin?" he'd asked.

"No," he'd replied, pouring himself more to drink from the magnetized jar sitting between them. "I've never been there, so it'd be one more to check off my list. If that's ok with you, Ahsoka?"
"I've never been either," she'd shrugged and so it had been decided.

With all of the worries curled tight around his heart, seeing Obi-Wan and Ahsoka starting to get along had been a huge relief. Now, as he walked into the main cabin, folding his arms to lean over the pilot chair Ahsoka sat in, the bluish-white rainbow of hyperspace beyond, he peered down over her shoulder. "What are you two up to?"

"I'm teaching her sabbac. Force knows she won't learn it from you," Obi-Wan offered, fully reclined into his own chair and his black boots up on the control board. "Ahsoka, has your master told you how bad he is at it?" His long fingers lingered over a card in his other hand as he debated whether or not to keep it or draw again.

She hunched over her own cards, sitting cross-legged. "I've seen it in action. No need to explain. Now, uh… I have the Mistress card. Is that good or bad? I thought the Face cards were bad?"

"Not always. Do you have an Idiot?"

Ahsoka glanced up at Anakin with a grin, who gave her a mock glare in return. "Uh, no," she said, pretending to consider the question, Anakin leaning further over her with an exaggerated stare until they both started snickering.

Obi-Wan smiled himself, their warmth impossible to resist, and tossed the card he'd been considering back in the deck. "Then you want a 10 or as close to it as you can get. 23 or negative 23 wins, remember?" He took a card and sighed. "Or I could overdraw and lose automatically."

"I win?"

"Yes. This time."

"I win! It's my first time to win, Master!" She paused and looked back at Obi-Wan. "Wait, what do I win?"

"The honor of beating your Master while I go get a shower." He stood and stretched as she groaned, offering his seat to Anakin with a swivel of it toward him.

"Thanks," Anakin said, sliding down into it and picking up the deck Obi-Wan had left just to the side of the main array. "I guess we should get Ahsoka used to the feeling of winning to build her confidence up."

"I've got lots of confidence."

"Don't I know it," Anakin winked, shuffling the deck.

"Can't imagine where she gets it from," Obi-Wan said over his shoulder, wandering back off down toward the nicely-appointed set of four quarters blocked off at the back of the ship. "You two get some sleep. The drive says we're still a good twelve hours out."

"Want to set up a watch tonight?" Anakin called out, and Obi-Wan slowed to a stop in the doorway. "Battle habit, sorry."

He considered this as he looked back at them, tapping his finger against the cool metal frame, hand pale against all the black he wore. "I think we'll be all right unless we suddenly drop out of hyperspace for some reason, but if it would make you feel better we could. I'll take first watch."

"I'll take second," he added, turning to Ahsoka, who gave him the cutest wide-eyed look she was
capable of, hands curled under her chin. "And you can just sleep, Snips."

"Yes!" she said, pumping her fist as she drew her first card.

"I know how cranky you get when you don't. We don't want to frighten the poor people of Tatooine, do we?"

"Do you see what I have to put up with?" She spun her chair around to face Obi-Wan. "Can you believe this?"

"I can, my dear." His gaze slid over to Anakin for a moment and lingered there, on his dark curls and his tanned face narrowed into a glare down at his cards.

"Wait, how is that score possible?" Anakin muttered to himself, unaware of the look and Obi-Wan's eyes shifting back to Ahsoka's.

She gave the barest of nods, a reassurance to both him and herself. *We'll be ok. He'll be ok.*

Obi-Wan returned the gesture and left, walking down and turning into the closest door and the room he'd chosen as his own. It shared a refresher with the room Anakin had chosen, and he leaned in to press the door button on Anakin's side, closing it off, before he did the same on his own side.

Left alone in the refresher, he waved the water and nanoscreen on behind him and stripped down, facing his own reflection in the mirror that lined the opposite wall of the refresher. Another sign of quality: none of that burnished metal that passed for mirrors found in lower-grade ships.

The perfect, flipped mimicry of reality allowed him to see every detail as he ran a hand along his pale skin and through his red hair, fingers tracing the scars that marked his chest and shoulders, and then a long, hard stare at the golden hue of his irises. It was a ritual of sorts, a tactile walk through the path that had been his life: wealth and privilege to loss and suffering and finally strength.

*Master says these are the eyes of hunters, of victors and those who are never afraid.* The thought of Maul did not fill him with complete disgust, as he'd seen in Anakin's Force signature when they had discussed his form of shielding the day before. There was fear when Obi-Wan contemplated Maul, but there was a deep respect as well. *Master is right in many ways. About many things.*

*I should not be afraid.*

But I am. I am afraid and I can't be right now. Fear will not help Anakin.

He closed his eyes and leaned forward, folding his arms on the cold metal of the sink and resting his head there, fighting down the sharp claws of doubt creeping up into his mind as he took warm, steadying breaths of the misty air.

*How weak are you, Obi-Wan?* he sneered at himself, reaching out for strength to the rich, bottomless vein of anger threading his soul. *So close and you'll crumple now? How pathetic are you?*

*How much like the weak fool that was your father?*

When he rose again to the pleasant chime of the shower telling him the water had reached the preset temperature, the fear shading his heart had hardened to flint. It took the entire shower for him to soothe that anger back down into the unspoken, secret places he kept the vast reaches of his emotions when they were too blunt and frightening to be allowed out into the sight of others.
Saved from eternal sabbac debt by his lack of earthly possessions as a Jedi, Anakin retired to bed at the same time as Ahsoka later that evening, and it felt like his head had barely touched the light, clean pillows and sheets of his room's small bed before his com was buzzing an alarm at him from the narrow niche of a shelf just above his head.

Sitting up with a yawn and lazy ripples of muscle along his back as he reached up toward the ceiling in a long, unhurried stretch, he blinked into the darkness around him and felt around for the chair he'd left a tunic thrown over. Shoving his arms through the sleeves, he tied it closed as he wandered barefoot back up to the front of the ship, the flooring refreshingly cold under his feet.

Obi-Wan was still there in the pilot's chair where they'd left him, turned away from the ghostly blue tunnel outside that formed almost a perfect halo behind him as he sat reading. Leaned back and legs crossed, lost in the dim rectangle of a datapad and his boots set neatly off to the side, he seemed completely at peace and Anakin almost regretted having to disturb him.

He watched him for a little while, the elegant way his hand moved over the screen, the softness concentration gave to his strange eyes, before finally and reluctantly tapping on the doorway.

"Hey… Want some sleep?"

Obi-Wan gave a dazed blink, coming back out of wherever he was. "Is it time already?"

"Yeah."

"Ah. I might stay up a bit more."

Anakin came over and sat down in the other chair, stifling another yawn. "Aren't you tired?"

"I don't sleep much, usually."

"You do when I'm around."

Obi-Wan smiled a little, tapping a new file open on the datapad even as he tentatively reached a hand out toward Anakin across the gap between their seats, palm up in an invitation. "True."

Anakin caught his hand and gently traced the outline of his fingers with his own as he studied the controls and made adjustments with his free hand, double-checking all of the numbers they'd plotted and tinkering with some of the settings the dockmaster had preset before they left.

They sat that way for some time, hands lingering and twining together as they said nothing and drew no attention to the caresses, fingertips the faintest ghosts of warmth across the other's in a conversation that required no words. Curiosity, growing trust, a playful hint of desire: all of these feelings drifted between them, carried in the lightest scratch of nails and palms pressed together, and Anakin wondered how such a simple touch could be so entrancing.

"Anakin?" Obi-Wan asked his datapad, not looking up.

"Yeah?"

"May I ask you something?" His cautious tone said without words that it would be personal, and Anakin was curious, their hands still dancing together in a delicious sort of slow motion.
"If I can ask you one too?"

"If you would like," Obi-Wan replied.

"Fair trade, right?"

"Yes. But, actually, why don't you go first?"

Several came to mind immediately, but Anakin didn't want to ruin the moment and went for a question that circled the heart of the matter but didn't brush too long against it.

"When did… this… happen?" he said, pointing up at his own blue eyes rather than at Obi-Wan's.

Obi-Wan let out a sigh, calm and lost in the meditation of their hands, no anger as he spread his fingers wide, Anakin matching his movement so that one hand was a reflection of the other in the warm mirror of their touch. "This happened just before I turned 20 standard years old," he murmured.

Anakin slid his hand on a tilt just enough he could twine his fingers through Obi-Wan's and close them, squeezing his palm before he opened his hand up again.

Obi-Wan gave a content smile at the gesture. "My turn."

Anakin nodded, wondering what Obi-Wan had wanted to ask.

"You said once that you had a dream about me. What was it about?"

Anakin hadn't expected that question, and went utterly still as Obi-Wan's nails traced patterns along the edge of his outstretched fingers. "Um, well… we were… together…"

"Like this?" he asked quietly, not looking away, the gold of his eyes rimmed in the blue haze streaking by outside. He clasped Anakin's hand reassuringly and rubbed his thumb over the back of it to show there was no mockery taking place.

"You know what I mean," he said, tracing his fingers down to wrap around Obi-Wan's wrist and pulling him a little closer. "Don't pretend you don't."

"Intimate, then?"

Anakin remembered how good the dream had felt, and a quiet thrill coursed through him as he nodded, too shy to admit it out loud.

Obi-Wan regarded Anakin's hand around his wrist and after some time drew it back toward himself, pulling Anakin with it out of his chair and over to him with slow, teasing sureness. "I thought it might be something like that."

"You know," Anakin offered as he leaned over the chair, falling into Obi-Wan's orbit and unable to escape the draw of that knowing grin, "that question was rather personal."

"I could ask more," Obi-Wan asked, lips brushing Anakin's as he spoke, his free hand sliding up Anakin's back to pull him closer. "But I'm not in the mood to answer any myself."

Anakin's grip on his wrist tightened. "Not even about… this?"

"Well, perhaps about that," he said with a low chuckle, Anakin so close he could only see the beautiful blue of his eyes. "What did you want to ask?"
Anakin tried to think of something that would catch Obi-Wan off guard like he'd done to him, and smiled as he hit on something his intellect promised would work and his body wanted to know the answer to anyway, desire lacing the Force as he whispered a challenge to him. "How quiet can you be?" He finished the question by stealing a kiss, hot and quick, heat lightning tracing through a summer night. "Ahsoka's a very light sleeper."

Obi-Wan took a kiss back from him, harder and deeper, but midway through brought his hand up to Anakin's chest and gently pushed him back. "I can tell. She's in the doorway."

Anakin whipped around to find her slumped against the wall, sleepy and frowning in annoyance at the pair but blushing almost as much as he now was. "Hi, you two."

"Snips! You're... you're awake?" He stood straight up, feeling as ridiculously young and stupid as a Padawan being caught by a Master out in the gardens.

"You're... uh... kind of loud across our bond with... well... all of this. Woke me up. Is there any way you can shut me out of it?" she asked, waving her hands around in their vague direction.

Obi-Wan watched with an amused smile on his face as Anakin dropped back into his chair, hands covering his face and groaning. "You're adorable when you've just woken up, my dear."

"I'll show you two kaa'tlis 'adorable'," she grumbled, rubbing at her eyes.

"I forgot... I'm really sorry, Ahsoka." Anakin offered, mortified, wanting to crawl into the tiniest duct on the ship and stay there, possibly forever.

"Hey," she grumbled, "it looks like embarrassment does the trick. All better now. And," she asked, pointing a finger at Obi-Wan, "aren't you supposed to be asleep if he's awake?"

"You heard the Padawan," Obi-Wan chuckled, standing and picking up his datapad, sliding his hand along Anakin's shoulder as he walked out but leaving his boots by the chair he'd sat in for the next morning. "I am off to bed, Temple Mistress. Nothing here but pure thoughts and virgin halos."

Ahsoka rolled her eyes, stumbling back off to bed and leaving Anakin alone and very focused on remembering how to temporarily dampen that bond between the two of them.

The next morning, when the waterfall of blue hyperspace stopped as abruptly as it had begun, an arc of mottled umber and rust filled the screen, planetary body Tatooine. Anakin, relegated to co-pilot for the entry for reasons he couldn't really follow, echoed Obi-Wan as he spoke aloud, repeating numbers and vectors, hands light and easy on the secondary controls as the ship skimmed the gravity well of the planet, letting just enough grab ahold to swing it around into a stable downward descent.

"The ship's not happy. She likes me better," he told Obi-Wan as the thrusters roared to life, rattling the ship despite how well it was made as intelligent machinery fought against the brute force of cosmic physics.

"I'm sure she does," Obi-Wan said pleasantly and without any hesitation, reaching up to tap a series of keys and flip a matching set of switches as Ahsoka watched from one of the two back seats in the cabin, strapped in and oddly silent for once. "I imagine she can tell I don't care for flying."
"So how come I didn't get to fly her in?" Anakin turned back to Ahsoka, not liking the tension on her face. You ok, Snips?

Yeah, she claimed, not as relaxed through the Force as the word implied.

"You're not flying because your reputation precedes you," Obi-Wan explained to the planet in front of him, shifting the controls back and banking into the vector neatly outlined in green on the low screen in front of him. "And I've been here before." There was a long patch of hazy turbulence and the scream of shields against the upper atmosphere and then they were through, the gritty clouds huddled around the ship torn away to reveal an almost incomprehensible emptiness below. Sand stretched in every direction of this part of Tatooine, tiny ridges that were likely hills the only atolls in this bizarre ocean of oranges and yellows, white and sun-faded silvers.

"People live here?" Anakin said, knowing the answer but unable to believe it as he absently keyed in the correct sequences, flight such a part of his life following the pings and alerts the ship gave him was more second-nature than conscious thought. "It's nothing but desert. I mean, nothing. People really live here?"

"They try. The locals call the desert 'azul'ir'," Obi-Wan said, glancing back to make sure Ahsoka was all right and received the tight line of a smile in return. It's all right, my dear. We'll be all right, he tried to reassure her despite the same thread of worry in his own mind."It means 'father', but in the same way some cultures call their god 'father'. Respect it and it may let you live. Disrespect it and it will kill you in a second."

"And you thought this would be a good place for us to relax?" Anakin chuckled, entering the final set of coordinates the computer suggested for their entry into the spaceport, a tiny spark of metal and towers far ahead on the horizon.

"I said it would be a good place to meditate without distraction."

"This is true," Anakin admitted. "It is beautiful in a way, I guess." He followed the line of the horizon with his gaze, tracing over the distant, bright waves of sand and the faded, baked blue of the sky now overhead. "Snips, you've never been here, right?"

"Nope. First time!" she said a little too cheerfully, and Anakin tossed a glance at her and then Obi-Wan before directing his attention back to their flight path and Obi-Wan's countdown of the markers left on their approach. "Did you two fight or something after I took watch last night? You're both acting a little weird."

"9000. No, I went straight to bed. 8000, all lines green and within parameters," Obi-Wan replied calmly.

"Sorry, maybe it's everything going on. I just feel anxious."

"We have plenty of reason to be. 7000."

"You know, I could fly this thing in without numbers."

"Mmm," Obi-Wan answered in a neutral tone, giving a friendly smirk to the landing permission window that popped up. "Flying and landing are different."

"So you two have been talking," he grinned back, pretending to be offended.

Obi-Wan's fingers danced over the screen, turning it blue, and the window vanished, a blue dot appearing over the landing lot they'd been cleared for. "A bit. 4000. Taking over manual for
Anakin sighed and leaned back, patting the control board in apology. "Next time."

The ship drifted over the neat rows of ones already parked in the cracked duracrete of the simple landing field, a whole range of shapes and sizes that perked Anakin's interest immediately. With nothing to do as Obi-Wan quietly handled the landing into their space, he mentally ticked off all of the models and classes he knew and the others he barely recognized under mods and patchwork repairs. He was so lost in trying to identify which year of Keylan-class scout ship had been cannibalized to fit out the ship next to them the landing itself came as a bit of surprise. Blinking as the ship rocked to a standstill, he applauded. "Hey, you can fly!"

"Heh."

Powering the ship down with a few more flicks of his hand as they undid their seat harnesses, the clatter of strap locks opening filling the cabin, Obi-Wan stood and paused as he took in the closed bulk of the landing door in the back of the ship with such sudden trepidation Anakin frowned. "What is it?"

"What?"

"You seem a little reluctant to go out there."

"Well, look at him," Ahsoka piped up, patting Obi-Wan's back as she walked by. "As pale as he is with that red hair, he probably just fries to a crisp in sun like this, huh?"

"I despise dockmasters at locations like this," Obi-Wan offered, pulling on his cloak and disappearing in a swirl of black. Pointing at it and then them, he added. "You both would be well to do the same. We can buy lighter ones later but for now these will work."

Anakin knew what Obi-Wan meant about bureaucrats, and sure enough, as soon as the landing ramp ground down into position, thunking solidly against the duracrete and a rush of hot air sweeping up into the ship, a small Rodian in sharply cut greys and browns scuttled halfway up with a small, ornately carved box in hand, stopping at the very edge of what would be considered acceptable on most other planets. "Travellers of Inbound Vessel 83103, welcome to His Excellency Jabba the Hutt's most prized and glimmering gem, Tatooine. His Worship is most aggrieved to find himself in the regrettable position of assessing your vehicle to be a 6,200 credit per diem vessel."

"Per diem?" Anakin balked, but Obi-Wan waved the number away dismissively and produced several credit chips from one of the layers of his collars, the dim metal glowing against the pitch black of his clothes.

Fanning them out with one hand, like a magician revealing a trick, Obi-Wan dropped them into the ceremonial payment box the Rodian held open with unabashed greed and then leaned in close to the green-skinned dockmaster. "This should be enough for three days. Three days of our ship being untouched and nothing disappearing off of it while we are away. Don't you agree?"

The Rodian darted a hand into the box, sliding the chips around to inspect them, and then gave a pleased bow. "His Excellency Jabba the Hutt accepts your gift. May the Twins shine upon you with good fortune, honored Sirs and Lady." And then he was gone, scuttling down the ramp to accost another ship roaring in somewhere far down the lane.

"I'm a Lady. I like this place!" Ahsoka patted at an imaginary dress, making Anakin chuckle as he donned his own cloak and pulled his hood up.
"So what's first?"

"We'll go buy better clothing for the daytime hours."

"Are we sleeping on the ship?" Anakin asked, curious.

"Yes. The only decent lodging in the middle of town where we are now is the brothels," Obi-Wan said, getting Ahsoka's cloak and putting it over her shoulders even as she protested. "The suns are harsh here, my dear. And you never know what the day will bring or how long we may be outside."

That stopped her cold, and Anakin chalked the strangeness of it up to the bizarre and incredible stresses they were all under. *We're all out of sorts, I guess.*

Anakin walked down the ramp to the sound of his boots clanking along the ribs of it and the sudden, bright blaze of daylight flooding into his hood. His career had taken him to several deserts or planets covered in them, but nothing was like this immediate surge of heat that crawled in through his hood, through his cloak, into his clothes and boots and lungs with such fierceness he almost took a step back.

It was like being kissed by a lover obsessed, no inch of him safe from the attention of the twin suns overhead no matter how secret and hidden it was and he instantly both loved and hated it. It was like a pain so strong it became sweet again.

He took a breath and drew in only heat, bitterly dry, and exhaled a breath that felt almost cold compared to the baking air around it. There was a crisp smell all around, the distinct tang of sand and duracrete, and then there was the touch of Obi-Wan's hand on his back. "Are you all right?" he asked in a muffled voice, face covered by a length of black scarf he'd wound around the bottom half of his face, only his yellow eyes visible in the shadows of his cowl.

"It's hot," Anakin grinned, feeling like an idiot. There was more to it than that, but he couldn't express it and Obi-Wan only nodded, pointing off toward the rusted arch that marked the entrance into the city proper from the landing field.

The three of them walked down and a few minutes later were part of the light foot traffic wandering down the crowded stalls of the local market, swathes of vendors shouting deals in several different languages but all roughly the same volume. Obi-Wan caught Anakin's arm and leaned in close as they passed a droid repair shop, pulling down the layers of cloth to whisper to him. "See the shop with the cloaks hanging all the way down there at the end, next to the race-betting booth? Let's go there. I'll pay when we get there, but you do the talking."

"Why?"

"This far out in the galaxy, my accent gets an extra zero added on to everything," he said with a roll of his eyes.

Ahsoka had dropped back to get a check out something interesting in one stall a few back down the row, and Anakin looked over Obi-Wan's shoulder at her. *Snips. We're heading into that place on the end with the cloaks outside.*

*I'll catch up,* she told him silently, fascinated by a strange, fox-like animal seated on the shoulder of an ancient woman selling scrap metal and parts on a blanket spread out in front of her. "What is that?" she asked, receiving a patient laugh and answer in a language she didn't know.

"It's so pretty," she said, holding her hand out slowly, and the woman leaned forward so the dusky-
colored creature could scamper over to Ahsoka's arm. She laughed and petted it as it crawled up onto her shoulders, loving how soft it was as it crawled around, dragging its tail along her lekku and face affectionately. "Thank you!" she said when it tired of her and hurried back across her arm to its owner, waving at the woman as she walked away and saw that Obi-Wan and Anakin had already turned into the shop down at the far end of the lane.

"Hey, you!" a young voice called out, two boys hurrying up to her with wide, tanned smiles. "Are you a Togruta?"

"I am," she said, friendly but sizing them up without any malice. Pickpockets most likely, from the sharp, hungry eyes paired with innocent faces, but one of them had a faded red silk ribbon tied around his shoulder, the drabness of this world so pervasive that after only half an hour here she knew it marked him as something out of the ordinary. "What's that for?"

"He's a singer," said the other boy, who might have been blond somewhere under all the dust and sand, as the first swept his arms out in a proud bow.

"Really? What do you sing?" When they patiently blinked at her, she decided to play along, unable to resist them. "And how much would it cost to hear a song?"

"Well, singers aren't paid, but it's good luck to give gifts," the singer admitted with just the right amount of shyness.

You two are slick, she thought with amused admiration. "Would five credits be considered an acceptable gift?"

"Definitely," the apparent manager said as the first boy bowed again, more enthusiastically this time.

If they break and run as soon as I give it to them I won't be surprised, she told herself with no bitterness at all, only the neutral observation of her Temple upbringing. It was hard to come to worlds like this and see the children that lived there, with no out and no hope beyond whatever straws fate gave them to clutch at.

When she'd given him the money, the credits disappearing into the soft folds of the singer's clothing, he gave her another smile. "What would you like to hear? I know all the theme songs to all the holos."

Ahsoka waved her hand, never much a fan of the melodramas some of the other Padawans passed around in secret on fifth-generation copies. "No, nothing like that. Uh… how about something from here?"

"Here? Tatooine?" They both looked at her puzzled, completely taken off-guard that anyone would want to hear anything from their homeworld, and then the manager grinned, relief writ large across his young face as he came up with a plan to save their scheme. "Oh, yes. We have a beautiful and ancient history of traditional songs here."

"'Blackbird' is one. It's a lullabye."

Instant recognition passed across the singer's face, and Ahsoka was pleased to note this appeared to be a real song they both knew and not something they were going to make up on the fly. "Ok, could I hear that one?"
"It's a repeating one. The end goes into the beginning so it can go on forever," the manager explained, twirling his finger as he spoke.

The singer cleared his throat and began, and Ahsoka had to admit he had a talented if untrained voice, fragile and sweet.

"Blackbird,
Once you were red
Oh, blackbird, blackbird
How long you bled!
Till nothing was left
But black!
Poor blackbird…"

She nodded her approval as he sang it through twice, and when the last word trailed away, lost in the din of the market around them, she held out the last five credits she'd brought from the ship. I can always get more from Master if I have to. "One more from here, please?" At the anxiety on their faces as they racked their brains, she decided to help them out. "Well, uh… what's your favorite song? Something you and all your friends know?"

At her question the singer's eyes lit up, both of them saying the same name: "Skybrother".

"It's a slave song. We sing it when we're working," the possibly blond boy sagely intoned.

"I can't sing the whole thing," the singer whispered, darting a concerned look over at him.

"It's ok if you only sing part of it," she said encouragingly. "But why is it called 'Skybrother'?"

The singer helpfully pointed up at the suns glistening white fire overhead. "The two skybrothers, always together." He paused, letting a vehicle roll by in a loud grind of treads and gears, and then began in his sweet, high voice.

"There's a dragon
In the heart
Of every sun
But two together
Is the world undone.
Oh, one day, one day
We will rise up free.
A dragon for you,
And a dragon for me."

He let the last word trail off and bowed to her applause as the second boy did the same. "There are
more verses but it's bad luck to sing the whole thing unless you're working," he said apologetically, fussing with the red sash on his arm.

Snips? Where are you?

"Well, they were both very nice but I have to go. Good luck to you two!" She walked off with the two happily waving after her, waiting a moment before she discreetly checked her wallet and relieved to find a third child hadn't lifted it while she was listening.

On my way, Master! Sorry! Got sidetracked! she sent ahead through their bond, hurrying toward the shop with the trailing banners of cloaks hung in a soft, earth-hued rainbow that danced in the arid breeze drifting through the market.

Chapter End Notes

I am so happy I finally got to write this part! It's been sitting in my plot outline since I started this whole thing back in what, June?

Thank you all so much for your comments and kudos! <3 Y'all are the best! I will catch up on comments tomorrow.

(If you want to keep reading, the second part of this update is going up as soon as I can copy and paste it into the next chapter.) My next update will be anywhere from next Tuesday to next Friday.
By the time they were done in the little shop, all three were in the light, gauzy sand-cottons of the local populace, their heavier clothing and cloaks packed away in a large bag Anakin offered to carry when they left, only their boots and belts still dark and heavy. As Anakin stood behind a synthwood folding screen, tying his new tunic shut and reaching down to pick up the wide leather strip of his belt, he felt a strange shiver in his mind that slowed time to a stop. There was something about this moment: the angle of the bright daylight through the narrow window behind him that fell in a golden streak along the rough clay wall, the clatter of a scrap-metal wind chime hanging from the top of that window, and the low, luscious scent of incense coming from sticks burning in the front of the shop that kept sand moths away from the bolts of fabric stacked behind the ready-made garments for sale.

It was a moment of perfect clarity, and he paused, letting the sensations wash over him. The sunlight, the ringing of the chime, the incense.

*It was good we came here*, he thought to himself as time started to move again. *It feels like I can actually start to think again. To have some breathing room to think again.*

He stepped out from behind the screen and pulled the last part on, a cloak made of the same light-hued fabric as the rest of his clothes. "Well, what do you think?"

Obi-Wan and Ahsoka nodded, already dressed and sitting on the cushions spread out off to the side of the screen. "Looking good, Master," Ahsoka said, giving him a thumbs up. She appeared older somehow, tucked away in her new cloak, and it was strange seeing Obi-Wan in the desert colors of sand and stone. His eyes and skin were pale against the swath of bleached fabric he now wore, his auburn hair peeking out of his hood the only hint of color left to him.

As they walked back outside, blending in perfectly with the locals, Anakin listened to the conversations all around him with half an ear, amazed at how much cooler his new clothes felt, the hot air that came in lazy wafts down the lane passing through the folds and layers easily.

"What would you two say if we just walked around a bit?" he asked.

"Master likes to do this in new cities we've got missions in," Ahsoka explained to Obi-Wan. "And old cities, and home. Everywhere, really."

"I like seeing a place for myself. It helps me get a feel for it."

"Well, if we stay out of the seedier-than-usual areas, I have no problem with it."

They wandered in a pleasant silence for a long while, the suns slipping past their zenith in the sky and angling downward, Anakin drawn in by the sights and smells of the narrow lanes and the organized chaos of life in this city that clung so precariously to existence. He would turn to watch droids that passed him, remarking on this feature or that to his companions, and then abruptly head off down an alley to get a better look at the shop banners draped from windows and doors.

Ahsoka stayed back a bit with Obi-Wan, giving Anakin the freedom to move at his own pace along the streets. "This is normal," she warned Obi-Wan, not wanting him to get his hopes up anything was happening that was out of the ordinary. "He wanders. You have to keep an eye on him or you'll
lose him."

"Oh, yes. I know."

"You do?"

Obi-Wan blinked at her, and then smiled. "Oh, he did this to me in the Tower garden. Can the man not follow a straight line?"

She grinned. "Only one that's been tied in knots. Sometimes he finds interesting stuff this way, though."

They found dinner that way, Anakin finding a wandering, twisting road of nothing but restaurants and their meal a local stew sopped up with pieces of tender kawn meat. When they'd finished, pleasantly tired from all of the walking, they agreed to head back to the ship and get settled in for their first shielding practice session of the trip.

As they were walking back, the light now shifting to the oranges of the last hour of afternoon before true dusk stole over the sky, Anakin stopped dead in front of a vehicle rental shop. A dozen different speeder models were lined up outside, freshly painted lines of color unable to completely distract the eye from the dents and scratches of age on most of them.

"An 81-62 Ion-9," Anakin breathed in awe, pointing at the third one from the left.

"A what?" Obi-Wan repeated, exchanging a curious smile with Ahsoka, who shrugged her shoulders.

"The mechanics in the hangar bay call this thing the Death Trap." Anakin grinned at them, seeming younger than his twenty-two years. "If they haven't modded it, this thing has a 1000 kdm thruster with only a 512 dampener. The company was trying to make a really light model so they left off the usual, heavier 840 dampener kit."

"Meaning?" Ahsoka volunteered, peering at the unassuming collection of metal and synthplast with new-found curiosity.

"It can go so fast it's dangerous. They've been banned on Core Worlds. I've never seen one in person. Just holos."

Obi-Wan tried to give a disapproving frown, but it was impossible with the childish glee Anakin beamed with in the Force. "And you want to ride it, don't you?"

"Yes. I have to. I will regret it forever if I don't. There's flat land around here, right? I saw it flying in. I just need a stretch I can open it up on."

"Yes, off to the west." Obi-Wan sighed with no real vexation, just amusement. "Let's find out how much they want to rent it. And you're not going alone. We'll get two normal ones for us sane people."

That plan worked until the owner, a tall and wiry Twi'lek, quoted them the price for three speeders, one high enough Obi-Wan was extremely glad he had kept his mouth shut during the initial conversation. "2,000 credits apiece?" Anakin said, canting his head. "Did I hear you right?"

"Yes, sir. But it's for up to a week. It's Sand People, you see, sir. Sometimes when customers go too far out past the Ring we lose the speeder and the customer. Can't do anything about the customer but we do have to buy new speeders."
"Well, that's reassuring," Ahsoka dead-panned, raising an eyebrow at Obi-Wan.

"At that price, we can afford two. And from what we saw outside I do not recommend putting two of us on the same one. You two go," he offered, pulling out another set of credit chips to hand over to the Twi'lek.

As they were walking back outside Ahsoka handed the second keystick back to Obi-Wan, Anakin hurrying ahead excitedly to run a hand over his speeder and make a closer inspection of it. "You know what? You should go. You know this place better than I do."

"What will you do?"

"I'll go back to the ship. Catch a nap. Dismember looters. I'll find something to do," she waved casually, gaze intent on him. Please take care of him if he starts remembering.

I will. I promise, his gentle squeeze of her shoulder told her as much as his whisper through the Force as he took the bag of their clothing from Anakin and strapped it down behind his seat.

The ride back to the ship confirmed Obi-Wan's theory: neither speeder liked having Ahsoka, as light as she was, as a second passenger, dragging dangerously low to the ground as they cruised along no matter which one she rode on. When she'd been dropped off and was safely back inside, waving to them from the main cabin, Anakin lifted his own in a return salute and spun the speeder around to face down the main aisle, out toward the endless desert with the city behind him and a swirl of sand kicked up behind him. "This way, right?"

"Yes," Obi-Wan said over the throaty hum of the engines, nudging his over next to Anakin's, both of their new cloaks packed away and their hair blowing in the rising evening breeze, brown waves and fine red tinted orange in the warm final afternoon light. "We head straight out from here, keeping the suns just on our right. Do that and it's a straight run for at least 100 or so klicks before the land changes, from what the map inside the shop said. There's a small ridge that rises up there."

"Yeah."

"We shouldn't go any further than that. There's a second ridge that apparently marks the edge of the Ring just a few klicks beyond the first one. And we probably only have an hour of daylight left anyway, more or less."

"Got it," Anakin nodded, already smiling as he took in the desert sprawling out past the last, rusted ramble of fence. "You going to keep up?"

"How fast does that thing go?" Obi-Wan asked with a dubious glance at its body, well-worn silver accented with a fresh coat of deep navy detailing lines.

"From what I remember, the factory specs claim 300 klicks an hour."

"Stars above... And you're going to push it to that, aren't you?" Obi-Wan shook his head, a little nervous about the whole idea but unable to resist the excitement radiating from Anakin as clearly as the distorted waves of air just under the thrusters below him.

"My honor as a pilot depends on it." Giving a mock salute, fist pressed to his chest, he bowed to Obi-Wan from his seat, a few curls falling over the top of the scar that ran along his temple.

Obi-Wan gave up any attempt to try to talk him down and instead swept his hand out before him in an invitation for Anakin to ride out first. "Let's just say I will try to keep you in sight."
The grin Anakin gave him was beautiful for its pure joy, uncomplicated by their current situation or personal doubts or anything other than what he was: a young gearhead given a ride on one of his dream machines, and as he darted off down the aisle and out into the desert Obi-Wan sighed and kicked his own into gear, speeding off after him.

There was nothing in the desert but baking wind and a silent sky just beginning to fade from blue to orange spread out over a mirrored sky of sand that was shifting from pale daylight whites and yellows to rich gold and bronze.

Anakin laughed as he rode out into it with a quick shove on the accelerator, the happy sound lost in the roar of the engine, testing it out, throttling it and then backing off, gunning it and then jerking back to brake and whip it around in wild spins, the desert and rambling edge of the city flying past in twin blurs until he settled out in the center of all of the sand he'd kicked up.

The whole time it tossed him back and forth like a wild animal, and he tightened his thighs against metal still warm enough from the day it sent a pleasant heat through his new clothes. Nice handling. But let's see what you can really do, he told it as he patted the top of the tiny control board nestled in between the speed and control gears.

Obi-Wan was catching up, and Anakin gave an excited whoop, waving a hand at him as he flicked the switches that turned on the nano-windshield and tore off out toward the horizon.

The two suns burned away on his right as he rode, large and luminous as they dropped toward the desert, a few wispy clouds rolling in fine lines across their orange and red faces and the first tones of dusk stained the sky to his left, an indigo and purple haze rising upward in slow motion. He was aware of both extremes, of the sheer vastness of both the darkness and the light out in this utterly flat land, but his eyes were forward, the Force tumbling out ahead of him to find any small rocks or outcroppings the speeder's auto-avoid feature might not be able to handle at the speed he intended to take it to.

Good cruising speed... The readout showed 100 klicks per hour, hands easy on the controls as the desert shot past him. Now to start pushing it more... he decided, juicing the thruster and cutting out the dampener shielding one layer at a time.

The nanoshielding that kept the violent spray of gritty evening wind off of him started to crackle at 200 klicks as he hit it too fast for the sand to be shunted aside and the nanos destroyed what forced itself past the initial repellent barrier they created. Anakin gave another wild laugh, not sure how much time had passed and not caring. All he knew was that the first sun was almost touching the horizon, a red sliver of light coming to rest on the inky line of land, and the desert still stretched out before him, welcoming him for what he was: one small traveler in its wide, unfathomably vast kingdom.

At a few more stabs at switches, 250 now on the red digital face nestled in the middle of the controls, all knowledge of Obi-Wan, of Ahsoka, of his life as a Jedi and all of the terrifying complications that made up his life was gone. There was only the beauty of speed, powerful and terrible and all-encompassing, hypnotizing him with the rattle of the speeder beneath him and the blur of the land and sky around him.

Faster! he thought or shouted to himself, not really sure which one, and both thrilled and afraid of
what would happen as he slapped the final lever and key to drop the dampener out completely, setting the fully-charged thruster free. The bike roared so loudly and hard it almost knocked him off, and he was flying, flying so fast it almost hurt to breathe, the windshield singing and glowing with pops of light as it fought the sand barreling into it.

There was nothing cluttering his mind now or even taking up space: no higher thought, no emotion, nothing above sheer observation and reaction. He and the speeder were one entity streaking across the flat land in a piercing whine of engine and sparks, a comet set loose across the surface of this barren planet.

In the perfect emptiness of his awareness, without looking around he took in the navy arch of the sky overhead, the first glitter of stars to his left and the first sun half sunk into the horizon on his right as the second hung ruddy and large close to it. His body sang of stress and ecstasy, of his hands in a death-grip on the shifters, of his legs gripping the speeder's body as tightly as he could as the burning smell of sand obliterated by the bike's shield filled his lungs.

In this state, under the watchful guard of the Tatooine suns on one side and the glimmer of stars on the other, closer to true meditation than a pillow in a silent Temple room had ever brought him, Anakin felt the spirit of truth reach out and drag a finger along his mind, unraveling a knot there buried so deep it stopped his breath cold.

Eyes widening, white-knuckled, he didn't even notice as the readout hit 300 klicks.

_I am from here._

_I am a child of this world._

How long it took for this single fact to reveal itself fully, to climb up out of the abyss it had been buried in as he rocketed along the barren flatland, he didn't know.

_I am from Tatooine._

He took this idea in, turned it over, examined it as carefully as he could, and from every angle he knew it to be true. There was nothing beyond this fact, not yet, only this simple, undoubtable truth shining as brightly as the last red line of the second sun shimmering on the horizon.

_Anakin!_ Time jarred back into motion at a sudden shout in his mind, his name sent in a frantic shot of the Force from somewhere far behind him. _Anakin! Can't you hear me?! Stop! STOP!_  
He blinked and a ridge was there, looming up and still far ahead but too close at the speed he was going, a greedy wave of stone ready to rise up and crush the little traveler on his little bike who had forgotten where he was. He fought with the controls, jerking the bike into a shrieking, shuddering arc across the dry land to a prayer and name somehow both strange and as familiar as his own. _Don't let me die, Azul'ir! Please!_  

The speeder tried to throw him but he held on, smacking the dampeners back on and letting off the thruster just enough on pure instinct, his expert skills as a pilot the only thing that saved him as the speeder cut a harsh, deafening ridge through the sand, burning out its extra speed as it did so and finally grinding to a halt with the ridge rising up in the distance behind him.

He stumbled off of it, the bike rocking back and forth, and collapsed onto his hands and knees into the heat of the sand, his heart thudding so hard in his chest he was sure it would break his ribs. Next to him the speeder hummed quietly above the ground, no worse the wear for its adventure, and from somewhere behind him he heard Obi-Wan's approaching.
Anakin! And then Obi-Wan was there in a few quick hisses of boots running across sand, kneeling next to him and turning Anakin's face up to him, terror making the gesture rougher than it would have been otherwise.

"Anakin," he pleaded, fear obvious in his voice. "Are you all right?"

Anakin gaped up at him, trying to find a way to make his simple, stupid mouth express the enormous truth that now floated within his soul, as true and glimmering as the stars that stole higher into the sky.

"I'm…" He put his hand up to his forehead, trying to force the words into order as a searing pain wrinkled his brow. Growling at it, he grabbed Obi-Wan's shoulders and forced himself to say it aloud even though he felt like a drowning man taking in water with every breath. "I'm... from... here. Tatooine." With each breath and syllable, the stabbing ache that had accompanied conscious thought receded until there was only a dull throb as Obi-Wan stared at him in amazement.

Something else stirred as the pain cleared, something coiled and furious inside his soul. Only the Council would have been powerful enough to do this.

"What do you remember?"

"I… nothing. Something. I'm from here. I was a child here," he managed, hands so tight on Obi-Wan's arms there would be bruises later.

Obi-Wan didn't notice. "You're from Tatooine. Are you sure?" His eyes were narrowed, so intent on Anakin it would have unnerved him if he'd been more coherent.

"Yes. The Council… I don't remember it happening… but they had to have done this." The black shape inside his soul hissed and curled in on itself in a painful knot of rage that stole his breath away. "Only… only they would be able to erase a whole kriffing planet." The Force began to shiver in the air around them, the distorted undulation of a mirage but far more dangerous and far more present.

Anakin blinked, tears stinging as he let go of Obi-Wan and collapsed back onto his hands and knees, feeling the tidal pull of this world through the Force, this fierce and heartless desert that had birthed a proud son and then lost him. To the Council. Somehow.

What was my life here like? Did I have a family? Friends? A few strange sounds came to him, and he muttered to himself, "Tagwa. Tagwa." Glancing back up at Obi-Wan, he fought back the rage writhing around him long enough to speak. "What does that mean?"

"'Yes, yes.' You speak Huttese, it would seem," Obi-Wan told him, and Anakin realized there were tears in Obi-Wan's eyes as well, almost invisible in the fading light around them. He reached out to pull Anakin to him tightly, his own Force presence roiling with hope and anger, love and fear as he stroked Anakin's hair and listened to his cries as he mourned the loss of an entire life he knew nothing about.

The last colors of day had drained away into a crisp ocean of black and stars before either one of them trusted themselves to speak again, to do anything but sit, wrapped in each other's arms, wordlessly stroking and soothing away the last frightening flares of emotion that startled them both with their intensity.
"Did you know I was from here?" Anakin whispered, voice hoarse from crying.

"Yes," Obi-Wan breathed so quietly it was almost lost in a gust of dry evening wind.

"How?"

The pause lasted so long Anakin wondered if Obi-Wan had heard him, and then the refined melody of his voice drifted to him. "We… we Sith have our ways."

Anakin reached into the soft cotton of Obi-Wan's hood and took his face in his hands, the blue and gold of their eyes made silver in the desert starlight as the words fell free in a hushed, astounded question. "Have you been trying to get me to remember this place? To remember all of this?"

The answer was a slow, broken smile as Obi-Wan looked down at the ground, clearing his throat and trying to keep his voice even. "I… I was once a slave. I don't want you to be the Council's."

"Obi-Wan…"

"You should let Ahsoka know we're ok and I'll set up camp for the night. It's too much of a risk to ride back in the dark with the things that come out at night here." Please. No more questions, Anakin. Not tonight, he begged silently through the Force.

Stunned beyond words as he tried to match up everything he'd ever thought about Obi-Wan with what he had just learned, Anakin said nothing as they both stood, helping each other up, and mounted their bikes again to ride to the deeper shadows now gathered around the base of the ridge behind them.

"I'm sorry," Anakin told him, the apology clumsy and worthless and for so much more than he was able to say. "I'm sorry I took us out this far."

"Don't apologize, Anakin. Don't ever apologize for what they did to you."

Anakin willed himself away from the newborn serpent slithering and snarling at bottom of his spirit and the equally nascent love for Obi-Wan that drowned it out, and tilted his head, closing his eyes and letting the warm wind flow over him. He let out a shuddering breath, attempting to calm himself. "It's summer here, isn't it?"

"I think that's what the readout said when we landed," Obi-Wan was still struggling as much as he was to control his emotions, it seemed, that glacier that usually covered his heart and mind cracking enough Anakin could feel a desperate hope and equally desperate sadness warring with each other inside him.

Thank you. You've risked your life to help me. Thank you, he wanted to say, but it wouldn't come out. "It… It won't get too much cooler than this. I don't think we'll even need our cloaks tonight," he replied instead, stunned at how much confidence he had in the words coming out of his mouth despite the scattershot chaos inside him.

"Is this how this planet is going to come to me? In little pieces? It's like watching a holo one word at a time."

"You should com Ahsoka."

In the gloom, he watched Obi-Wan pull a sleeping roll out of the bag of supplies strapped to his bike, putting himself to work to smooth out his emotions with the simple, mindless rhythm of what needed to be done. "You do that and I'll get camp set up," he explained, facing away from Anakin.
"All right," he answered, feeling dumb and mute in the face of everything happening. Within a few clicks along his wrist as he faced the ridge with his back turned to the desert, hiding the blue glow, Ahsoka's concerned face above her folded arms materialized just above his wrist. "Master? You two all right?"

"We're... We're not fine, that's for sure. "... all right. Look, I went too far out and we're stuck out here for the night. We're at the first ridge headed out from the west exit of the landing field you and the ship's at."

"What happened?" she prodded, not liking his hesitation.

"I... I remembered something else the Council did to me. My homeworld. It's here. It's Tatooine."

Ahsoka gasped and her hand flew up to her mouth, the sudden motion blurring her arm in the holo feed. "You did?" He couldn't tell in the grainy feed if her expression was one of shock or happiness or a mix of both.

"Yeah. That's all I really know right now and I don't know how to even start thinking about it." He gave a short, hurt laugh of disbelief and did his best to let the snarl of the incomprehensible shift in his life this truth would mean stay unfathomable for now, for just one more night before it all came crashing down on him. "And I don't want to until we're all back together tomorrow morning. So I don't want you thinking about it either, or worrying about it, or anything, until we get back tomorrow. All right?"

Ahsoka assented, concern and affection coming through her body language in the holo even if she was too far away from them for her physical Force signature to register. Hugging herself, she peered into the camera as if she could see him better the closer she got to her own side of it. "You be safe. You two take care of yourselves."

"According to the map in the shop we're inside the Ring. It's this line of watches Jabba's men set up to keep the Sand People away from the spice and the moisture farmers around town. So we should be safe. But we'll keep all our lights hidden just in case."

"Good. How is he?"

Anakin hesitated, glad Ahsoka was too far to feel the ragged, emotional edge both of them were on, but Obi-Wan came over, face as calm as he could make it as he leaned in next to Anakin. "I'm fine, my dear. Just setting up what will pass for a camp."

"Good. But I'm going to saber you if Master comes back with even a scratch on him," she tried to joke. Obi-Wan's dry chuckle did nothing to reassure her as he moved back out of sight toward the speeders. "Please be careful, both of you."

"I will. We will. Have a good night, Snips."

"You too, Master. A nice, quiet, safe night."

Anakin clicked off the holo and lifted his gaze up to the night sky, allowing his vision to readjust in the blackness above, before bringing it back down again. He could just make out two bedrolls in the shadow of the ridge within arm's reach of each other and Obi-Wan, who sat down on one and returned to sorting through the bottles and cans from the supply bags, squinting at them close to his face rather than risk using the light from his own com.
There was so much he wanted to say to Obi-Wan, but forming the words for any of it, even just in his mind, brought too much emotion boiling up and he gave up for the moment, going to sit down on the other pallet across from him. "Need any help?" That was safe. There was no risk in that, no thoughts of anything beyond this exact moment.

"No." Obi-Wan shook a small bottle against his ear and listened to it. "I think this is dune-palm oil. Good for sunburns."

"Any food in there?"

"Rations, for the most part."

They sat quietly, unconsciously calming each other once again with the subtle overlap of the Force that burned outward from Anakin and crept out in sparks and halos from Obi-Wan as Anakin watched the sky and Obi-Wan arranged whatever he figured might be needed or helpful in a small stack between their rolls and the speeders.

When the last bottle was checked and set aside, the surface of their souls was calm enough once again to entertain lighter thoughts, ones that could float along without attracting the monsters that swam in the deep. "Looking at the stars?" Obi-Wan asked, brushing his fingers across Anakin's back in a soothing rhythm back and forth as he took in the lovely stretch of the heavens overhead.

"Yeah." Tonight, perhaps because Anakin needed escape so badly, he could almost feel a sweet vertigo, his heart and mind falling into the soft, beautiful black above that was so clear and perfect it felt like he was back in space, stars crowding the sky with their subtle undertones of pink and blue, red and orange beneath their faint glittering white.

_This was my sky. This is my sky_, he realized with sudden pride at the gorgeous sweep of jeweled night above. _These are my stars._

He felt Obi-Wan's hand drop down to his own and squeeze comfortingly, and did the same back. "Do you remember anything about them? Their names?" Obi-Wan asked, twining his fingers with Anakin's as they sat, two slim silhouettes lost in darkness.

He took a deep breath and let it out, relaxing, trying to leave an open space in his mind for the answers to rise up into. It felt like coaxing a large, dangerous animal in from the wild, maybe that awful rage he'd almost suffocated from earlier: he sensed that if he pushed his recollections, or tried to force them back into view, that the horrid pain from earlier would be back and in force. So instead he waited as the last of the day's heat dissipated from the desert floor, cooler air blowing in around them as Obi-Wan's thumb ran gently over the back of his hand and the words began to find their way to his lips.

"That's the River of the Dead," he said, indicating a barely visible wash of light cutting from north to south just above the horizon before sliding his finger over to two glittering points, one red and one white almost straight overhead. "And those… those are the King and… wait, no… those are the Lovers."

"Do they have a story?" Obi-Wan asked, leaning against him, drawing strength from Anakin, and Anakin felt a certain pride at that. _I'm right here. You're safe. We're safe._

"The red one is a princess. She died in a sandstorm and the old gods put her up in the sky out of pity. Her lover wandered, searching for her until he ended up in the sky too. I… I always wondered why they didn't just come back home after they found each other."
"Maybe if they come back they can't be together." It was meant as an innocent reply, a casual remark, but Anakin felt a sadness creep into Obi-Wan's words as Obi-Wan understood what he'd said and sat up away from him, running his hands through his hair and pressing his palms to his forehead for a moment as if he could drive his demons out of sight that way.

Unable to see Obi-Wan's face in the dark but easily finding his cheek, Anakin rested his free hand against it and stroked the line of his jaw. "Are you worried about… about us? That this will change things somehow?"

Surprised, Anakin watched as Obi-Wan struggled to find the right words to say, confirming he was lost in doubt so powerful it had stripped him of his usual eloquence.

Don't be worried. We'll find a way somehow, Anakin sent with a wave of reassurance, pulling him in for a tight embrace.

When Obi-Wan's mood did not budge, mired in whatever awful thoughts were holding him down, Anakin felt instinct take over. "Obi-Wan?" he asked lightly, as if they had just been trading jokes and talking about saber practice.

"Yes?" came the puzzled response.

"I was wondering, you know… with your injuries... are you better yet?" Please don't be sad. I can't imagine how sad your life has been, but it won't be anymore. Not with me.

Please smile. Please let me make you smile.

Obi-Wan paused, and Anakin watched as he worked through the seemingly random question, head canting to one side. "Oh. Oh," he repeated, laughing at his own embarrassment as he remembered the promise they'd made each other when he was still too sore for any of the pleasures both of them had been entertaining the idea of, and the worst of the fog surrounding him began to fade. "Ah, yes? Yes, I'm better."

At Obi-Wan's hesitation, that rare flash of shyness, Anakin's heart beat faster with hope and fledging desire, and his idea seemed even better by the second. "Then let me show you nothing's changed and you have nothing, nothing at all, to be worried about," he whispered, leaning in close to kiss him.

You are not what your master made you. I know you're not.

They leaned into each other again like the tides this world had never known, trading light kisses and touches that deepened in agonizingly slow perfection to the hard, demanding push of waves rolling in, parting only for quick breaths before coming together again. As their mouths and tongues met in luscious waves of heat, Obi-Wan tangled his hands in Anakin's hair so tight it hurt and Anakin returned the favor by licking and sucking the soft, salty skin of his throat until bruises bloomed like the flowers this desert had never seen.

If I do this tonight, I will never be a perfect Jedi, the last surviving doubt screamed, almost drowned out by the Force singing around the both of them in twin harmonies of pure, undiluted need.
I never was the perfect Jedi, he answered himself silently, close to the same passionate transcendence he'd achieved on the bike that rested cold and still on the ground just a few feet away.

I never stood a chance to be the perfect Jedi. That's why the Council did this. That's why they mind-wiped me.

Desperate for more but breathless, Anakin sat back, gasping, taking in the fine, wet hint of Obi-Wan's mouth in the dark with a fresh wave of arousal, but Obi-Wan didn't give him much time to admire it, quick to pull Anakin's mouth back against it. Lost in the kiss, Anakin's tongue twined with Obi-Wan's as he fumbled with his own shirt, eager to give Obi-Wan's roaming hands more to tease.

This is who I really am.

I am my anger and my lust and all of those feelings they tried to take out of me.

There was no sound other than Anakin's tremulous moans of approval as Obi-Wan pushed him back to lie on the sleeping roll and fell over him like a lovely shadow made of firm, heavy heat and sharp teeth that nipped at his throat and chest and fingers. Obi-Wan added his own rasping whispers, murmuring in Anakin's ear how beautiful he was, how much he wanted him, as Anakin buried his hands in Obi-Wan's hair, lost in the fine silk of it as Obi-Wan's fingers found something much harder to toy with down the fine, lithe line of Anakin's body.

And I want him.

More than anything.

He let out a startled gasp at the pleasure of it, the sound a pure, beautiful plea for more, and Obi-Wan was happy to oblige him. They moved easily, no words needed, Anakin slipping under Obi-Wan just as he had in the dream back at the Temple and Obi-Wan smiling down at him with the same heady, smoldering mix of lust and love Anakin had seen just before waking up alone.

I need him.

A sudden fear rose in him and he clutched at Obi-Wan's shoulders as they kissed, pushing him back just enough to stare at him and his words falling in unbidden, terrified gasps. "Don't go away. I don't want you to go."

"I won't," Obi-Wan rasped back, desire heavy in his throat. "I will never leave you, Anakin."

Anakin kissed him so hard it cut his lip, but Obi-Wan only laughed at the wound, a beautiful, rich sound that sent Anakin's heart thudding as Obi-Wan kissed him back, fingers just tight enough around his throat to show his own claim and territory. With the eagerness of all young lovers they quickly found their rhythm again, hands and mouths tracing greedy patterns on each other's skin as they shed their clothes and their words and everything but the stars overhead and their violent, beautiful need for the other.

As he lay on his back, Obi-Wan's forceful thrusts crushing the thin bedroll he lay on and pressing him down into the hard earth that was nothing compared to what was inside of him, Anakin gasped with each rock of Obi-Wan's hips as he stared up past his silhouette into the night sky and his body screamed with pure, delirious pleasure. He tried to form words, to beg for Obi-Wan to never stop, but both his voice and his Force signature had burned away to the same pinpoints of fire he saw overhead.
There was only Obi-Wan, over him, inside him, as the heat seared away everything but that perfect, blinding glare of Anakin's body giving all it had, burning away to ash in the fire of their lust and leaving him to clutch weakly at Obi-Wan's shoulders and shuddering in mindless ecstasy. Obi-Wan only drove in harder and faster, a shooting star in free-fall along its own doomed line toward earth until it flashed and burnt itself out in its own flare of beautiful white heat inside the velvet night of Anakin's body.

They lay together, gasping, and somehow Anakin found the strength to bring his hands up to Obi-Wan's face and cradle it as he leaned up to kiss him, lips still trembling and breath hot on Obi-Wan's cheek. "Mine," he panted, the thought and word echoing as one in both of their spirits.

"Yours," Obi-Wan breathed with the same reverence, dropping his head to lie on the hot, slick skin of Anakin's bare chest. "Always."

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaaand done for this week! Hope you enjoyed! I'll be back with another update anywhere from next Tuesday to next Friday.

Thanks again so much for your kudos, your comments, and your support! I will catch up on comments tomorrow. I always love hearing your thoughts, opinions, and theories! Y'all are the best! :) 

Thank you to my dear Fireflyfish for all of her help. <3 <3 <3

On Tumblr? Me too! Come visit me, send me asks, anything! writegowrite
Greetings, my dear readers whom I love and adore!

So this seems to be a habit of late... I bring you another giant chapter split into two! When I plotted this out I didn't realize how much I was packing into each original chapter.

Two notes: I am no longer sticking to the original 20 chapter plan since they seem to be clocking in at 2 per update recently. For now I'll say somewhere between 22 and 30 chapters for the final count. For those who might be worried, the whole plot is written out, so this won't turn into an endless, rambling fic. There is a definite end to it, for better or worse. ;)

The other note is that I have been sick all week, like stay home from work sick, so if you notice a slip in quality that's why. I've finally started feeling human again today, though. Yay!

Anakin woke in a tangle of cloaks against his bare skin, puzzled at first by the cool drift of air across his face and shoulders and the darkness that loomed over him.

Rocks. A ridge. Why am I outsi... oh.

Tatooine.

Obi-Wan.

It came to him that they had fallen asleep together, both physically and emotionally exhausted, and that he had, for once, slept in perfect, dreamless bliss through the night.

As he rolled over to face the desert, he found Obi-Wan gone from his side, a half-dressed shadow sitting just out of reach with his back to Anakin and the ridge, the brute wall of his shields down. Obi-Wan's head was tilted, and a powerful sadness surrounded him like a halo darker than the waning black and dull grey of this hour just before dawn. A single thought lay threaded through that ring of emotion, glittering ebony and pain. Is this it? Is this all he will remember?

"Obi-Wan?"

He started, and by the time he turned back to Anakin his shields were back up and the sadness and errant thought were gone as cleanly as Anakin's speeder tracks wiped away by the desert winds during the night. "You're awake," he said with a real smile, whatever was on his mind forgotten for the moment.

Anakin reached toward him with one of his own, arms out and still too asleep to think through what he'd just seen. "Yeah. Come here."

Obi-Wan moved back over to him, Anakin sitting up and the cloaks falling away from his chest as
he hugged him. "Good morning," he smiled, lazily stealing a kiss. "I see you bundled me up at some point."

"Good morning," Obi-Wan answered, tracing his hands through Anakin's hair in an attempt to bring some order to the waves and curls. "I did. You slept well, it seems."

"I did." Anakin nuzzled against him, his nose cold as it brushed against his cheek. He wrapped one of the cloaks and then his arms around them both, Obi-Wan leaning his head to rest on Anakin's shoulder as Anakin rubbed his hand along Obi-Wan's back, feeling the scars there and the muscles they ghosted over.

They watched the black retreat across the sky, the dawn marching in slow scouts of grey and long trailing flags of pink overhead, their souls finding that delicate balance that defined their budding relationship in the simple act of contact with the other.

"Shall we head back?" Obi-Wan murmured when a wash of orange had bled into the pink sky, pulling on the tunic left in a pile to the side of their bedrolls. "It should be safe at this point."

"Do we have to?" Suddenly overcome by the sheer weight of what likely lurked back in Mos Espa, Anakin pressed himself closer against Obi-Wan and tried to ignore the cold blossoming in the pit of his stomach. He wanted to know and didn't, wanted to find out what had been hidden from him but uneasy about what it might be.

Obi-Wan kissed his cheek, whispering against it but no more eager than he was. "Yes."

"I don't remember anything beyond bits and pieces. Will it all come back?" Anakin asked, tugging on his own clothes after shaking the sand out of them the best he could and making a face at the fine dust that drifted away.

"I… I don't know. But you must not push yourself, Anakin." Obi-Wan warned, shaking out his own cloak in hollow snaps of fabric and sand.

"What do you mean?"

Obi-Wan folded the cloak in neat halves once and then again, fingers sliding along the ridges of cloth as he worked. "You must not try to push past what your mind is willing to show you. If you try to force it before it's ready, you could very much hurt yourself."

"Does that mean I can't ask you about whatever Sith secret you used to find out I was from Tatooine?" Anakin's thoughts raced along with possibilities, and his hands drifted away from the belt he was fastening as he considered them. "Can you read through mind-wipes or something? Is that it? What did you see when you did? Did you see my family?"

Obi-Wan turned to him, the cloak in his arms and framed by a halo of the last stars brave enough to wait for the rising suns. "Please trust me, Anakin, that I would tell you about your life here if I could. Please. But I would rather die than hurt you." He looked out toward the desert, avoiding Anakin's curious gaze as he walked by to pack the cloak away in one of the bags that hung from the side of his speeder. "Your memories of Tatooine will come back on their own, or… or they won't. There is no secret, Jedi or Sith, that can help you."

There was a finality in Obi-Wan's words he didn't care for. "You two brought me here, and that worked, right? Could you show me where I lived, if you know? Can you see that too? Could I remember that way?"

Bringing a hand up to wave away all of the questions, Obi-Wan shook his head and settled on
answering two of them. He sounded tired. "Yes, I can show you where you lived. And yes, It was
Ahsoka's idea to come here. She found the first records of you coming to the Temple from
Tatooine through the hangar bay ship rosters and asked for my help in getting you here. Already
knowing you were from here, I had considered it before but thought you wouldn't trust me enough
to come along. She cares about you, Anakin. Deeply. You are lucky to have her looking out for
you."

Anakin finished getting dressed, movements slow as he thought back to the strange collection of
documents he had found on Ahsoka's datapad back on the planet of lavender forests. "She is, well,
amazing. I don't deserve her as a Padawan."

"She is fiercely intelligent and stubborn, just like you," Obi-Wan smiled weakly as Anakin came
over to wrap him in a quiet embrace. "And just as aggressive when it comes to protecting those she
cares about." He ran a finger over Anakin's cheek, tracing the line of his jaw, before sliding his
arms around him again. "She thinks she is the first to know that you are from here. Please do not
tell her otherwise. I don't wish to be interrogated about it. The less that is said, the safer you are."

Anakin sighed, tucking his head under Obi-Wan's, his lips against his collarbone, wanting to sink
into his heat and stay there forever, wishing he could stop the planet turning and the day stealing
into the sky overhead. "I don't keep things from her. Not... not anymore."

"Just this, Anakin. Please."

"Fine," he huffed against Obi-Wan's chest in a warmth puff of air before leaning back, shaking his
head and easily finding another target for the sudden, vicious flare of anger that rose inside. "I can't
believe they did this to me."

Obi-Wan said nothing, not trusting himself to speak on this particular matter, and stroked Anakin's
back in a few gentle motions before pulling away.

"Obi-Wan?" came the hesitant question, Anakin catching him by the hand before his arms dropped
away.

"Yes?"

Anakin studied the lazy tangle of their fingers, tanned skin against pale. "Did you mean what you
said? Last night?"

Golden eyes made bronze by the night and rising through clouds of doubt and fear, Obi-Wan
looked up with such intensity it almost frightened him. "I will be yours forever, Anakin. As long as
you want me by your side, I will be there."

At those words Anakin drew him in for a hard, needful kiss, their two forms lingering in the
growing light as Anakin did his best to show Obi-Wan just how long that would be and the worry
between them drained away into caresses and soothing touches along collars and sleeves.

The silence begun by that rough embrace continued as they packed up their small camp, both
wanting this fragile, perfect peace to last as long as it could. The only sound came from somewhere
far away in the desert: the keening cry of a dune-hawk circling up lazily into the sky.

By the time they rode back, the city was stirring to life in the early morning sun, and Ahsoka was
waiting for them in front of their ship as they appeared through the gate at the end of the landing
field.

Arms folded, brain dull from weariness and a mostly sleepless night spent tossing and turning,
Ahsoka watched the two ride down the lane toward her, frowning at the various hues of the Force that swirled around Anakin like the banners of an army returning home.

Anger she had expected, and understood. Excitement, too, even. But there was another vein of emotion that she wasn't sure about: Obi-Wan and Anakin were closer than when they had left and as much as she knew Obi-Wan loved Anakin she wasn't entirely sure it was a good thing if Anakin decided to start loving him back. He is a Sith. He loves you but he's still a Sith.

"Master?" she asked as they pulled up in a low grumble of engines and swung to a halt in the landcraft slot next to the ship.

"Hey, Snips." Anakin got down and strode over to her as Obi-Wan slid off his own bike. "You ok?"

"Yeah. You?"

"Let's go inside. I need a shower and to wash the sand out of these clothes and then we need to talk. Obi-Wan… told me how you found out. Thank you." Anakin hugged her so tightly it had almost hurt, and she did the same back, their Force presences lingering in a cloud of concern and worry, love and reassurance. I am here, their true selves said to the other. You are not alone.

The two men went on ahead inside, Obi-Wan taking one shower while Anakin took the other, leaving Ahsoka to stand and look out over the jagged waves of ships and fencing as the ramp came back up.

And that was how Ahsoka's world changed. She had known it would. She had stood there before they appeared, waiting for the sound of their speeders, peering out through the gauzy light of dawn and the people scurrying back and forth with a lead weight in her gut, knowing this was the last time she would see the world this way, with certain truths unshakable and set above her in the firmament of her mind. The Council can be trusted. The Order is good, and true, and helps people. I am proud to be a Jedi.

She had known it would change, that some of these truths would be destroyed, but it still stole her breath and stopped her heart when it did, when Anakin sat an hour later in the lead pilot chair, scrubbing at his damp hair with a towel, and uttered a few words that for all of their simplicity changed both of their lives. "I'm from Tatooine."

The Council can't be trusted. The Order is… is what?

Can I be a Jedi after this?

Then her master repeated more words she'd heard the night before, but so different hearing them from his own lips rather than through the grainy blue of a holo. "The Council did this to me. I don't remember it happening, but I know they did."

He was in shock, it was clear, the simple way he offered this as if he was discussing the latest fighter model to come online in the fleet.

The Council took my master's entire childhood from him.

They mind-wiped away his home, and his family, and the world he came from. My master, who has done nothing but fight for them and for the Order his whole life...

Ahsoka fought back her emotions as best she could, but soon it was too much for her and Anakin was there, wrapping his arms around her in a faint scent of soap and the cloud of his freshly laundered desert clothes. Obi-Wan came back out from his own shower to find them like this, and wordlessly went to sit in one of the back chairs in the cabin to give them a little room.
"How could they do this to you?" she cried, hands in fists. "Why would they do this to you? Take away your whole childhood?"

Anakin felt numb as he listened to her questions, ones he had started asking himself this morning, felt strangely detached as if he were floating high above the situation, examining a problem on one of the Padawan assignments he often helped her with rather than a huge, gaping hole in his own life. "I don't know. I have no idea," he admitted, trying to fight down all of the same fears and uncertainty raging through him, to show her he would somehow be all right in the face of this strange, monstrous revelation. "But I do know that before we go back I want to try to remember more."

More than his own unrecognizable feelings, he hated how upset she felt through the Force and tried to smile for her as best he could. "Hey, we'll be all right, whatever happens. We're tough, right?"

She sniffled against him, nodding her agreement even as she smoothed down his collar and gave him a half-hearted poke in the chest. "Yeah, I guess so."

This time, when Anakin stepped outside into the bright daylight and heat already curling up from the duracrete, wrapped in his layers of light cottons, he was alert rather than just curious, already a different man than the one that had so blithely wandered off the ship yesterday. He reached out with the Force, trying to find some sight or sound that would bring another memory, another epiphany like the one he'd had yesterday. But there was nothing, only the coarse rock walls of the buildings around him and the sound of vehicles and conversations. He wondered how he'd known Huttese and if more would come back to him, but as he passed a vendor arguing with a customer in the guttural tones of the language he still couldn't make any sense of it.

Obi-Wan strolled ahead of him, his gait relaxed and easy as it always was but his shoulders tense, the stiff line of them obvious even under his own billowing cloak.

*Where are you taking me?* he wondered to himself, careful to not let that reach ahead. He was still angry about keeping a secret from Ahsoka, at how Obi-Wan had forced his hand in that even if he knew Obi-Wan was right. *I need to remember on my own, and she might not be able to stop herself from telling me if she knows something I don't.*

They were going into a meaner part of town, the dwellings packed tightly together and the faces becoming brittle and sullen as the glances after the three cloaked figures grew longer and longer. Anakin wasn't afraid, though, and if Ahsoka was she didn't show it: after enough missions in places like this it was easy to think of their long walk as just another reconnaissance run if they were careful not to put too much thought into it.

For his part, Obi-Wan walked down the narrow streets as if he owned the place, drifting through tunnels and down winding lanes for a long while before he stopped in a little courtyard with at least two-dozen small doors and arches facing out onto it, a group of pitifully small excuses for apartments spread out over three rickety floors that rose around them. There was a faint scent of solder and oil mixed in with the hot air around them, carried by the morning breezes from a line of shops a few streets over.

Anakin paused next to Obi-Wan, trying to figure out if this was the place Obi-Wan meant to bring
them to or if he was just getting his bearings. "Why are we stopping here?" He examined the cracked plaster and duracrete walls, both eager for and dreading any memories that might come, but none did. It was just a poor block of rooms in a poor neighborhood, shimmering in the growing heat of the twin suns climbing into the sky.

Obi-Wan said nothing, looking up to one particular arch in a corner of the third floor, lost in thought and far away as if recalling ancient history or some tome he'd once read. The roughly-hewn arch had long ago been outlined in a deep red paint, some kind of crude ochre likely pulled from the clay flats around the city and now faded to a ghost of its former hue. "That particular color," he finally said, nodding up to it, "marks a victim of illness. Azul'ir's children, they call those that die of it, as the plagues visit here often enough it's seen as a punishment from the Father."

"I saw a door like that a couple of streets ago," Ahsoka said, peering up at it from inside her hood. "It only looked a few years old, though, and people were living there?"

"It seals away the evil, is the thought," Obi-Wan said, turning to Anakin with a hard glint in his eyes. "Both of you listen. It's important in this part of town you not touch or disturb anything painted that color, no matter how old. The locals think the color keeps the dead content and asleep. It lets life go on," he gestured up without looking toward the marked door, "when so much of it has ended."

Anakin and Ahsoka both nodded and they continued on away from that sad collection of apartments, noticing just how many doors they passed after that bore at least faint traces of the rust-red as they moved further into this stretch of the rambling town. Obi-Wan, a ghost in tan and grey, turned again and again and they followed, down a snarl of roads and alleys Anakin desperately wanted to remember but couldn't until he stepped out onto one cracked lane kept in shadow by the relatively tall buildings it was sandwiched between.

As soon as his boot came down, the blunt shadows of the structures pressing down around him, it came in a thought as pure as the strip of blue sky left free overhead and the heat rising from the duracrete. *Mother.*

*I know this road. This is the way to Mother.*

He let out a laugh at the realization, Ahsoka and Obi-Wan glancing back at him. *Mother. I have a mother. A real mother.*

"Anakin?" Obi-Wan asked, taking a step toward him, his alarm showing this was not a place he'd expected Anakin to remember anything.

Anakin didn't notice, too caught up in chasing the bright fireflies of memories sparking to life in his mind. *Mother but no father.* As bizarre as it seemed, he felt no sadness about this. There had never been a father in his life and this had never bothered his mother. *No father. Just Mother.*

"Mother. She's this way," Anakin said in awe, knowing which alley his feet would spin him toward in a swirl of cloak before they did, away from wherever Obi-Wan had been leading them. "She's this way!"

*Mother. Warm and soft and kind.* He let out another laugh as a memory came to him, superimposed over the barren walls as he took off, a beautiful haze of a dark-haired woman with a thoughtful face brushing his hair. *I was so small. I fit so perfectly in her lap.*

"Anakin, wait!" Obi-Wan called, but he was gone already, racing ahead, as fast as his long legs could carry him down the narrow street.
She sang to me when I was scared, he told himself, knowing it was true as soon as he thought it and beginning a strange conversation as the deeper reaches of his mind spoke out in flashes of images and feelings to the waking one.

I was scared? Why was I scared?

Slaves. She and I were slaves.

Anakin slowed, his run dropping to an uncertain, wobbling walk before he fought back against the weight of this new understanding with another stunned, ecstatic laugh. He took off in long strides, boots scraping against the cobblestones of this incredibly old part of town. Somewhere behind him Obi-Wan and Ahsoka were shouting for him, but he wasn't listening as he rushed ahead.

Kriff that! I'm not a slave now! I'll buy her and she'll be free! We can be together again... She's just ahead!

He rounded a corner and then another, drunk on that memory of sitting in his mother's lap, her voice sweet and low as she hummed to him. The intimate reality of the memory, the tugging of the brush on his hair, of her fingers brushing it back out of his face: it felt so real as if it'd happened an hour ago, a perfect counterpoint to the soaring epiphany Tatooine had been.

He was a child of Tatooine and a son of this woman. And just as he'd found Tatooine he'd find her. Running faster, laughing at the startled expression of a woman he surprised coming around a bend, he ran past her with a breathless apology and hurried onward down this last stretch before what he knew was the final turn to the right, a corner covered in hardy scrubvine that shivered yellow in the morning breeze.

He ran his fingers through the sea of cool and waxy leaves as he rounded the corner. Mother! I'm coming! I'm-

Red filled his vision.

He almost hit a sea of the color, ancient and dried like old blood and smeared so high it was almost taller than him. Jerking to a halt, his cloak swirling around him, he took in the low brick wall in front of him and the open archway in the middle of it with an inarticulate cry of understanding at the ruddy, worn shapes scattered inside.

A cemetery.

Her cemetery.

"No," he cried, trembling, unable to deny that plain, hateful truth as another memory tumbled in, that of him as a little boy with tiny hands rubbing that horrid red over a plain, ugly gravestone.

Her gravestone. Mother's.

Obi-Wan and Ahsoka had lost sight of Anakin, but the flash of rage that slammed through the Force seared through them as blindingly as any beacon. "Master!" Ahsoka shouted as the two skidded around the corner to find Anakin struggling to stay on his feet, shaking and backing away from a worn archway colored that same hue Obi-Wan had warned them about.

The cobblestones in the courtyard began to rattle, a small earthquake drawing puzzled shouts and yells from those living in the homes piled up around the cemetery even if they couldn't tell where it was coming from.
Dead, Anakin's heart sighed as the last wisp of hope dried up and blew away on the wind that pulled at his cloak. She's been dead.

For a long time.

Another truth cut in, jagged and sharp. I came here every day after she died.

Every day.

The Force shot out in black waves, powerful and vicious, curling in around him to seethe like a nest of vipers thick and deep as he let out a choked sob and sank to his knees, unable to look away from the sea of red in front of him as the metal railings lining the building across the way began to creak and distort. Ahsoka let out a cry and tensed to run to him, but Obi-Wan yanked her back. "No!"

She whipped her head around to argue and met a glare icier than she had ever seen from him as the Force boiled around them. The glare said she was in the way, and that she needed to be out of it. "He will hurt you! Stay here."

Shocked, torn between disobeying him and actually afraid of what might happen if she did, Ahsoka watched in mute, anguish silence as Obi-Wan slowly walked out across the courtyard to Anakin's crumpled form, fighting the battering, invisible howl of the Force as it screamed in a way Anakin himself could not, the sound of cracking rock and panicked voices loud from the buildings around them, the gravestones themselves the only thing not vibrating with his unspeakable horror and grief.

Ahsoka squinted, sliding down with her back against the wall, straining to watch as Obi-Wan pulled his hood back, face as grim as a triage medic assessing a fatally wounded soldier, and laid a hand on Anakin's back as he leaned over him.

Anakin's Force presence, thoughtless and violent as it careened around them, still carried the words to her through their bond, simple ones delivered in the smooth ice of Obi-Wan's Coruscanti accent with only a hint of the fear he must have felt. "Silent and still, Anakin. Silent and still, please."

She watched as Anakin, wild-eyed, faced Obi-Wan as if just now understanding he was there with him, and then in a wild surge of agony across the Master-Padawan bond Anakin passed out, the rattling and shaking all around them abruptly dying away as swiftly as it'd come.

Obi-Wan caught him with a grieved cry of his own, sinking to his knees and cradling Anakin's head against his chest as Ahsoka overcame her fear and darted over to them.

When Anakin woke, it was to the low, hissed tones of Obi-Wan and Ahsoka arguing with each other just over his head and a throbbing pain that kept him from doing anything more than listening and trying to place himself back in this awful new world he'd brought himself to.

"What did you do to him?" his Padawan was demanding.

"I didn't do anything!"

"You hurt him somehow!"
"I was trying to calm him down!" came the rattled response, so unlike Obi-Wan's usual impassive tones.

"You knocked him out!"

Anakin groaned, trying to wave his hand, to dispel the anger building between them that beat against the headache drumming to life in his skull. "Stop. Please."

They did, the quarrel instantly forgotten as concern flooded down to him from Ahsoka and Obi-Wan's yellow gaze narrowed with the same. Anakin's body told him as he sat back up that he was half-sitting, half-lying, leaned against Obi-Wan and the three of them resting in a narrow street across from the plague cemetery.

The courtyard and buildings were just as quiet and empty as they had been before Anakin's awful discovery, the local denizens very familiar with ignoring things that might get them into trouble if they got too curious.

In this new silence, Anakin leaned back against Obi-Wan as he tried to get his strength back and stared across the way at the graveyard, the collection of worn markers and piles of rock, some freshly rubbed or painted that dull red and others scrubbed almost clean by arid winds and sands.

She's somewhere in there. She was my mother and she loved me so much and it didn't matter. She's still in there.

The black snake coiled around his heart squeezed and sank its fangs into him anew, but there was no shock in the understanding this time. Grief, a wide pit of it he wasn't sure had any bottom, but no shock as more memories faded into view.

She died when I was six. I had just had my tracker put in the year before, at the age of five. The age everyone gets them. He reached up with shaking fingers to rub at a tiny, smooth mark that ran up the back of his neck, a small and precise line he'd never really thought about before, his memories flowing at the same speed as his thoughts and illuminating what was just ahead and no more as they tumbled along.

She got sick. She got sick and then she was gone and she was so thin and they took her away and there was only my owner and… me… and… and why can't I remember any more?

Obi-Wan followed Anakin's motions, stroking the back of his neck, not saying anything as Ahsoka took his other hand with both of her own. "Master? It's me…"

"She's gone," came the words, fragile and tremulous as he fought a fresh wave of despair.

She opened her mouth and then closed it again, and in the end she pressed his hand gently as she sent her Force presence to wrap around him, loving and worried, as Obi-Wan watched in silence.

"What do you remember?" she asked, when the worst of his anguish had subsided just enough she felt it was safe to speak.

"We were slaves. My father… wasn't there. She… she died when I was young. Six." A name came to him, as harsh as he suddenly knew his owner had been. "Watto. Our master's name was Watto. Toydarian."

He scrabbled across the cliff face of this newly remembered horror that another being had once owned him with the same surety and legal backing a man owns a house or a ship, trying to reach out past it for more memories of his mother, of his life as a slave, but only a bolt of pain shot
through him. Groaning, he put his head in his hands and cursed. "I want to remember!"

"Anakin. Do not push yourself!" Obi-Wan begged and warned in the same breath.

"I want to remember!" he snarled, fingers digging and clenching into his hair, staring at the ground and through the pain that accompanied his words.

Obi-Wan pulled him closer, trying to soothe him with his presence, and whispered in his ear. "Please, Anakin. If you hurt yourself, we'll have to carry you back to the ship. Please stop."

Another starry flare across his consciousness at these words, ringed in pain but with an undeniable clarity. "To the ship. Nine. I was nine when he came. When Master Qui-Gon came. 'Nine is a lucky number, they say.' That's what Watto said, when he sold me to him, but that's not true. He just made it up. He... he really wanted me out by then."

These events in his life were like still holo captures, no sound or movement or detail, just fuzzy outlines around solid truth. "He was scared of me by then. Watto was. He kept trying to sell me."

"Scared of a child?" Ahsoka wondered, wrapping one of his hands in both of her own and rubbing it.

"I would... destroy things when I was upset. Or I... I did? Sometimes I stopped?" More interference, more noise crowding in alongside a sharp, unrelenting ache until even the still images he'd seen were impossible to make out or focus on. "Why would I stop? I hated him!"

"Anakin," Obi-Wan said into his hair, stroking errant waves of brown back out of his face. "You're sweating. Stop." He darted another cool glare at Ahsoka, who was drawing breath to ask another question.

She nodded and let it out without saying anything further, patting Anakin's shoulder and then his cheek, trying to smooth away the anxiety drumming at the edges of his mind.

*I would sit on the uneven ledge of the window in the front of Watto's shop- It was a junk shop, a salvage shop, that's right- my tiny feet swinging over the side with some droid parts to play with to keep me busy. I'd watch Mother work, and she'd ask me what I saw outside. She taught me who and what went by outside and everything she gave me to play with, one name at a time. Never angry, never impatient. I loved when she'd explain things to me, when everything else would stop and it would just be her and me as she told me some new amazing thing I had never heard of before. She knew about the whole world, I thought. She knew everything and I wanted to be just like her."

"I want to see her," he said, pushing himself to his feet, voice as unsteady as his legs were.

"Anakin, are you sure?" Obi-Wan asked, rising with him and his hand tight on one arm as Ahsoka took the other.

"Yeah, I'm sure." He braced himself against the wall behind them and then gently pushed both Obi-Wan and Ahsoka away, taking one step forward and then another toward that silent place. He knew where he was going before he crossed under the arch, walking slowly as the memories came back.

*She was kind, always helping our neighbors when we could or taking food to the sick when the plagues came. She said you should always help someone if you can. And Watto blamed her death on that when she fell ill. "You see, Ani?" he snorted, smacking me in the back of the head to make me stop crying as they carried her body out. "You see what helping people gets you?"*
"I wanted to kill him for that," he muttered to no one in particular, walking deeper into the haphazard rows of graves that lay in silent tumbles of rock about him. "Why didn't I?"

Sarlacc, came the answer, in such a rote, frozen string it had to be something he'd heard before, something repeated often enough to become second nature. *Slaves that kill their masters are fed to the Sarlacc, by order of his Grand Excellency Jabba the Most Wise and Just.*

A sudden image of that gruesome pit ringed with tentacles and teeth as only a young child could have imagined it slithered through him, leaving him cold as he found himself turning down one path and then another. *I still wanted to. I know I did.*

The graves were rougher here than in the front of the cemetery, decorations and carvings disappearing, the only adornment on these plain stones the short, thin metallic strip of a holoreader.

Anakin didn't need memories to know what those were: while the general treatment of slaves while alive was left to a master's individual temperament across the galaxy, the hard numbers of a slave's birth and death were matters carefully tracked by the syndicates that profited so much from them. He'd seen these on other planets, cheap and solar-powered units that would project the name, birth and death date, and any other interesting information about the slave, all of it sealed by the local magistrate and proof a slave had indeed died and not been resold without the local syndicate knowing.

*I would have been on one of these stones one day if Master hadn't found me.*

His hands curled into fists at his side, lost in the light folds of his desert cloak as a question scratched along his mind, one Anakin refused to consider for any longer than it took to recognize it. *No. Master had nothing to do with this. I refuse to believe he had anything to do with taking my memories from me.***

*He only wanted to help me.*

When he made the last turn, surrounded by bare markers glinting with their own lines of bronze readers in the morning sun, his boots scuffed to a halt against the path as he inclined his head, knowing to look down and to his left.

When Obi-Wan and Ahsoka caught up a few minutes later, giving him space and time, they found him knelt there, a broken, hooded shape limp and weak amidst the impassive stones, his fingers tracing over a plain marker that bore no writing save that projected by the reader.

Its message hung in the air above it, triggered by the brushing of his thumb against the metal strip, a tiny and speckled flag of lurid green text unmoved by the breeze swirling dust around them.


Anakin's hand trailed aimlessly through the faded red the stone was covered in, leaving new scars across its face and dust the color of a sunset on his fingers as his anguish bled out into the Force around him. There were no tears that fell from his hood: all of his pain was there in his spirit, none left to trace down his cheeks.

He said nothing as they came to stand and kneel on either side of him, into the murky swirl of the Force shrouding him that was heavy and dark as the mists this land had likely never known. Anakin clicked the holoreader off and the unearthly fireflies of numbers and letters vanished.

Ahsoka had never seen him truly, perfectly silent like this, and it terrified her. She reached out
hesitantly to touch his shoulder, only to find it was like touching a statue, hard and unmoving, and she glanced over at Obi-Wan for help in what to do next.

The Sith said nothing and did nothing, knelt with his own hooded face tilted down toward the grave marker.

"Ahsoka?" Anakin said, voice brittle as he raised his hand from the stone to point off past her. "There should be... a... a basket or bucket or something in the far corner off that way with clay in it. Bring it here?"

"Sure," she said, relieved to have something, anything to do, and hurried over the way he'd gestured, returning quickly with a large, rickety basket filled with raw lumps of what looked like red dirt. She set it down next to him and watched as he shifted to examine it, the sweep of his hood moving as he did.

He reached in and picked up a lump that crumbled at the touch, rubbing it together in his hands until it fell apart into smaller and smaller clumps, the heat of his skin softening the tiny pieces, talking so quietly she wasn't sure if he was addressing her and Obi-Wan or just himself. "Beggar's basket. Paint's expensive. You need water for paint." Holding his hands out, stained that dull umber, he began to rub them across the stone, leaving vivid streaks of the color on the weathered rock. Some of the pigment fell on his sleeves and his cloak, blood from invisible wounds, but he kept scrubbing, slowly and methodically, the Force now so dim and dark around him it shimmered like a mirage seen at midnight.

Obi-Wan placed his hand on Anakin's back, wordless, head bowed, as Anakin took another lump and crushed it with a twist of his wrists, touch gentle once again when his fingers met the grave marker. "I'm sorry I was gone so long, Mother," he murmured. "No one's been here to tend to you. Were you lonely?"

He smoothed another hazy line of red across its coarse surface. "I have...," he swallowed, "some people I'd like you to meet."

The faintest sigh came from inside the shadows of Obi-Wan's hood, and Ahsoka tried not to listen as she knelt to sit next to Anakin. Is he crying?

"This is my Padawan, Ahsoka." He held out his ruddy hands, asking for one of hers wordlessly, and Ahsoka gave it to him. He dropped a little gritty crumble into her palm, and rubbed it in a little, warming it up to spread across her skin. "She's sort of like my student, but she's really my best friend."

"Hello," she whispered, trying not to cry herself as she realized what she was supposed to do and the weight of it hitting her. "Anakin's really amazing. You'd be so proud of him." She ran her finger along the edge of the rough stone, smiling through the tears that threatened to come anyway.

Anakin shifted to hold out his hands to Obi-Wan. "And this is Obi-Wan."

Obi-Wan held out a trembling hand, face still downcast, and Anakin took it gently and rubbed some of the clay into his palm, their fingers twining and smearing the red as he thought about what to say, the Force trembling around him. "I... I love him. I think you would have liked him."

"Azul'ir's child, may you walk forever in the land of rains and flowers," Obi-Wan said in the low rasp of a formal greeting before his voice dropped to such an aching openness Anakin wondered how his shields could still hold against such emotion. "I swear to you, on my love for your son, that I will protect him. I will let no harm come to him."
Ahsoka bowed her head in sorrow and fear, afraid of so much as Obi-Wan reached out to trace his stained fingers across the stone: what would happen after Anakin finished paying his respects, what would happen when they went back to Coruscant, what sort of end a Jedi’s love for a Sith would come to. *Please, please help me protect your son. I just want him safe.*

They watched as Anakin finished covering the last corners of the marker and sat back, palms upturned and smeared with clay, the color bright against the unbleached lines of his clothes. When he finally stood, he rubbed his hands together until they were mostly clean, the last of the dust falling in wisps to the grave, and bowed deeply before he took the basket of clay back to the far corner. Ahsoka and Obi-Wan copied his motions, her tiny hands and his long fingers stretched out into the air over the marker, the same red drifting from both.

When they bowed and turned, Anakin was standing there as cold and stiff as the statues in the front of the cemetery, the only heat left in him in the faint red stains along his sleeve cuffs and blue eyes dark with emotion. The Force glinted like the scales of an indigo dragon curled around him. "I want to go back to the ship and practice shielding."

"I think that's a good idea, Master," Ahsoka said gently.

"But first we stop by Watto's."

Chapter End Notes

So I'm not going to lie, this was a hard chapter to write, and for the Shmi fans out there I mean no evil toward her, this is just how the story plotted out in my mind. I joke about being an evil Sith writer but yes, I felt bad building Anakin up and then doing that to him. My poor boy!

If you'd like to keep reading, Chapter 16 will go up in just a few minutes as soon as I format it. It's called "Answers". Yeah, I keep it real subtle like that.

Thank you so much for your comments and kudos, as always they make my day when I get them! I'll catch up on them once everything is posted.
Standing in front of the address Anakin had half-remembered and double-checked on the tombstone, a rambling restaurant she'd only eat at on a dare, Ahsoka had never in her entire life been so glad to hear of someone's death. She tried not to show relief on her face or in her own halo of the Force as the local, a thin-faced man that was more skeleton than human, spat something in Huttese Obi-Wan translated under his breath for both of them. This place felt wrong, though it was hard to tell anything beyond the black, thick cloud surrounding Anakin.

"Watto's been dead for a couple of years now, he's saying."

"How? Kava?" Anakin asked, voice icy, not even noticing the Huttese word that had come back to him.

The man chuckled and drew his index finger across his back twice, twisting around to let them see what he was doing. "Gambler lucky, lucky, lucky, one day unlucky!" he laughed in broken Basic before dropping back into Huttese, replete with dramatic gestures and waves of his bony hands.

Obi-Wan continued in a studiously neutral tone that ignored Ahsoka's gasp of disgust. "Someone cut or burned off his wings and left them in the middle of his shop and that was the last anyone saw of Watto. This man, the new owner of this charming establishment, is fairly certain he's in pieces out in the desert as payment for some gambling loss or another."

"Oh. Well... How do you say 'Thank you for the information'?" Ahsoka asked, hoping this was the end of the particular, murderous idea she was certain Anakin had been entertaining and one she had no desire to let happen much less witness, no matter how fitting it might be. "Shouldn't we be getting back to the ship?"

"I just wanted to talk to him," Anakin growled, swirling and stalking away into the crowd as Obi-Wan nodded their thanks and strode to catch up with him. "See if I could remember anything else. That's all."

"Master, a lot's happened in the day we've been here. Maybe it would be best if we just went back to the ship and sat and were quiet for a bit."

"I have been quiet. I have been quiet and obedient for my entire life as a Jedi because that is what the Council wanted me to be," he threw back over his shoulder. "I am done being quiet."

His hand drifted up under his hair to the scar on the back of his neck, smooth and perfect, as they walked through the dusty lanes and hovels back out into what was allegedly the nicer part of town. 

"What was my life like here? I still can't remember any of it, just that I was six when Mother died and nine when Master Qui-Gon bought me and took me onto the Jedi ship."

Anakin's gaze slid along the rusting buildings and blunt misery sprawling out around him as they walked. "Maybe I don't want to remember. A slave with no mother, out here? That couldn't have been an easy life."

His wavering faith in the Council mustered up a last stand, begging for understanding in the face of all that had happened. "Maybe that's why they did this. They wanted to spare me all of this."
"No," he said to himself, drawing a curious look from the other two as he pressed against the scar, searching for some flash of memory or sensation that refused to come. *I don't care. It's my life and it wasn't right of them to take it from me!*

"Master?" Ahsoka said as Obi-Wan led them back through the entrance to the landing field, glancing back at them.

"Nothing. Let's eat and then get started." *We need to be safe from this happening ever again. That is the first and only thing I know right now.*

*She needs to be safe.*

---

After a simple meal spent mostly in silence they arranged themselves in a loose triangle across the floor of the main cabin, cushions from the sleeping quarters tucked under them as they sat cross-legged in the sun slanting in from outside. Obi-Wan studied both of them in turn, starting with Anakin.

"You two will practice first, as we did last time. Anakin," Obi-Wan pondered how to best address the situation, "you have been through so much and at this point, you are different than you were before you came here."

"Yeah," he said, aware of how angrily the Force shifted back and forth around him, a new shadow trailing along the first one cast behind him. "I'm not trying to hold back anymore."

"And it shows," Obi-Wan nodded. "You need to be careful when you let Ahsoka in that you do not overwhelm her. And Ahsoka," he added, "You need to understand he will be different. Until today you've only interacted with Anakin behind glass, as it were. As the glass cracks and you see more of him, it may come as a surprise to you. He may not be the same person you have come to know."

"I want to know him for who he really is. I'm not scared." She had vague recollections of a mountain range, a craggy black line against a sky made purple with dusk, when Anakin had let her inside the last time they had done this. *I'll do anything to help you, Master. Anything.*

Anakin gave her a small smile at the determined set of her mouth and reached over to put his hand on her shoulder, rubbing it. "I'd never hurt you, Snips."

"I know," she smiled back, putting her hand over his. "Now come on, let me in."

Obi-Wan watched them sink into meditation together, relaxing into his seat as time passed and the air around them settled out into a calm sea of trust as Ahsoka's love and concern chipped away at Anakin's unease, until at last only a few ripples remained as they fought back errant thoughts and memories of everything that had happened outside of this invisible bridge built between them.

*Even with Anakin as upset as he is, they're twice as fast now,* Obi-Wan thought with grim satisfaction as he noted the time on his com when Anakin let out a soft whisper to Ahsoka that he was ready, an echo of it moving through the Force. *They're scared for each other. They're starting to realize what they're up against.*

Somewhere inside herself, Ahsoka heard Anakin's voice calling her from somewhere distant, somewhere further back than the grey haze of her eyes closed against the afternoon suns outside.
Her soul drifted toward it, after what might have been a time passing through a gate of some kind that had no height or width but was a gate all the same, and there was the mountain range once again, stretching on forever, a chain of dark silhouettes vanishing into a twilight sky.

*Here you are, Master.*

She floated above it, no emotion this far into her trance, and gave only the slightest gasp outside in the real world as the mountains began to move. *Is this an earthquake?* she asked herself with difficulty, as her conscious mind tried to impose order onto what her unconscious sensed. *Am I remembering the cemetery?*

The black hills below her rocked and shifted, and then a giant gold sun appeared near her in the middle of one. *No, not a sun. That's an eye.*

The eye, larger than a moon, larger than it had any right to be, opened wide and caught her in its path, though she couldn't say how long it took for this to happen here in this place where time was irrelevant and only the spirit ruled. She saw love and hate in the golden orb, more than any sentient being could ever hope to bear, and yet it was here, straining to get out.

*Dragon,* her heart moaned in terror and awe. *It was never mountains. It was a dragon. And now it's awake.*

And then it swirled up around her, impossibly graceful for its unfathomable size, wrapping her inside its coils until the violet of the sky was almost gone and there was a growing feeling she was safe, that nothing in existence could pierce this thing that had started to wrap around her.

Even so it scared her, monstrous and frightening in the way all forces of nature are, something unstoppable and endless that could end her life with just the slightest shift in its course.

Somewhere out in the real world, Obi-Wan's voice drifted to her, surprise coloring his words. "Anakin, keep going. You're close. She's halfway gone."

"I'm trying. I want to protect her. Isn't that enough?"

"Use your fear. Stop fighting it."

"I can't."

"Do not be afraid of your emotions. They give you strength."

*What?* Ahsoka silently gasped, her concentration wavering and the dragon and sky shimmering out of focus for a moment. Obi-Wan's words were a careful rephrasing of a Sith sentiment, something directly from their own warped code that Jedi Initiates repeated to each other on dares late at night, but Anakin didn't even seem to recognize it as lost as he was in the trance between them. *No, Master. Don't listen to him!*

"Let them out?"

"Yes. All of them. If you are afraid, use it. Use your fear."

Ahsoka shivered inside the strange place her soul hung and where the tidal forces of Anakin's emotions reigned, aware more than anyone else at this moment what setting all of them loose could mean.

Their bond began to fray at her worry, the dragon and sky fading, and Anakin sent a confused
question that was more feeling than coherent words. She tried to answer but had no more success than he did, and the two sat back, blinking and cringing, as the final thread snapped and they were back in the warm weight of their bodies and the sterile quiet of the ship.

Obi-Wan frowned at them from where he sat, looking back and forth between them in confusion. "What happened?"

"How does it go?" Ahsoka snapped, pointing at him. "How does it start again? 'Peace is a lie', right?"

"What? Ahsoka, I... I just want to help him!" Obi-Wan retorted, glaring at her finger and brushing what she said aside with a sharp sweep of his hand. "You know I would never hurt him! You've been inside my mind, for stars' sake!"

Anger boiled up swiftly inside her, some her own and some residue from the powerful black serpent of Anakin's emotions that had brushed against her innermost self. Anakin gaped at his Padawan as she stood, grabbing the cushion off the floor and throwing it aside. "And this isn't going to hurt him one day? You... two... being together?"

"Snips?" came the questioning slide of Anakin's voice as he tried to understand where this had come from.

The Council and the mind-wipes, the attack on both her and her master, she could do nothing about. The horrible truth of Anakin's mother she could do nothing about. But this, she decided in the depths of her building rage, this she could do something about. She could fix it. Or stop it from happening. "You know what I mean!" Obi-Wan rose, his motions slow and deliberate, folding his arms and lifting his chin as she continued. "Master, nothing good will come of this! You know it won't!"

"Snips, what is wrong with you?" Anakin said in bewilderment, standing up and putting himself between her and Obi-Wan.

"I don't want you to change! I don't want all of this to change you! I... I don't want to lose you to the dark!"

"I'm not going to, Ahsoka," he tried to reassure her, shocked, but she cut him off.

"Since you've met him you've lied to me and, and everyone else, and you've hated and wanted revenge and-"

"I hated and wanted revenge before I ever met him," he said over her, voice raising in anger. 

"-and now you're in love with him and you're going to leave the Order, aren't you?" You'll leave me all alone at the Temple and why are all of these awful things happening and maybe I'll leave the Order too because they mind-wiped you about your own childhood and your mother and I can't ever look at the Council again without thinking of that and I'll be alone and where will I go?

"Aren't you, Master?"

"And there it is," Obi-Wan noted in a low, cold voice as crisp as a fall frost, gently pushing past Anakin and Ahsoka to go toward the back of the ship. "You two talk. This," he waved over his shoulder, "is not a conversation I should be a part of."

"Obi-Wan, wait," Anakin said, but he was already gone down the hall, his door closing. Anakin dropped the hand he'd held out and turned to Ahsoka, who was standing and trembling with her arms curled around herself. "Snips." It was half an accusation and half a worried question.
"This is different now," she whispered, tapping her head and then pointing at him, struggling to put into words the vague images and feelings her conscious mind would allow out here in the real world. "I saw it. It's hard to say exactly what I saw, but it's different."

"It's not different! It's me," he said, reaching out to grab her arms, struggling to find the right thing to say amid his own fury and confusion. "Snips, what the Council did to me was wrong. You see that, don't you? They tried to make me forget who I was. Where I came from!"

"I know. I know it's wrong! But what if who you were is like him?" she asked, darting a look behind her toward the door Obi-Wan had gone into. "He's dangerous. I know he is."

Anakin shook his head in a warning. "He had no choice, Snips, in what he became. I do."

Her urge to argue the former died away at hearing the latter. "So you're not leaving the Order?" Relief and disappointment rattled through her at the same time.

"I don't want to leave," he said, rubbing a hand up and down her arm, trying to find the conviction in his words he wanted to believe as he thought about her question, one that he'd been considering in one way or another since his epiphany on the speeder. "I want answers from the Council on why they did this, however many years ago they did it. They owe me that much. And depending on what they say, I guess, well, I guess I'll decide then."

She stared into the blue of his eyes, searching them for answers and reassurance. "You think it's safe to ask them?"

"Not all of them together. Once we learn Obi-Wan's shielding, I'll go visit one of them."

"With me, right? We should go together. We'd be stronger," she decided. There. That was something concrete she could do for him.

"Maybe."

"You know," she offered hesitantly, "if, if you left I'd leave too. I don't want you to be alone."

"Snips," he sighed, pulling her close to hug her. "Same for you. I will never, ever leave you behind."

She buried her face against his chest and let out a long, shaky breath. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I know he's a Sith, Snips. But there is good in him. I know there is and I think I can bring him back," he murmured down to her, strong arms still around her. "Just, if you can't trust him, trust me, all right? Trust my instincts."

"I'll try, Master." She stepped back and brushed off her tunic, fussing with the collar as he watched and talking to it rather than him. "Should I go talk to him?"

"Please. You two need to trust each other or none of this works."

"I want to trust him, Master. I do."

"Then go talk to him. Please?"

She nodded and tugged on her silka braid, frowning down the hall and unsure of what she would say, but knowing she would do her best for her master's sake.
Obi-Wan said nothing as she knocked and he let her in, bare feet silent on the floor as he walked back to sit on the narrow bed that lined one side of the small room and gestured with a politeness so formal as to be sarcastic to the chair and desk bolted down opposite it. There was just enough room for a person to squeeze between the two if they wanted to go to the far wall and the shelves there: this would be an intimate conversation whether they wanted it to be or not.

He sat in the pale colors of the desert linens they all wore, gauzy lines of fabric unable to hide the rigidity of his back and the dim light of a single lamp on the table caught in the strange gold of his eyes as he watched her take a seat and slowly spin the chair to face him.

"You're a Sith," she began, not sure how she was going to work around to the apology she knew Anakin wanted her to give, and that she herself wanted to give but couldn't, a quick, swift apology that would immediately fix the rift she'd torn in the new, fragile sense of family that had begun between the three of them. But this was too big for something like that. This had to be dealt with.

"I am. Shall we go outside and have a duel?" he smiled, expression cold.

She drew her legs up and wrapped her arms around them, her feet on the seat and her head on her knees as she regarded him warily. "Don't act like that. I just have to know why you became one. Before I can trust you. Really trust you."

"It matters how I became one?"

"Yes. I just want to help Master. I know you love him. I love him too. Don't you see why I'm worried? Why you would worry someone?"

Obi-Wan looked down, jaw tight, and she felt a pang of shame at saying this to someone who, as far as she could tell, had done nothing but risk his life to help her dear Master. But she had to keep going. "So tell me why you became one. Please?"

The edge of anger left his voice, only weariness left, as he addressed the neat tiling of the floor. "Because I was dying and lost in rage and hatred when Maul found me. And he offered me life and vengeance if I served him. He liked the potential I had. And I wanted to live. I wanted revenge for what the Council took from me."

"What did the Council take from you? Anakin thinks it was your family."

A moment of hesitation, a glance at the door before he brought his tired gaze back to her, the gaze of a man too tired to go on for much longer. If she had asked him this a month ago, a week ago, perhaps he would have said no, she thought. But he was running out of whatever was keeping him going. And so, instead he asked, "Would you like to see what they took?"

"Yes."

Giving a dry, hollow laugh, he muttered to himself more than her. "It may be the only way, I suppose." He stretched out an arm to touch her forehead, bracing himself for whatever was about to happen and trying to ignore how tense she felt beneath his fingers and the way she'd shied away when he first reached over. "Because I've let you in before this should work without a lot of preparation beforehand. I will meditate on a memory and you will simply follow along. Do you understand?"

"Yeah. Should we tell Master, if this is going to take a while? Couldn't you just tell me?"
"It won't take a lot of time, and given how things are going, I think it best you see it rather than just hear about it. Now steady your breathing."

She reluctantly did as he said, their breaths out of sync at first but slowly drawing together, the soft flow of air the only sound in the room as he dropped his hand to her knees still drawn up against her chest. When he was satisfied she was relaxed enough, her eyes closed and the worst of the tension no longer knotting her brow, he shut his own and reached out to the memory his master had had him call upon so many times.

_Do you hear me, my dear?_

Yes.

_Good. I want you to watch, and listen. This is a memory my very own Sith master has tried to have me focus upon, time and time again, in meditation. It is the first day I hated someone. The day I hated my father. And myself. But I've never been able to channel that hatred to his satisfaction, and it's because of what happens just after that moment, something I have never told him of._

Centering himself in the darkest, most secret part of his spirit, Obi-Wan fell into the memory as easily as a bird diving from its nest into the mist of a spring morning below, the awful little room snapping back into view with certain details so sharp they almost hurt and others nothing more than vague suggestions.

The pitiful sight of the dead man and the dying woman lying in a tiny bed were clear, as was the little red-headed boy sitting and sobbing on the uneven duracrete floor with his small hand wrapped around one of the woman's that dangled over the side of the bed. Ahsoka tried to stay balanced, to not let emotion in that would interfere with the shared vision, but her heart broke at the sight. _Obi-Wan. He can't be any more than six or seven._

The light outside shifted, time as strange here in this recollection as it was in the deeper meditations. It was dark and then light again in a moment, the cheap cloth draped over the two barely-remembered windows of the room glowing like embers as the day came again.

The woman was now still. A sheet had been dragged out from under the two bodies and arranged over them as best a child could manage. _It's my fault she's dead_, the boy repeated to himself. _I should be dead, too._

The boy was sitting on the floor with his back against the bed, tears dried tracks on his blank face. The Force was radiating from him, anguish and grief and pain singing out like a choir, but it was getting weaker.

_Closer. You are not close enough_, Obi-Wan's voice rang through her mind, and then she was him. She was the little boy sitting on the hard floor, raw-eyed and hoarse from crying, a boy who had once known the jewel-toned dawns of Coruscant all lit up with traffic, who had worn beautiful clothes and eaten lovely things and had real books even if he couldn't read most of them yet.

She was the little boy who now sat in roughly-sewn shirt and pants, covered in dirt, hungry, lost in this strange and alien place so far from his sky-side life, frightened and weak and wanting to die as the Force rolled off of him like fire in a mad attempt to burn all of his pain away.

But something was happening now, over by the front door that now swam into perfect focus. It was not even a real door, just an arch of bare masonry with a crudely made blanket tacked up over it. The blanket had been patched so many times it was more of a collection of charcoal and ash than a true color, and the edges glowed with the daylight outside.
And something else.

Another flame was coming.

Another impossible fire, like him but a different color, this one burning with life and joy.

Ahsoka froze as that other sunrise came closer, accompanied by the sound of small feet pounding up steps and coming down the way to stand just outside.

The blanket was pulled aside with a hand just smaller than the little red-haired boy's and Ahsoka, lost in mimicry of him, brought her own up to block the dazzling light that spilled in amid swirls of remembered dust.

Another young boy, younger than he was, stood there in the doorway, gleaming with the daylight behind him.

"Hello?" he asked, all sandy blond hair and bright blue eyes, taking in the covered bodies with the concerned frown of someone who had seen such things before before returning his attention to the little boy sitting on the floor. "Are you the one that was crying really loud through the light? I heard it all the way at the shop!"

The little boy lowered his hands, Ahsoka doing the same, tears streaming down both their faces.

"Yes. My family's gone."

"Mother, I found him!" the child called back over his shoulder, silhouetted by the white light outside before he turned back and gave the most beautiful smile Ahsoka had ever seen. "I'm Anakin. What's your name?"

"Obi-Wan," the little boy managed.

"Don't worry, Obi-Wan. We'll take care of you now." He came over and hugged the little boy, the warm glow of the Force radiant and bright like the most beautiful song he and Ahsoka had ever heard.

Ahsoka blinked and the room was gone, the tiny space of the ship quarters back and Obi-Wan's thumb tracing along her cheek to wipe away the wetness there before he sat back, saying nothing as she brought a hand to her mouth to keep in the cry that clawed its way up her throat.

"He… you? Since then?"

"Yes. And..." he paused, watching her as he fought with his own unseen emotions, "I think I will tell you more. I will tell you all of it, perhaps. But not today. Not until we get back to Coruscant. There has been enough excitement for one trip, I think," he sighed in exhaustion, looking toward the door and avoiding her wide-eyed stare.

"I am so sorry. You. Him. I am so sorry this happened to you," she breathed through the hand forgotten at her mouth.

Unwilling to meet her gaze, he spoke to the floor. "I don't think I have to remind you to say nothing of this to him? You can imagine what will happen if you do."

"Nothing. I swear." Ahsoka wanted to hug him, but all she could do was gape at the man that little boy had grown into, at the red hair and pale skin that were gifts from a mother long gone.

"I will protect him to my dying breath, Ahsoka. Even if he never remembers me. I swear it." He
stood up and traced his hand over her arm, fingers as light across her skin as his voice was heavy. "Now go, please. Go practice with him. I would like to get some rest."

She took steadying breaths and scrubbed at her eyes, calming herself as best she could. "I will never doubt you again."

"We both love him, Ahsoka. And so we will both protect him."

Chapter End Notes

Thank all of you once again for your support for this story! As I said in the last chapter, I'm changing the total count to somewhere between 22 and 30 chapters since they keep coming out so long, so there's no more countdown to 20 but there will be a definite end as I have that already worked out.

About this chapter: if you thought it was odd Obi-Wan fell for Anakin so quickly, now you know why... he's always loved him. <3

I also MUST give a shout-out to the incredibly observant reader Tenebralunae, who went back after the last update and spotted damn near every hint I gave leading up to this particular reveal. You picked up on all of those little details I slaved over!!! I LOVE YOU! <3 <3 <3 In a non-creepy, platonic author way. Am I peopleing right? I'm so bad at this, but THANK YOU!

Regarding updates, this is the last one until anywhere from next Friday to Monday. I'd love to hear what you think, and thanks so much for reading once again!

Bonus thanks to wonderful girlfriend Fireflyfish, who didn't let ME succumb to the plague while I was sick home from work all this week!
"Is he gone, Obi-Wan?" The question was loud in the empty shop as a desert boy with ocean-blue eyes peeked out a roughly cut window, scanning the massive throng of people slowly passing by in a loud, cheerful wave funneled down the narrow road outside. Large, strange shadows of droid parts and ship components rose all around him, the only light in the room the dull glow of morning sunlight bouncing off of the walls across the street.

"Almost. Quiet, Anakin," the older boy next to him said, intent on the corner at the end of the street as he shifted to lean out over the window ledge. "There he goes. Just went around the corner."

"No way he's coming back that way to check on us, right?" Anakin watched the people go by, fascinated by the sheer variety of sentients slithering and bobbing and striding past, everyone in this hardscrabble little city for once in a good mood, everyone on their way to see Mos Espa's biggest yearly event.

"He wouldn't anyway today with the Boonta going on."

Anakin hopped up to sit in the window, swinging both legs over the side and drumming his heels against the wall as the sun warmed him. "He's not coming back until tomorrow, you think?"

Obi-Wan stayed where he was, leaning with his thin arms folded on the ledge and still in shadow. "Yeah. Maybe not even until the day after that if he wins." He looked up into the sky and cleared his throat in mock seriousness. "Dear gods of luck, let His Royal Fatness Watto win so much he gets chuba drunk and wanders out on the track and gets run over by one of the podracers. Amen."

Anakin snickered even as his eyes slid to a line of welts along his own arm, and he tugged the sleeve of his well-patched shirt down over it. "Do podracers ever back up?"

Obi-Wan pretended to think deeply about this question about this as Anakin helped him up to sit next to him. His slightly longer legs dangled next to Anakin's as they watched the crowd go by in a slow buzz of conversation and shuffling feet. "For Master? Twice at least!"

They giggled, sitting as they always did with their small shoulders touching. "Do you want to go?"

Anakin wondered as he waved to a couple of their friends in the crowd whose masters felt they were well-behaved enough to get dragged along to serve for the day.

"To the Boonta? Nah, more fun here." Obi-Wan pointed up and down the road as they hopped down onto the narrow patio in front of the shop, protected from the surge of the crowd by the low wall around it. "Fewer guardsmen. They're all there right now."

Anakin nodded in agreement. "Yeah. Hey, race you to the far end?"

"Wait. Did you get it fixed?" Obi-Wan tilted his head back to indicate the shop behind him as he reached back inside and pulled out a worn cloak he tossed around himself.

Anakin leaned back and pulled out a small device cobbled together from half-a-dozen salvage
projects from a pile of parts near the window. At a push of a worn button near the top of it, a faint nanoshield flickered into life at the windows and doors, blocking the two boys outside on the patio and no way for anyone to get in.

"You really fixed it!" Obi-Wan beamed, hugging Anakin as he stared in awe at the faint glow of blue neatly fitted over the entrance.

"Of course I did. I can fix anything," he said with a note of pride, tucking the remote into his pants. "And now every time Master leaves us alone he'll think we had to stay here at the shop to watch over stuff."

Obi-Wan smiled and took a step back with an eyebrow raised in a challenge, already turning toward the crowd to push into it going the opposite way that it flowed. "Let's go!"

"You're gonna lose!" Anakin laughed, throwing himself in behind Obi-Wan, a slender nine-year-old boy easily able to slip in and out of the small, ever-changing gaps between the people around him. It was like diving into sand, the light fading as he was swallowed up, rough fabric and arms and legs and appendages pressing in around him as he worked his way to the end of the street.

When he emerged at the next street corner, the crowd even thicker and louder here, Obi-Wan was sitting cross-legged above him on Old Man Lakan's roof, back turned to the street. "You're late!" he teased as Anakin clambered up a wall and then the gentle slope of the tiles to sit next to him.

"But did I win?"

"Let's see. What'd you get?"

Anakin reached into his shirt and laid out three loose Hutt credits and a badly-mashed wrapped snack of some kind along one of the thick plaster tiles. Obi-Wan gave a low whistle of teasing pity, slapping a coin purse down on top of the credits and declaring his total to be twelve.

Instead of conceding defeat, Anakin produced a wallet that looked to be made of real leather and thumped it down on top of the purse. "I win."

"Oh, eh chu ta!" Obi-Wan groaned even as he excitedly reached for the wallet. "How much?"

"Haven't looked."

Obi-Wan flicked through its contents quickly, their heads together and the suns glinting a halo of gold in Anakin's hair even as it shone copper in Obi-Wan's. "Twenty-one credits for your total. Nice!"

"So that's what, thirty-six? Give away eighteen?"

"Yeah. Maybe the old lady in the yellow house this time."

"Sure. And we get nine each, right?" Anakin sighed happily, lying back on the white tiles and enjoying their heat along his back. It felt nice on the bruised parts of him. "I'm gonna spend my half on snacks. What are you gonna get with your half?"

"Some curry. Maybe something to read," Obi-Wan thought aloud as he watched the people milling along. Off in the far distance there was a loud booming of horns and drums to announce the opening of the stadium, carried to them by the morning breezes in fragmented bits and pieces of sound.
"Itlat got some old datapads in last week, I heard," Anakin offered, already planning out which food stalls he'd go to and in which order. *Fried kawn, flower sweets, red palm fruit...*

"Anything good?"

"Don't know. Just saw them in his shop when Watto sent me over to work on his moisture trap."

"Huh." Obi-Wan yawned and flopped onto his back, his head on Anakin's chest as they both stretched out and stared up into the cloudless sky. "Want to go see? Or is he at the races too?"

"Maybe." Anakin looked off away from the suns still relatively low in the sky and toward the opposite horizon. "Wait, do you hear that?"

A faint rumbling echoed out from the flats, and both boys fell silent as the roar grew closer and stronger, almost drowning out the drone of the crowd below.

"Yaen-class engine," Anakin muttered, Obi-Wan only able to hear him because of how close his mouth was to Obi-Wan's ear. "Scout ship, you think?"

"Yeah. And on the B-5 flight path," Obi-Wan answered, and they fell silent again, waiting for the ship that made such a finely tuned rumble to shoot by overhead. It appeared like a huge hornet, high enough to not rattle any windows but low enough to make out the model, there for a second and then gone again in a flash of dull metal toward the spaceport near the center of the city.

"What karanj is dumb enough to come to Mos Espa on the day of the Boonta?" Anakin wondered, eyes following the smudge of white the ship had left high above them as he unwrapped the smashed snack, a soft cake of some kind.

"An offworlder," Obi-Wan said as Anakin tore off a piece and gave it to him, popping it in his mouth as they lay there. "Has to be."

"Think he'll pay? Dockmaster's gonna take double if he lands any time this week."

"Don't know. But if we don't see or hear him leave in the next half hour, he paid and he's still there."

"If he stays I wanna see his ship. I think it was an 834."

"Yeah, maybe."

They lay together in the sun as they waited, content with themselves and the world for the moment, two young best friends with the whole day ahead of them and no responsibilities at all. After a time, Anakin finished the last of the cake and without sitting up picked up two of the loose credits from the pile off to the side of them. He dropped the small weight of one on Obi-Wan's chest before putting the other on his own. "Want to play?"

"Ok. How high or how long?"

"Uh… how long? If we get too high before we drop them they might bounce off into the crowd."

"Yeah. Ok," Obi-Wan said, closing his eyes and settling his shoulders in closer against Anakin's side. "I'm gonna win this time. Ready?"

"Yeah."

Anakin closed his eyes, the daylight an orange haze in his mind and heat on his skin. "Three…
Long minutes dragged out, the two boys seemingly asleep given their stillness, but they were focused intently on the credits on their chests and a strange, unseen warmth that had been beside and between them for as long as they could remember.

Anakin's credit began to move, shifting as if pushed by an invisible finger before it hesitantly lifted into the air. Obi-Wan's drifted up next, no shudder at all in the movement, and the two chips moved upward to float just above them.

They lay perfectly still, their eyes opening the only movement, and watched the pair of credits gently bobbing up and down in time to their concentration. Anakin's moved more erratically than Obi-Wan's, as if tossed about on invisible waves, but it held its height.

"Stay up!" he muttered, blue eyes fixed on every weave and dip of the credit as Obi-Wan's floated serenely next to his as if it dangled from a string dropped all the way from space.

"Relax, Anakin," Obi-Wan whispered, gaze distant as he imagined a shelf beneath his chip. A solid rock shelf, very smooth and stable and-

A thump rattled the roof, loud and hard.

The two credits dropped, skittering along the tiles as Anakin and Obi-Wan jumped to their feet at the sound of Old Man Lakan banging on the ceiling below them and cursing with his usual vigor. "Off my roof! Droid says kids on the roof again! Off, you little kaa'tlis!"

One credit bounced and sailed away into the air as Obi-Wan threw a foot out in the path of the other one hissing down the tiles past them, almost losing his balance and tipping out into the bare duracrete patio that surrounded the house as he did.

Anakin grabbed his arm just in time as the credit spun past and glittered on its way down to land on the narrow patio below. Laughing, they scooped up what they still had, the dust shaking on the tiles as the old man below them gave a few more smacks to his ceiling. "Nyee poodoo! Off my roof!"

"Sorry, Master Lakan! We left you a credit!" Anakin called as they jumped over to the top of a neighboring house and then slid down a drain pipe as fast as they could, vanishing back into the press of people with only a few strange looks thrown their way before the crowd swallowed them up.

They were still giggling by the time they emerged on a winding side street several minutes later, doing impersonations of the old man in the gruffest voices they could as they drew nearer and nearer to the spaceport and the latest apparently rich fool to come to Mos Espa. As they stepped back out into the strengthening light of the two suns overhead, Obi-Wan threw his hood up and covered the bottom half of his face as they walked, hiding away skin they had learned long ago burned much easier than Anakin's.

Two food stalls and a few credits later, Anakin had a snack in each hand, letting Obi-Wan take a bite of each as they strolled along. The crowd was much lighter here today than usual, everyone just outside of the city or on their way there along the main thoroughfare a few streets over, and they walked quietly, Anakin chewing on fried kawn and Obi-Wan holding the bite of the flower sweet in his mouth as long as he could, letting the sugar melt away on his tongue.

"I'll bet the guy that came's a gambler," Anakin said as he finished off the kawn meat. "A Twi'lek
"No, they'd be here already. Maybe it's a mercenary! A bounty hunter!" Obi-Wan mused, eyes alight as he imagined the tall, intimidating soldiers of the holos Watto liked to watch.

"Who's he looking for?"

"Skywalker!" a harsh shout echoed behind them.

Anakin jumped, startled, and dropped what was left of the flower sweet as Obi-Wan whirled, his cloak billowing out. The confection fell to the ground, a smack of soft white and pink in the dull yellow of sand. "Kriff," Anakin muttered to himself, not even looking down at it as he stared down the road.

Four older boys stood at the end of it, two Rodians and two humans, one pointing as the others snickered. "Aww, did we scare you, little witch boy?" the taller human asked, lanky and supremely confident as he strode up to tower over Anakin and Obi-Wan. The residents passing by said nothing and continued on their way, the brawls between street children nothing for them to concern themselves with, and soon the street was prudently deserted save for the boys.

The sugar in Obi-Wan's mouth turned sickly-sweet with fear, and he swallowed it in a gulp as he risked a look behind them. No one was blocking their way that way, but if they ran the older boys would catch them in just a few strides. He and Anakin knew that from experience.

Anakin had recovered by the time the first boy had reached them and threw two fingers up in the leader's face in one of the rudest gestures he knew. "Me scared? Yeah, of your ugly kriffing face, Hunuk! Eh chu ta!"

The other three strolled up, one of the Rodians crushing what was left of the sweet under his boot as they came to a stop just out of reach of the younger boys. Obi-Wan and Anakin glared up at all of them, fists balled, as Hunuk considered what to do. "You know what? I'm done being nice with you two."

The dark-haired boy drew a deep breath, thoughtful and still, and then backhanded Anakin across the face, much faster than his bulky frame suggested he could be.

His knuckles landed hard across Anakin's cheek and sent him spinning away like a doll to collapse into the dirt. "From now on, no mouth out of you, slag. Just whatever credits you've-.

Obi-Wan kicked him in the stomach as hard as he could with a furious snarl, the movement clumsy and untrained but hidden long enough by his cloak no one knew it was coming until he'd knocked the breath out of Hunuk and drove him to his knees with it.

There was a perfectly still moment between the six of them as Hunuk gasped for air, the sound rough and hard in the hot desert air.

And then chaos.

Anakin, cheek stinging, scrabbled to his feet as the four boys descended on Obi-Wan in a flurry of hits and kicks and shouts and threw himself on one of the Rodians' backs, fists pummeling his sensitive antennae until the Rodian flung him off and stumbled away, clutching at his head in agony.

Obi-Wan somehow landed a punch square on the other human boy's nose, dropping him like a sack of parts to writhe in the sand, but then Hunuk was on him, shoving him to the ground and
straddling him as the second Rodian turned to face Anakin. "You karking little bastard!" Hunuk growled, struggling with him. "I'm gonna pound your chuba face in!"

Anakin growled a curse at the Rodian, trying to dart around him but blocked and shoved back every time. "Aw, what is it, Skywalker?" the Rodian teased in Huttese, a cruel grin on his face as he matched the smaller boy's steps with his own. "Didn't your witch mommy teach you any magic?"

"Stop it! Get off him, Hunuk!" Anakin could feel Obi-Wan's terror through the bond between them. It fed his own and bubbled over into frustrated rage, centered on the smarting pang along his cheek where Hunuk had struck him.

Behind them, Obi-Wan let out a sharp cry and then another as Hunuk found an opening for a few solid hits. "Anakin, run! Go!" he managed before another punch across the mouth cut him off.

"No!" Anakin shouted, tears of anger welling up as he grew more and more desperate trying to get around the Rodian to him.

"Aw, listen to him!" the Rodian taunted, never taking his eyes off Anakin. "Beat the little bastard's face in, Hunuk! Beat the-" He stopped, suddenly wheezing as if the air around him had turned to mud.

"Shut up!" Anakin snapped, taking a step forward and then another, a strange cloud, cold and invisible, crackling up all around him like a sandstorm of glass and electricity that only Obi-Wan could sense clearly.

"Anakin!" Obi-Wan called out, spitting blood from his newly split lip and terrified at the icy, charged air that even Hunuk could sense rolling over to them. The older boy twisted around and gaped at the sight of the Rodian dropping to his knees, clutching at his throat, as a strange little tickle began to form around his own neck.

"Help…" the Rodian coughed, reaching out toward Hunuk. Anakin now stood over him, hands tightened into fists and unaware of his nails digging into his palms, blue eyes wide and empty as he felt all of his anger at the Rodian's words, all of his rage at Obi-Wan's pain, flow out like a river to wash over the four older boys.

"My mother wasn't a witch! And don't you kriffing TOUCH him!"

Squinting at the jagged ache along his jaw, Obi-Wan sat up and shoved Hunuk off, who was staring in total disbelief at the proof of the nickname neighborhood rumors had given the Skywalker boy. "Anakin! Stop!"

"No!"

"You're going to kill him, Anakin!"

The Rodian was changing color, green draining away to a sickly grey, breaths ugly rasps as he clawed at his neck and his lungs tried to force in more air past the crushing weight around his throat. Anakin looked up with a snarl and Hunuk and the other boys scrambled away and ran, their feet loud pounding that echoed off the buildings around them as they fled out of sight.

Anakin did not stop. In the white fury of his anger he wasn't sure he could.

He didn't know that he really wanted to anyway. You four always steal from us and hurt us! Always! Maybe you should get hurt this time!
Obi-Wan dragged himself over to kneel next to Anakin on the hot sand, looking up at him as he grabbed his shoulders. His hood had been yanked down in the fight, hair tousled and blood from his lip smeared along his jaw and bright against his skin.

"Anakin," he begged, frightened. "You have to stop. Please."

"You want to stop," a new voice said, an adult one laced with firm authority and something neither Anakin or Obi-Wan had ever heard: the odd warmth that surrounded them, the warmth Anakin's anger had at the moment twisted into this cold rope of ice strangling his would-be bully.

It was enough to get Anakin to look back, but not enough to even lessen the pressure against the Rodian's throat.

An incredibly tall human man stood in the middle of the street in light robes and a dark cloak, brown-haired and bearded and with a presence that felt as solid as the rock walls all around him. "You want to stop," he murmured again, passing his hand across the air with the slightest look of confusion at having to repeat himself.

"No," Anakin hissed, and the Rodian fell onto his back, writhing as he started to truly suffocate, kicking up sand as he flailed on the ground.

The man blinked and took a step back.

Obi-Wan, having no time to consider who or what this stranger was, turned Anakin back around to face him and pulled Anakin's head down so their foreheads touched. "Silent and still, Anakin. Now. You must be silent and still," he panted, licking his lips and too scared to taste the salt of his own blood.

Anakin blinked and then something happened the man couldn't quite explain even though he was looking right at them: a kind of whirlpool, the frigid ocean of energy draining away and pulled back like the tide into the tiny form of the young boy as the older one cringed.

The Rodian gasped, air rushing back in to fill his lungs, and within a few breaths was staggering to his feet to stumble off in the same direction as his friends, almost falling as he threw himself around the corner at the end of the street.

Silence returned to the road as Obi-Wan pulled Anakin close and touched his face, the bully already forgotten. "Are you all right?"

"They hurt you," he frowned, tracing a finger along the blood on Obi-Wan's face.

"I'm ok, Anakin," he whispered, hugging him tight and pressing his head against Anakin's chest where his small heart still thudded violently, ignoring the pain that shot across his jaw. "You scared me."

"Sorry," he said, hugging him back. "I just got… angry again…"

"I know. But it's all right now."

They both turned, remembering at the same time that unusual, powerful presence that was like them and not, a smooth, expertly forged knife blade of power in comparison to the blunt, blind force of their own.

The man stood, his hands folded in the huge sleeves of his cloak, and studied the two boys huddled together on the ground like wolf cubs, fierce and feral and instantly suspicious of him, two pairs of
blue eyes that were sharper and harder than children's eyes should ever be.

He did his best to keep his face calm and neutral, but he wanted to drop to his knees at the power that had radiated from the younger one, the one called Anakin.

*It was like the heavens themselves were about to crack open under the radiance of it, the sheer might of it. Like the teachings of old. 'In the days of darkness, a star will clothe itself in flesh and walk among us, the dawn within the dawn. And he will bring flame and ruin to those who turn from the Light.'*

The man gripped his hands together tighter under his sleeves until the tremble left them, in awe of the golden halo he'd seen, one so massive and powerful it had felt like standing on the surface of a star itself. It still danced in his vision, faint glowing traces across his consciousness that left no room for doubt in his heart and in his spirit. *The prophecy! He is of the prophecy that speaks of balance!*

*The other one is strong too, maybe one of the strongest I've seen, but next to this boy Anakin he is a candle to a bonfire. The prophesied bonfire that could burn away the Sith forever.*

*He is the Chosen One!*

*He must be!*

"My name is Qui-Gon Jinn," he said carefully, not letting any of his excitement into his voice and trying to ignore the frantic beat of his heart at the implications of such a discovery. "May I have yours?"

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The present.

Anakin stood in the Temple gardens, hands behind his back, surrounded by the gentle sweeps of branches and leaves rustled by a cool afternoon breeze. He'd come here on his way through to see if any memories tugged at his mind, but none had come along with the wind or the soft, tangy scent of the grasses waving around him.

Far on the other end of this sea of green, well out of earshot, two Council members walked along, Krell and Yoda, talking quietly with each other. They were moving away from him, down the paths that would take them back into the Temple proper, and Anakin let out a sigh of relief at that.

He wasn't ready to face any of them. Not yet.

He'd managed to completely shield Ahsoka their very last practice on the trip, done in the blue tunnel of hyperspace, but he knew it would take more time before he could easily build the same sort of wall around himself.

*I still can't believe Ahsoka beat me on that.* After his Padawan had gone back to Obi-Wan's room and the door had shut for the conversation she had been reluctant to have, Anakin had anxiously counted off minutes on his chrono until the door opened and Ahsoka came out looking chastised but, through the Force, clearly free of her anger with Obi-Wan. The next practice between the two the following day was stunning: within two hours she'd hidden Obi-Wan away, and within another day, on the hyperspace trip back, she'd hidden herself. Slower than Obi-Wan could, but she had
"She is a ferociously quick learner, Anakin," Obi-Wan had said with a note of admiration, Ahsoka beaming and sitting up taller with a determined look in her eyes. "Faster than you, even."

"Heh," he'd said, but he was glad. It made him feel better about them returning to the Temple and Ahsoka having to return to her classes there.

They had to pretend things were normal for as long as they could.

By the Temple's timeline, that was another three weeks. *That's when I'm supposed to give my speech.*

*I can't do that. Not after what they did to me. My mother. Tatooine.*

He shook his head and forced down a flare of anger, turning to walk back into the shadows of the garden and down the path that would take him toward his own quarters.

*But I can't tell them that yet. Maybe by the time I do I'll be telling them I'm leaving the Order entirely.*

He ran a hand along a column he passed, the stone cool and soothing under his fingertips, trying to imagine life without the Temple and ignoring the fearful uncertainty that stole along behind that idea.

*And then there's Maul.*

A month after the speech that wasn't going to happen, Maul was due to return. *Jedi or not at that point, I have to be ready.*

Anakin nodded to Padawans and Knights he passed, not seeing any of them as he wondered how much of a chance he really stood against the Sith Lord. *I was so arrogant when all of this began. But I'll do what I can. That's all I can do.*

*So many things are going on I can't control. I hate this.*

The plan was that he would stay with Obi-Wan as much as possible for the next two weeks, not only for their physical and shield training but to limit his time at the Temple to lower the risk any Masters would come across him and notice the same change Ahsoka had.

He frowned at the memory of it, of her tapping her head and pointing at him, calling him different. *I don't feel different. I feel like a sick person who's finally starting to get better, who can finally see and think like they're supposed to.*

By the time he arrived back at their training ground that night, all the stray paperwork and correspondence he was expected to keep up on was finished, the cover of darkness allowing him to leave unnoticed in another set of civilian clothes to make his long, convoluted way down to the old factory.

Obi-Wan smiled up at him as he came in, the door shrieking shut behind him. He was sitting in the middle of the floor, both the training sabers set out before him, and Anakin came over to him and offered a hand, helping him up. They hugged tightly before Obi-Wan stepped back, scolding him without any kind of anger in his voice. "You're late, Anakin."

"What's got you in such a good mood? Looking forward to kicking my ass again?" Anakin grinned,
stealing a kiss.

"You look better. Brighter."

"I feel better."

"Let's see if that translates to your fighting. Duel first, then practice. Remember to trust your instincts." Obi-Wan handed him his practice saber and drew back to a dueling distance.

Anakin felt a little uneasy at the thought, Ahsoka's worried face flashing through his mind. "How... much should I trust them?"

Obi-Wan studied him, igniting and twirling his blade thoughtfully in a whine of plasma. "Are you worried?"

"A little?"

"What's the worst you could do?"

"Well, it's not like I haven't lost this whole time," Anakin shrugged. "Hurt you, I guess?"

"The worst a training saber will do is leave a light burn. Just not the face, hmm? I do only have the one and I'm rather fond of it," Obi-Wan teased as he settled into a relaxed, easy stance, the green line of his saber held in both hands and angled across his chest.

Anakin chuckled. "Ok, not the face. I'm fond of it, too." He took a deep breath, lowering his blade in a fan of green as he stepped back to reflect on what his first move would be and his expression faded into one of intense concentration.

"Begin," Obi-Wan called, the word echoing around the cavernous room and lost in the hiss of sabers as Anakin dove at him.

Obi-Wan parried and spun, thrusting downward at him, but Anakin was gone, rolling away and slashing as he came back up. They danced away from each other, but Anakin whirled back without warning in a blur of light and sound.

Green met green in a deafening crackle and Obi-Wan shoved Anakin back, aiming a kick at his chest but only the toe connecting as Anakin threw himself back just in time. Obi-Wan allowed himself a single thought as he tore after him in spins of his saber. Better.

Anakin blocked Obi-Wan again and then again, shoving him back even as he defended, the Force a second halo around the jade glow of the sabers and pulsing with Anakin's anger and excitement as Obi-Wan found himself finally having to drop into real concentration, real effort, to take control of the fight.

Their feet danced across the duracrete, kicking up dust as they moved out of the central area, Obi-Wan forcing him back toward the piles of junk that sat in huge drifts against the walls with strikes and lunges that Anakin was too slow to defend against, fighting with his own attention torn between forms practiced a thousand times and what his instincts shouted at him.

Every strike had the rattling power of the Force behind it now, the sparks and clashes bright flashes of light showing the tight line of their mouths and the wide, entranced eyes of fighters lost to the song of battle as they shoved against each other with the Force and their sabers, Anakin with his back against the cluttered wall but refusing to give up.
Obi-Wan hammered at him relentlessly, striking at his feet and then his shoulder and then his side faster and faster, but Anakin was there every time with a block made clumsy from speed but effective nonetheless.

And then Anakin reached out with his free hand as his saber shoved Obi-Wan's blade aside, not to push him with the Force, but to pull him with it.

Obi-Wan had just enough time to gasp at the reversal of the unseen gusts that had been battering him before Anakin slid to the side and used them to throw Obi-Wan past him into the mountain of trash behind them.

Saber waving blindly, Obi-Wan shot the other hand out as he flew by, jerking Anakin off his feet along with him. They crashed into a drift of old tarps heaped up high, the ancient fabric crumpling easily beneath them and sending up a cloud of dust.

One saber powered down and then the other, the green aura hanging over the trash pile fading into the dimness of the outer ring of the room as a gasp and then coughing rose up. A head lifted from the pile, Anakin dazed and trying to place which arms and legs were his and which were Obi-Wan's.

*I landed on him!* "Obi-Wan?" he asked, straining to see in the sudden darkness around them and feeling around below him as he coughed.

"That's my arm, Anakin," Obi-Wan coughed back.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Just had the wind knocked out of me," he rasped as he fought for more air, waving at the dust around him.

Anakin carefully stood up, balancing on the uneven stacks around him, helping Obi-Wan up. When they had picked their way back down to the bottom and slapped the dust and streaks of grime off of each other's clothes, Anakin satisfied himself that Obi-Wan was really all right by running his hands over his arms and chest.

"I'm fine, Anakin," Obi-Wan said with a smile, ruffling Anakin's hair to get the last bit of dust out.

"That was much better. You listened to your instincts much more than you have before."

"I guess. I didn't win, though. That was a tie," Anakin said, stepping back and pacing back and forth, disconcerted by the bloodlust still riding alongside the adrenaline pumping through him and wanting to keep Obi-Wan safe from it.

He wanted to fight Obi-Wan again. He wanted to fight him all night. *Not train. Fight."

"What is it?"

"I… I liked it." Anakin looked up at the ceiling, unhappy at saying it aloud.

"Fighting?"

"Yeah."

Obi-Wan studied him, puzzled. "Haven't you always?"

"No, or I mean, I tried not to… because…" He looked away, pausing and horrified at the thought
that came immediately to mind. "...the Chosen One should not enjoy fighting."

*Straight out of the mouth of the Council,* Anakin thought with disgust.

"There is nothing wrong with enjoying fighting. Enjoying something you're good at," Obi-Wan offered, staying where he was as he watched Anakin struggle with himself, the only sound Anakin's boots on the floor as he walked back and forth aimlessly.

"Is this who I really am?" Anakin muttered, fascination and fear warring with each other.

"Why don't we find out?" Obi-Wan flicked his saber on and pointed toward the weak ring of light that marked the center of the chamber. "Again?"

"Yeah." He moved back to the middle of the room, blade canted down beside him, still breathing hard from their last round, trying to understand the rush of emotions flowing through him: excitement at the thought of them fighting again, fear of hurting Obi-Wan somehow, lust and anxiety mixing in a fine sheen over all of it.

The requested second, third, and fourth rounds all ended the same, Obi-Wan winning even if not by as large a margin as on previous occasions, Anakin noticeably better but unable to replicate the beautiful emptiness of instinct he had stumbled across that first time. Every time he fell into the rhythm of it, thought slipping away into highly trained muscle memory and gut reactions that made him feel alive in the same way flying did, the last spark of his intellect would rebel at the seductive perfection of it.

*You should never enjoy this! That is the way to the dark side!*

*But I do.*

And he would linger just a fraction of a second too long in how good it felt to fight and Obi-Wan would be there in a slash of green and brute force, their blades crossing to grind at each other's before one of them retreated or Anakin found himself disarmed and theoretically killed.

The end of the fifth round found Anakin breathless on his back on the hard duracrete floor, pinned by Obi-Wan straddling him and Obi-Wan's saber across his throat. "We," Obi-Wan gasped and swallowed, a heavy weight across Anakin's stomach, "should move onto your Juyo defense practice, don't you think?"

He stared down into Anakin's wild eyes, fixing them with his own as he shut the blade off and their color shifting from bright green to faded yellow in the gloom.

"All… all right." Anakin turned his off as well, blinking and looking away as he fought down the urge to ask for another round, but Obi-Wan didn't move off of him and he looked back up in curiosity. "What is it?"

"Did you find your answer yet? Is this who you are? What you want?"

Anakin looked up at Obi-Wan, felt the warmth of his body straddling his, saw the heaving of his chest beneath the plain tunic he wore. The adrenaline lacing Anakin's senses made every detail perfect, every syllable of Obi-Wan's question and every shadow along the fine hollow of his throat sharp, and it was with the slightest shift of Obi-Wan's body above his that his instincts turned from bloodlust to desire.

For the moment he had no idea what he thought about fighting, but he damn sure knew what he felt about Obi-Wan.
"You. I want you."

He pulled Obi-Wan down and kissed him as hard as he could.

Surprised, Obi-Wan laughed against his mouth but then returned the kiss greedily, free hand tight in Anakin's shirt as he did.

When he felt Obi-Wan starting to pull back, Anakin caught Obi-Wan's bottom lip with his teeth in a playful tug before letting go, and got one more kiss out of him that way, Obi-Wan unable to resist the challenge before he finally forced himself to stand up and out of Anakin's reach.

"Not here. Training, right?" Obi-Wan reluctantly reminded him, awkwardly brushing off his shirt and reaching down to help Anakin up. The air between them was thick with the desire still circling, its once-vague shadows now defined shapes that looked like a desert and a ridge and two bodies twined together.

Anakin swallowed and tried to put that lovely memory aside. For all of the tension between them that that night had killed off, it had replaced it with the sweet, taunting certainty of what he was missing every night they did not spend together.

_Or day, or afternoon…_

"Anakin?"

"Sorry. Just… I don't know." He sighed and rubbed his saber arm, trying to focus on the simple sensation of the fabric of his sleeve against his skin.

"It's all right." Obi-Wan touched his cheek, brushing his thumb along it with such affection it was hard to believe this was the same man who could be so vicious in a duel. "I imagine it must be hard to suddenly try to let in all of these emotions you've been taught to hold at bay for so long."

Anakin nodded, grateful Obi-Wan was able to put into words what he was feeling.

"These are all good signs, Anakin." Obi-Wan let his hand fall away and pointed back toward the center of the room, reaching for and finding after a moment an impassive instructor's tone. "Defensive techniques?"

"Yeah."

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They finished a few hours later, hard work pushing all other thoughts aside and Anakin's progress evident across the entire session. Both of them were exhausted by the end of it, Obi-Wan declaring it time to go back so they would have enough rest for the next day.

"I'll get you yet," Anakin promised Obi-Wan as he sat sprawled with his back against an old conveyor belt, gulping down his water as Obi-Wan disassembled the two training sabers from their connector.

"You almost did tonight toward the end," Obi-Wan agreed as he dropped the sabers and connector back into the box they kept them in. He took one of the towels Anakin tossed him, dripping wet with water, and twisted it before ran it over his face and down his neck. "Stars, you ran me ragged."
"Think I have a chance at Maul?"

"Better than before, and at this rate if you keep improving like you are you might be able to fight him alone. Not that you're going to, of course." He wrung out the towel and hung it as he spoke, sounding as casual as if they'd been discussing the public lift schedules up to his apartment.

Do you mean what I think you do? This was something that Anakin had wondered about ever since Obi-Wan had proposed his plan to Anakin, and had anxiously hoped for since he'd learned Obi-Wan cared about him. It almost hurt to ask, he was so nervous, but he did. "Are you... going to fight with me?" I could win if you did. We could win. Together. And then I'd have my revenge and you'd be free.

"Yes," Obi-Wan said, surprise evident in his voice that Anakin had expected anything else. "I wish neither of us had to fight him. I really do. But even if you decide you don't want to seek him out, he wants you, and he will come find you. So we will face him together."

Relief soothed the tightness that had paralyzed Anakin's heart and he looked down at the fine cracks that crept along the floor, unable to find a way to express his thankfulness that anyone, even a lover, would risk himself like that for him. "Together then."

Another question came to mind, curiosity far easier to indulge. "Whose idea was it to turn me?"

Obi-Wan threw on his cloak and handed Anakin his coat. "Master wants to bring down the Jedi. No real surprise there. And after I saw you in battle once, some time before the Separatist ship where we spoke, I suggested we go after you, you being the Chosen One. That I go after you." They walked to the door and Anakin opened it, Obi-Wan slipping outside into the eternal twilight of the mid-levels and Anakin following.

"Because you wanted to help me? Because you knew I was from Tatooine, right?"

"Yes." Obi-Wan lifted his hood as Anakin did the same, the two disappearing into the long shadows of another street in a long series of alleys that led to the crude, armored garages the wealthier mid-level types of this district rented for their vehicles. They walked in comfortable silence, confident and sure together.

"Does Maul know? About Tatooine?" he asked after a time.

"No, and even if he did I don't think he'd care. Master only focuses on what is useful. I was useful. He took me. You are useful. He plans to take you. He has no idea of what the Council has done to you. He just sees the Chosen One: your power, your prestige within the Order."

"Funny how he and the Council are alike like that," Anakin grumbled as they made the final turn to Obi-Wan's two-seater, getting in and taking off into the sky to join the dark shapes streaming by overhead.

Obi-Wan reached over and put his free hand over Anakin's as they drove, the cool touch gentle and calming. "How do you see me?" Anakin wondered, turning his hand over to let Obi-Wan's palm rest against his.


Anakin considered this, nodding after a while as the city drifted past them in its usual columns of sparkling buildings and washes of moonlit sky behind them. "That is something I have to think about."
"What?"

"If I leave the Order, how can I help anyone? What would I do?"

Obi-Wan thought about it. "I don't know. That's something you'd have to think about. The Telladorians have a saying about situations like this, where you have to choose between what you know and what you don't: 'Opre jrii gallaksa dasin hriinaksa,' or something like 'Better to fly into dark clouds than stare at a painted sun.'"

"I've heard one like it. 'Better to risk than settle'," Anakin closed his eyes, enjoying the breeze through his hair and Obi-Wan's hand in his as he tried once again to imagine life without the Order. It was easier to do like this, up in the air, out of his robes and cloak and his lover's hand in his. It was easier to imagine a future with them together, maybe Ahsoka too, traveling together around the galaxy, doing bodyguard work or charity missions or something like that.

*If the Order lets me leave.* He told himself it was ridiculous to imagine they wouldn't, but the worry nagged him the rest of the ride back and as he got ready for bed, only the pleasant warmth of a shower against his tired muscles able to finally start drumming it out of his mind.

The worry and everything else was then completely forgotten as he stepped out of the shower to find Obi-Wan already done with his in the other refresher and dressed for bed, waiting with a towel in his hands and a sly smile on his face. "I owe you, don't I?" he said as he stepped forward to wrap it around Anakin's small waist.

He loved the blush that crept up Anakin's face and out all the way to ears hidden away in damp ringlets that Obi-Wan rubbed a second towel through, the tenderness of his motions somehow arousing Anakin even more.

Remembering the unexpected force of his emotions earlier, Anakin tried to let Obi-Wan have an out if he wanted it, if he was as afraid of their potential as Anakin was. "I… ah… We don't have to if you don't want to. Just, earlier tonight… I…"

"Shhh," Obi-Wan murmured as he squeezed the last of the water from his hair into the towel and dropped it back on the counter, face close to Anakin's and fine eyelashes blond against his cheek. "Come to bed," he murmured, the invitation as quiet and gentle as his touch in Anakin's hair.

They moved silently and slowly into Obi-Wan's room without turning on any of the lights, at ease with each other now, their bodies no longer unknown lands to be conquered in a rush of excitement but territories to be lovingly explored, mapped with lazy caresses and breathless gasps.

Neither spoke as they found their way back to each other in the dark, to that beautiful place where there was only heat and love and truth, the only sound their moans and the slow, luscious drumbeat of skin against skin.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, lovely readers! Thank you for all of your support, kudos and comments! I say it every time because I mean it every time... Without you, I got nothing but me and my crazy ideas. <3

I will say I really, really enjoy writing about the feral wolf puppies that were young
Anakin and Obi-Wan on Tatooine. I'd love to spend a dozen chapters just writing about their childhood together there. Sequel-ish fic, maybe? Don't know, but I smile just thinking about them.

If you're looking for more stuff to read, Fireflyfish and I have wandered off into some kind of insane co-written crack fic land called The Warp and the Weft where Anakin and Obi-Wan get sucked out of the Force back into two characters you might remember from The Force Awakens. We're not sure if we're going to continue it, but it was fun to write! :)

Love to you all and beautiful fall weather if it's that time of year for you! (Or spring!)
The past.

Anakin and Obi-Wan knelt by a freshly colored gravestone in the dying light of day, small hands stained red with clay and linked together, excitement on their young faces and the sound of sand crickets all around as they explained all that had happened in the past few days.

"And Obi-Wan tried to hide me after the fight but the Jedi had already seen and he asked us our names and where we lived," Anakin told the marker.

"And he came the next day and Watto was there and the Jedi said he wanted to buy Anakin." Obi-Wan stood and carefully hauled the beggar's basket of clay back to its corner, talking as he went and came back, Anakin's hand sliding back into his as he knelt again. "But Anakin said he had to buy me too or he wasn't going. Anakin started to get mad again, Mother, and break things with the Force. That's what the Jedi calls the light we have."

Anakin reached out and smoothed out a rough edge of clay near the top of the marker. "And after that the Jedi agreed to buy both of us! And Watto was so happy to get rid of both of us he only tried to haggle a little!"

Obi-Wan smiled, eyes far away as he remembered it. "Then the Jedi, his name is Master Jinn, said we were free and not slaves anymore and he invited us to come back to the Temple. He thinks maybe we can both be Jedi, he said." He took a deep breath and gave a daydreamer's sigh, the evening air warm in his lungs.

"Yeah, we can both learn to use the li- the Force! It's gonna be so much fun, Mother," Anakin grinned, squeezing Obi-Wan's hand tight.

"We'll go to Coruscant," Obi-Wan added, squeezing Anakin's hand back and a little afraid if he said it out loud the chance would somehow vanish. "I'll get to see Coruscant again."

"Are you going to look for your family when we get there?" Anakin asked, curious as the thought occurred to him for the first time.

"You and Mother are my family," Obi-Wan said proudly before he glanced away and his voice dropped. "Besides, even if I did mine never came looking for me."

Anakin nodded, leaning into him comfortingly before he lowered his head in a prayer. "Please stay happy and sleeping, Mother. It's going to be a long time before we can come back. But we will come back."

"We will," Obi-Wan repeated, bowing and a fragile hope burning about what so unexpectedly now lay before them.

"We can show you our Jedi things then!" Anakin exclaimed as they stood up and rubbed their hands clean over the stone. "Lightsabers and big cloaks and stuff."

"Yeah," Obi-Wan agreed. "Mine's going to be blue. I know it."
They bowed one more time and gave a final thanks before waving and running back off through the cemetery, taking all of the quietest ways they could in a long, roundabout spiral toward the spaceport and the Yaen-class 834 scout ship that crouched on the end of one of the landing rows, gleaming dully like a dunebeetle and crowned in a neat ring of golden lights.

The Jedi Master in question was waiting, meditating seated in the doorway of the ship at the top of the open landing ramp like a tall, bent pine on a mountaintop. As the two boys approached, glowing points of light in the Force that rivaled the last light of the suns dying behind them, Qui-Gon watched his thoughts float by, keeping them far enough away none of them could snag on his mind and pull emotion to the surface.

*Attached. They are far too attached to each other.*

*The Council will not like that. Or their ages.*

*But Anakin is the Chosen One. Once they see him, only a fool would say otherwise. They will choose to train him. The Order, possibly the galaxy, is at stake. If we don't train him, the Dark will find him and train him instead.*

Qui-Gon felt the cold, sharp prick of fear along his gut as he considered the raw, near-limitless power of young Anakin turned away from the Light and given to the Dark. *No. No matter what he must be trained.*

*And what of Obi-Wan?* he asked himself as he heard the orphans' footsteps across the duracrete below, felt them in the subtle vibration of air and Force as they walked up to the ship.

*I tried to leave him here, to keep him here from the hard truth of things. The Council will not have him. He is even older than Anakin.* Qui-Gon fought the wavering line of his concentration, pushing aside the disappointment that fact brought him and finding his inner balance again as best he could. *It would be better for Obi-Wan to stay here and never know what he will miss. He's intelligent and talented. He would not be a slave forever.*

*But Anakin wanted him to come and so he is coming.*

Qui-Gon felt another emotion slide past him, an unpleasant and rare sense of guilt, and struggled to remain in the emotionless haze of meditation even as he tried to tell himself that what he had done was right. *I did not lie to them. I told them perhaps they could both be knights. Not that they would be. I had to get Anakin to agree to come, and perhaps the Council will have mercy and overlook Obi-Wan's age, given his own potential.*

"Master Jinn!" Anakin called from the bottom of the ramp, the pair slowing to a stop in utter fascination. "Hello! We're back! What are you doing?"

He opened his eyes and found a smile for the two of them. It was easy to do with the bright, happy blaze of their Force presences brushing his own. "Meditating. It helps me see the Force and its will clearly."

"What is the Force's will?" Obi-Wan asked, curious and peering at Qui-Gon as if it would be written on him somewhere as they hurried up the ramp to him, the metal slats clanking beneath them.

"Whatever happens. The Force guides all things," he said, standing up and ruffling the hair on both of their heads.

"So you meeting us was the Force's will?" Anakin asked, smiling at the touch as Obi-Wan did the
same. It was pleasantly strange for an adult to do something other than hit him.

"Yes," Qui-Gon said with obvious pleasure at Anakin's quick thinking. "Very good, Anakin."

Obi-Wan happily noticed how proud Anakin was as he tried another question. "What does the Force will right now?"

"That we get back to the main ship in orbit. There are around two-dozen other children like you up there, all headed to the Temple. Would you like to meet them?"

Their widening, excited smiles answered that question better than words, and Qui-Gon watched them hurry inside to find seats to strap themselves into with a bittersweet look.

_I hope the Force somehow wills you two to both be knights. I sincerely hope it does._

The next few weeks as Qui-Gon took the ship to its last stops before returning to Coruscant passed by in a strange, alien blur for Anakin. On the main Temple ship there were showers with water, frightening at first but so much nicer than the rough sonic scrubbers he'd grown up with. There was food, what felt like mountains of it, but even with a pile of it on his plate he still hid rolls in his sleeves and felt a glimmer of disgust when he saw other children throwing away half-eaten pieces. There was cool air, so much of it he caught a cold and had to be given injections by a medical droid, which fascinated him as much as scared him because he had never seen one before.

And there was space, the great vast void of black that Anakin had fallen instantly in love with as it came swimming in all around the dry, dusty waves of Tatooine as the scout ship rose into orbit. When they weren't in hyperspace he would stand at a window, Obi-Wan next to him, the two pointing out stars or nebulae or planets in a happy, rapid-fire chatter that occasionally dwindled to a blissful silence between them.

Obi-Wan adjusted much easier, it seemed. He was just old enough to remember showers and food and droids from his earlier life, and the first time Anakin saw him cleaned up, in nice, new clothes with his hair trimmed by yet another type of droid he'd never seen before Anakin felt a sudden, paralyzing terror he would lose him, that Obi-Wan would drift back into the elegant world he'd come from and forget that the dirty, clumsy slave boy named Anakin had ever existed.

At the thought of this, he threw himself on Obi-Wan and hugged him, almost in tears, and Obi-Wan hugged him back with a laugh and asked him what was wrong as the six other younglings in the room looked up from the game they'd been playing on the floor, puzzled.

Anakin didn't care about how the group gaped at them, and he knew Obi-Wan didn't either. The two had lost interest in making friends with any of them once they'd seen how soft and childish they all were.

"Are we still skybrothers?" he whimpered anxiously in Huttese, a language the pair had quickly learned might as well be secret code among these freemen boys and girls they were surrounded by.

"Yes, always!" Obi-Wan reassured him, stroking his hair and ignoring the stares they were getting. "Do I look that different now?" he grinned, gently teasing him.

"A little," Anakin sniffed, and then sighed at Obi-Wan's Force presence blooming to twine through his, warm and soothing as always.

"We'll always be skybrothers, Anakin. On Tatooine or Coruscant or anywhere."

Anakin stepped back, satisfied at this reassurance, and put his hands on his small hips. "You know,
"Thanks," Obi-Wan said, a little shyly. "Well, you will too once that droid is done with you." He nodded toward the slender mechanical form waiting at the door and Anakin saluted, bravely marching off to find out what it was like to have his hair cut by a machine.

Three days later Anakin stood with his own neatly cut hair and new clothes in a lofty room that made him feel like he was up in the clouds somewhere, surrounded by the peace and weight of thousands of years, circled by the seated, solemn men and women in light robes and dark shadows who watched him come in with Obi-Wan, Qui-Gon behind them.

Murmurs echoed around the room as they walked in, strange names he had never heard before attached to his own: "Anakin Skywalker", "The Chosen One", "The Son of Suns", "The One of the Prophecy."

There was such awe and so many furious whispers at his appearance Anakin felt like he was listening to the street children back home staring after a Core World visitor passing by in the market. Several side conversations caught his ear, a discordant hum of words and questions, as the Masters took turns introducing themselves to the boys.

"How can he be that strong already?"

"From Tatooine? The Chosen One is from the Outer Rim?"

"He already knows how to touch the Force."

"In times of trials/in the lands of the lost/is born the brightest light."

"That is not part of the accepted Prophecy."

"And this is when he is calm?"

"Look at him and tell me he is not the One."

The horned Iktotchi Master Tinn lifted his hand for silence, clearing his throat and waiting until the stunned reactions died away. "Good afternoon, Master Jinn. Obi-Wan. Anakin." He handed a datapad over to a small, ancient sentient who the others called Grandmaster and had given his name as Yoda. "We have read your report, Master Jinn."

"Concerns we have. Many," Yoda croaked, turning his steely face to Obi-Wan and then Anakin. "But seeing this boy here before us, believe you we do. We must."

Anakin's hand slipped into Obi-Wan's as he tried to be brave in the face of these intimidating Masters ringed all around them and Obi-Wan gripped Anakin's hand hard enough it almost hurt, his own young face as calm as he could make it but his fear unmistakable.

"Anakin Skywalker is the Chosen One. Does anyone here contest that assessment or the need to keep that information strictly confidential?" a human Master named Windu said, glancing around the room with a pointed look as if he dared anyone to speak.

No one did, all of them turning from Windu back to face Anakin and a few making luck signs across their chests or blade arms. Anakin shyly drifted over until his shoulder touched Obi-Wan's, bumping against it as he returned the many entranced gazes with his own nervous one.

Qui-Gon put a hand on Anakin's shoulder, sending encouragement through the Force.
"Then it is settled," Master Windu continued. "He must be trained. With such abilities, if he is not, great harm may come to him. And after reading your report, we have decided that you will be his master, Master Jinn, if he accepts our tutelage."

"Thank you, Masters. I will do my best to train him in our ways."

Anakin blinked. It was that simple? He turned to Obi-Wan, almost giddy with relief, and then realized Obi-Wan wasn't smiling. The older boy was still staring ahead, body tense and hand stiff in Anakin's.

*Wait. Why didn't they include Obi-Wan?* "What about Obi-Wan?" he asked, young voice clear and high in the airy chamber.

Master Tinn barely looked at Obi-Wan, directing his answer to Anakin. "He is too old to be trained."

Qui-Gon glanced away, jaw tight. Neither boy had any idea this was the second meeting of the day on the topic of what was to be done with them.

At that first secret meeting, Qui-Gon had given his report and then bowed his head and listened to the will of the Council as they argued about what to do. Most of the Masters had agreed in that first meeting on what had to happen, the stirrings of religious fervor creeping across more than a few faces when they saw the results of the Census ship readings and tests Qui-Gon had given Anakin.

Now that he was here before them there was no question.

He was the Chosen One. The one of songs and scrolls. The one who could save an Order already showing cracks along the venerable lines of its lineage.

And it was imperative the Chosen One be brought up pure and strong. That he have no attachments, nothing to pull him away from the narrow path of the Light.

It would be easy enough to prevent future ones, to isolate him almost entirely from other Padawans under the guise of remedial classes and training with only the highest-level masters.

But this present attachment had to be dealt with first.

In that first meeting a few of the Masters had said it was a waste to not find some way to train Obi-Wan, as much potential as he had. Two Masters even threatened to leave the Council if he were not, saying he deserved as much of a chance as Anakin and that this sort of manipulation went against the Order, but the boy was destined to be a casualty of fate: the majority had won out.

This second gathering was merely for show, all of the hard decisions already made and concealed in convenient truths that would be fed in bitter pills to the boys one at a time in this beautiful room high above the cityscape.

"Too old to be trained?" Anakin repeated dumbly, unable to believe what they were saying.

Obi-Wan said nothing, but his heart spasmed painfully in his chest as the odd, unshakable dread he'd woken up with that morning was confirmed in the unchanging faces around him: he had already been written off. He was not even there to them.

His comfortable new clothes suddenly felt tight at the collar, or maybe that was just his throat. He couldn't tell.
"It is with great reluctance we accept you, Anakin," a Master named Mundi said coolly. "We do so because you may come to harm if we do not, in possession of such abilities as you have. But eleven? Eleven is far too old to be trained as a Jedi."

"No!" Anakin shot a desperate cry up to Qui-Gon, frantic and tugging on his tabard, tanned fist balled in the light fabric. "Master Jinn, you said we would both be knights!"

And Qui-Gon shook his head, trying to subsume the uneasiness he felt as he fell in line with the Council. It was easier to do looking down at Anakin, seeing the umbra of raw power circling around him like a furnace, and he tried to focus on that, to remind himself what was at stake here. *That must be turned to fight the Sith, to fight evil. That power must serve the Jedi or we will all perish when it is turned against us.* He let his eyes drift to the fragile slump of Obi-Wan's shoulders as he spoke. "I am sorry. I tried to convince them, Anakin, but I see now that... that they are right. He is too old. But we can still help him."

Obi-Wan lowered his chin, staring down at the ground, trying to breathe around the sharp twinge in his chest, his pain a brittle frost all around him. Qui-Gon tried to put his other hand on Obi-Wan's shoulder to comfort him, but the boy roughly shrugged it off and stepped into Anakin's open arms, his own hanging limp at his side as he stared blindly at the lovely floral patterns spiraling along the floor.

Anakin pulled him close and glared around at the Masters with much the same defiance he had the street gang on that faraway Mos Espa street, the cold shock of Obi-Wan's Force presence bleeding over into his and boiling away into anger. "This isn't fair!"

"We will remove the remnants of both of your deactivated slave trackers to ensure your freedom and you, Obi-Wan, are welcome to have a home and occupation here," another Master offered. "Your aptitude test showed mechanical skill and knowledge. You are a couple of years younger than usual for an apprenticeship, but we could arrange for a tutor and an apprentice mechanic position in the hangar bay that might turn into a pilot position, depending on your progress. Either way, it would come with quarters in the technician wing and a salary when you are older. The only requirement would be that you do not discuss Anakin with anyone else, given the sensitive nature of his powers."

"Unless you wish to leave and return to your family here on Coruscant? What is your family name?" a horned Master named Koth offered kindly, leaning forward from his seat near where the boys stood.

"That won't work. Even with that accent he swears he's from Tatooine, Qui-Gon had told them in that first meeting. But he saw that they had decided to try it anyway."

And for a moment, Qui-Gon felt a shiver in the boy's Force presence, doubt and hesitation as he briefly weighed the chance at whatever sky-side life that accent likely hinted at against the certain torture of being so near Jedi but unable to be one.

But then Obi-Wan clenched his jaw and stood a little taller, will hardening into steel as he decided his path. "It's Skywalker."

"So you want to stay here at the Temple?" Master Koth asked politely, disappointment clear in his eyes if not his question.

"Yes. If Anakin's here, I'm here," he said, leaning against Anakin.

"Yeah," Anakin added, daring anyone to disagree with him before his voice softened as he spoke to
Qui-Gon. "I mean, we'll see each other all the time, right?"

"Of course, as your schedules allow," Master Mundi said smoothly.

_How often will that be?_ Obi-Wan wondered as the grey sleet of bleak despair beat against him. He was not so young and not so innocent that he didn't understand the gist of what was happening here even if the finer points escaped him.

"Good. I'm glad we agree," Anakin said as if he were the one sitting in the Grandmaster's chair rather than Yoda, and a few eyebrows raised at the confident bravado of one so young. Most of the Masters were amused and Anakin was playing on that, Obi-Wan knew.

After Master Jinn had caved in on Tatooine so quickly, agreeing to bring Obi-Wan along after just one outburst, Anakin thought these robed men and women that looked like Master Jinn would be as easy to manipulate with a mix of charm and temper as he had been and Obi-Wan would be a Padawan along with him within a day. Maybe a week at the most. But Obi-Wan understood far better than Anakin what had just been decided.

Anakin was theirs now.

And he was nothing.

"Then we shall offer an apprenticeship to you, Obi-Wan," Master Koth replied.

Obi-Wan swallowed, speaking with the same meek tone Qui-Gon had heard him using with his former owner on Tatooine. "Thank you for your kindness, Masters."

"You are welcome," another Master said as Obi-Wan's soul crumpled at the approving look he gave Anakin, the look that spoke of plans and possession in the same way a man considers a newly purchased droid.

"It's all right, Obi-Wan," Anakin whispered, trying to cheer him up and tapping his shoulder twice in the same way he did when they spotted an easy mark on the street back home.

"No, it's not," Obi-Wan whimpered, trying to find the words for the unshakable, looming certainty in his young soul that nothing would ever be all right again.

As the boys spoke the Council watched, judging the way the Force twisted around the two of them, the story it told of how close they were.

"Do not presume you know us, Obi-Wan," Master Mundi said, canting his head to one side. "We only wish to help both of you."

"Then train him!" Anakin said, switching to the same demanding pout he had used with Qui-Gon in Watto's shop.

"We cannot."

"You have to!"

"No. We cannot," Master Mundi answered, utterly unmoved.

Qui-Gon noticed Master Plo Koon's furious expression as he tapped something on a datapad, likely his resignation from the Council. Master Fisto sat in equally stony silence, arms folded and looking away, shaking his head in disbelief. _They'll leave or be off the Council soon._ Qui-Gon felt sure of
it. Don't they see this is what we have to do? We can't take any chances with Anakin.

The rest were all watching Anakin like moths entranced by a candle flame, fascinated by the sheer strength of the Force that radiated from the boy as it began to build. "I want him trained!"

"No," Yoda said, and Anakin felt a warning push against his mind as the Council sat and studied him.

He blinked at the denial, realizing how deadly serious they were, and the color drained from his face as he took in what that meant. "It's not fair!" he moaned, burying himself against Obi-Wan's chest and trying to burn away the ice growing thick there. Obi-Wan stroked his hair, the love he had for Anakin swelling so brilliantly in the Force Qui-Gon almost had to step back.

"Anakin," Obi-Wan begged, knowing what he had to do even as it crushed what was left of his young heart. "You have to listen to them. You have to get trained so you don't hurt yourself, ok? And… and you'll see me, right? When you're not training."

"You should be trained too!" he cried. "You're strong too!" Anakin turned to fix his angry gaze on the ring of Masters watching quietly, tears welling up. "He is!"

"It's all right," Obi-Wan tried to say, but the words died away, weak and useless.

"No, it isn't!"

"Anakin, please…"

Qui-Gon waited to see if that strange incident would repeat itself that he'd seen when they first met, if Anakin's anger would vanish in an odd flash, but it just seethed and boiled where it was, as hot against his mind as Obi-Wan's was cold.

"Argue this do not. Do what we must, we do, for the Order and the galaxy," Yoda said to more in the room than just the boy, tapping the floor with a stick almost as bent and gnarled as he was to show the discussion was over. "Accept our training, do you, Anakin?"

"Anakin, please…" Obi-Wan pleaded, clutching his hand even as his own trembled.

"Yes, I do," he said with a miserable glance over at Obi-Wan.

"Accept our shelter, do you, Obi-Wan?"

"Yes."

As he bowed once and then again to the Masters, Qui-Gon had to agree with the old Grandmaster and the Council's decision, hard as it was. The two boys were wrapped around each other now, heads touching and ache pouring through the innate, feral bond forged between them in molten light like two stars feeding off of each other.

_That sort of attachment will bring only danger and destruction if left unchecked_, Qui-Gon thought to himself as he led the two upset boys out of the room. _The road of the Light is narrow, too narrow to chance._
The present.

Anakin woke in the early morning hours, some immediately forgotten thought or dream setting a hook in his mind and reeling him back to consciousness in a single moment of startled confusion.

He blinked without moving, battle habits keeping him lying down so as not to sit up into a line of fire, and felt his heart thud against his chest, trying to place where this dark room was.

"Anakin?" came a faint murmur, and a warm weight shifted against him, an arm sleepily winding around his waist. *Obi-Wan.*

Letting out a sigh, Anakin rolled into him, pulling Obi-Wan close so that his head lay tucked under Anakin's chin. The two were lost in the sheets and pillows of the bed, dim shapes twined together, the only sound the low hum of air circulating in the room.

Obi-Wan's lips tickled his throat as he mumbled against his skin. "Dream?"

"No. I'm fine. Something woke me up but I don't know what it was." He ran a hand in a soothing arc along Obi-Wan's back, fingertips gentle along his skin as he yawned and inhaled the light scent of his shampoo. "Go back to sleep."

Obi-Wan's breathing gradually settled back into the peaceful rhythm of slumber and his head grew heavy on Anakin's arm as Anakin lay there, staring out into the glittering velvet of the Coruscant night as his own heart slowed and his thoughts settled.

Sleep refused to come, however, and half an hour later Anakin gave up on trying to chase it down. Gingerly sliding his arm out from under Obi-Wan, he left him asleep on his side and sat up, reaching for his pants and tugging them on as he got out of bed.

He took silent, careful steps over to the small bag of clothes he'd brought with him for the week, reaching inside to the bottom and pulling out the old holocron of his master's speech.

Shutting the door behind him, he left the lights in the hall and in the living area off, finding his way around dark silhouettes to sit down on the floor on the far side of the living room, his back against the long bench and the holo on the table in front of him. Tapping the volume down to almost nothing before he started the message, he sat back and watched the familiar blue form spring to life, but this time the message that had once been so comforting grew more unnerving the more he listened.

"I know it has been difficult for you, but you have done it and I am so proud of you. I know life has not been easy here and the fight against attachment was long, but you persevered and have become an example for all of us. Congratulations, Anakin."

He pulled his knees up to his chest, tilting his head and frowning as the holo continued. "There are great things in your future, and I am sure that one day you will sit on the Council itself, if not lead it. Do not let regret or doubt into your mind. You are the Chosen One, and you must always remember that. The Council needs you, Anakin. We will all need you one day. Do not be afraid of your destiny. Go forth and bring Light wherever you go. You have certainly brought it to me. Good luck, Padawan. Though I guess I can't call you that, anymore, can I? Good luck, Knight Skywalker. Thank you for being my Padawan."

Anakin watched it again, with a new wariness, and then again, trying to determine from the slightest shifts in the resolution lines of the holo how his Master felt when he said those words about the Council. *You didn't know what they did, right, whenever they did it? I can't believe that*
"Anakin?" Obi-Wan said from the doorway to the bedroom, a soft whisper and nudge through the Force that startled Anakin nonetheless. He whipped his head around and let out a sigh immediately. "Oh, Obi-Wan, I'm sorry. Did it wake you up?"

"No, this did," he said, tapping his head. "Something's upset you." Sleepily wandering through across the room to Anakin, clad only in pants as he padded into the weak glow of the holo, Obi-Wan sat down next to him on the floor. "What are you watching?"

"It's... it's an old holo my master made."

Obi-Wan slid an arm up Anakin's back, lazily stroking the curls at the base of his neck as he leaned into him, but the tension in his body was unmistakable. "What's it about?"

"It was supposed to be given to me the day I was knighted. I found it in his room after... after Maul."

"Anakin," Obi-Wan asked, hand deep in his hair, smoothing and stroking it, "why are you watching this?"

"I thought it would make me feel better, but I haven't seen it since all of this happened, and now it just makes me wonder. Did he know? Did my master know what they did to me?"

"What do you think?" he asked, bleary-eyed and tone curious.

"I can't believe it. Master was never like that. He was... he was the only person that cared about me in the Temple when I was younger."

Obi-Wan's hand paused in its lazy combing through Anakin's hair. "He was?"

"Yeah. I didn't have any friends, really."

Obi-Wan wet his lips and sat back, folding his arms and gaze sliding to the holocron. "None?"

"No," Anakin said, never looking away from the shimmering blue face. "I was so behind in my studies I spent most of my time with different Masters getting caught up. And then they had another load of studies on top of that to help me with my Force abilities. Master Jinn was my best friend, really."

Obi-Wan narrowed his eyes as Anakin spoke and shook his head. "Anakin, there is something we need to talk about. I've been... well, I've been putting it off but I guess now is as good a time as any for this." He waved a hand at the holocron and shut it off, darkness returning to the room.

"What?" Anakin asked, his features shadowed but concern clear in the question.

"You can't talk about his death. At all," Obi-Wan pointed out, his own face hidden in indigo and black.

"It hurts to. I hate even thinking about it."

"I know. But Anakin," Obi-Wan regarded him with a frown evident in the gloom as Anakin's sight readjusted, "if you can't even talk about it, what will you do when my Master is standing across from you in combat? When he's right there?"

He shrugged nonchalantly, not liking where this was going. "I... it'll be different then. I'll have to
"Anakin, my master looks fearsome but his intellect is what makes him truly dangerous. The second he smells weakness on you he will turn it directly against you and hammer you with it until you crack. And if you cringe just once, if you lose your focus for the briefest moment, the fight will be over, I promise you," Obi-Wan told him with a note of exasperation shading his words. "He is not aiming to kill you. He is aiming to enslave you. He'll wound you and move on to me. And if you've gone down, I will not be able to beat him alone. He will kill me."

Anakin refused to let that last sentence hang in the blackness for long. "I fight in battles all the time. I can shut down my emotions when I have to."

"Then tell me," Obi-Wan demanded. "Tell me about your master's death." There was something in his voice Anakin didn't like, though he couldn't put his finger exactly on it. "Anger? Fear?"

"Obi-Wan, please…"

"Tell me. All of it."

Anakin sighed and stretched his legs out in front of him as he leaned back against the bench, tired and annoyed and just wanting to go back to bed. "Master and I were on a mission to Takodana."

"Why?"

"It was a scouting mission, I think. Pirates."

"You think?" Obi-Wan asked doubtfully.

Anakin glared at him, Obi-Wan's tone an unpleasant surprise. "Yeah. Yeah, it was pirates."

"And then what happened?"

"Maul surprised us when we were out in some woods. We were following up on a lead, trying to find a pirate base." The air between them hummed with tension now, making the huge room feel small and claustrophobic as the lights glittered in a line across the sky behind them.

"Who attacked first?" Obi-Wan continued, apparently blind to Anakin's growing anger.

"He did," Anakin spat back. "Who do you think?"

"Tell me about the fight."

Anakin picked up the holocron, turning it over and over again in his hands, an endless spin of corner over corner as he tried to fight the nastier emotions rising up inside him. "He and Master fought. I tried to jump in to help. I distracted Maul just enough he missed Master but on the swing back he caught me across the face." He pointed at the scar tracing down the outside of his eye before going back to fidgeting with the holocron.

"Then?"

"Kriff, how much more do you want to know?"

Obi-Wan gestured with one hand, a clipped sweep across his chest. "All of it. Have you ever told the whole thing to anyone? Said it out loud?"

Anakin stopped, mouth open to protest, to say of course he had, but it came to him that he hadn't.
Not even to Ahsoka. "... No." The word hung between them, strange and awkward, weighted with emotion.

Obi-Wan waited, and Anakin wished Obi-Wan would hug him or reassure him but he only sat and stared like a wolf considering a stranger in its territory. "I fell down and they kept fighting, and Maul… Maul killed him," he eventually continued, resenting Obi-Wan's silence.

"A wound on the face kept you out of the fight? You?"

"That's what you choose to say? After I say I've never told anyone?" "It hurt! I don't know, maybe I'd been injured. I don't remember. I just remember hurting with my hands over my face and hearing the… the end of the fight."

"What happened then?" came the next question, as impassive as a saber lesson.

Anakin clenched his jaw, grinding his teeth as he saw that Obi-Wan meant to force this conversation through to the brutal end. "A rescue ship came. Troops. A Master or two, I think. Master must have called them the second Maul showed himself."

"Why didn't my Master kill you?"

"I don't know!" Anakin shot to his feet, voice loud in the darkness as he towered over Obi-Wan. "I don't kriffing know and I'm tired of this! You want me to fight him? You're worried I'm not going to be able to fight him? I'll show you how ready I am! Come on! Let's go train! Right now!"

Obi-Wan stood slowly, and Anakin was infuriated to notice he dared to have worry on his face after his long, painful line of bloodless, relentless questioning. "Good enough. It'll have to be good enough," Obi-Wan muttered to Anakin and then to himself before turning away, back toward the bedroom.

"No." Anakin grabbed his arm and spun him back around. "This isn't about 'good enough'! I loved my Master! He was the only good thing I had at the Temple! He taught me everything I know and he was there for me when no one else was! I will not stop until the monster that killed him is dead!"

Obi-Wan froze as Anakin spoke, first his arm under Anakin's hand, then his shoulders, and finally his eyes, an unseen snow drifting down over the entirety of his person. "You're right," he said, words clipped as if saying them took a supreme amount of effort. "The great and saintly Qui-Gon Jinn must be avenged. I... have no doubt you will not falter in the fight against my Master."

"Why are you being like this?" Anakin said, taking him by the other shoulder as well, searching his face in bewilderment. "Are you having second thoughts about turning on your own Master?"

Obi-Wan laughed bitterly, standing stiffly in Anakin's grasp as he looked up at him. "You know, just like you, my Master taught me everything I know. He, too, was there for me when no one else was. But I am going to help you kill him anyway, Anakin, because I want you safe."

"Don't. Don't compare the two of them," he snarled, shocked at Obi-Wan's words. "There is no comparison between them at all."

"You're right," Obi-Wan sneered. "Mine never tried to hold me back."

Anakin gaped at him, rage surging through his mind and blotting out everything else in a black line of storm clouds. "He did not know about my mind-wipe."
"No, I'm sure he didn't. But he knew all about the Chosen One prophecy, though, didn't he? He and the Council!" Obi-Wan's mental shields were holding, but just barely. Anakin could feel the hatred roiling around the edges of them, a seething halo that would sear anything it touched.

"Are you jealous? Are you jealous I'm the Chosen One?"

"Jealous? Of that nonsense?" Obi-Wan shoved Anakin's hands off his shoulders. "Let go of me." He strode off toward the bedroom, Anakin right behind him like a nexu stalking prey.

"I know. You're jealous of my Master!"


"No. You don't get to call him that. You didn't even know him. You wanted to talk about my Master, so let's talk!" Anakin growled, Obi-Wan whirling to face him and so close Anakin could see Obi-Wan's chest rising and falling in quick, angry breaths despite the shadows they were both drowning in. "So you never had a Master like him. You only had Maul. I'm sorry, but that's not my Master's fault. You don't get to look down on what you never had!"

For a second, he thought Obi-Wan was going to hit him: he felt through the raw, jagged thunderhead of the Force around them that Obi-Wan's fingers were curling into a fist, felt the muscles tensing in a wave up his lithe arm. And then his fist opened, and he instead brought his open palm up to put it over Anakin's chest as carefully as if he were searching for a security reader to place his hand on.

He pushed Anakin backward out of the bedroom, quiet and icier than Anakin had ever seen him. "No practice today. Come back tomorrow." As he spoke he used a thread of the Force to lift Anakin's things and threw them out to scatter at his feet in the living area.

"Obi-Wan, I..." Anakin began, starting to realize what he had just said, and then the bedroom door shut in his face and locked with a sterile click that sounded impossibly loud in the dark.

_He was forced into that life, and that's what you say to him? What in the third hell is wrong with you?_ he thought, the questions sinking black and awful into his stomach.

"I'm sorry, Obi-Wan!" Anakin called through the door, but there was no answer save the ghosts of footsteps moving away from it. Standing there, a horrible guilt creeping over him, Anakin heard the muffled hiss of the shower in the refresher off of the bedroom start and then grow duller as the door to it was shut as well.

"I'm sorry," Anakin whispered again, running his hands through his hair as he leaned forward to rest his forehead against the cool plastic of the door. "I'm sorry."

Chapter End Notes

Hello and thank you so much for your support and comments last week, readers! <3 I'm going to go catch up with all of you as soon as I post this.

I will say this was a hard chapter to write because all I want is the boys to be happy and snuggle forever. *shakes fist at plot* If you are not angst-hardy like me, please
accept a hug and my apologies.

For updates, we're moving into the last fourth or so of the story (five or six more chapters, maybe?), and due to a trip out of town this coming weekend I'll post my next update a couple of days later than usual, sometime between next Wednesday and Sunday.

Need something happy to read after this? This week's fic rec. to counterbalance my angst is *Where Shall We Three Meet Again*, delicious fluffy crack by my girlfriend in which three different Obi-Wans (Sith, female, and canon) get pulled into a world where Anakin Skywalker never became a Jedi and is instead a professional podracer.

Oh, and if you're on Tumblr feel free to come say hi and give me a drabble prompt if you want (it's a few posts back). :)

Thanks again for reading, lovelies!
The past.

The accommodation section of the Temple was entirely silent this late at night, the corridors collections of long shadows and dim lights that stretched on forever and the only sound in this corner of it the low hiss of a door opening.

Anakin leaned out of his room to look both ways before stepping out, a small stack of datapads in his arms.

He had been in the Temple for approximately six weeks, placed in an unoccupied Master's room rather than the Initiate or Padawan dorms to keep him closer to the members of the Council, unaware of how large his quarters were compared to his peers.

He was, however, aware of how his schedule had been changed a week prior, how suddenly it was impossible for him to have lunch at the same time as Obi-Wan's break from his own studies and apprentice job. This was the last place and time he had been able to regularly see Obi-Wan since their arrival, and now he agreed with what Obi-Wan had whispered in Huttese the last time they'd eaten together, surrounded by the din of the dining hall. *They don't want us to be friends anymore.*

Anakin walked away from his room at as relaxed a pace as he could manage. *If we're friends, then that's attachment, Master would say. Attachments are dangerous. Attachments are not the Jedi way.*

*Well, kriff that! he thought with a frown. If attachments are so dangerous there wouldn't be Padawans and Masters. Or anyone with anyone. Ever.*

*You can be a Jedi and still care about people.*

Under the datapads he clutched a small piece of duraplastic in his hand, an ID card that had no markings on it other than serial numbers and a hole punched in the top so it could be clipped to a belt or chain. Anakin had no idea what it was but it had been slipped under his door sometime this afternoon while he was in his saber lesson with Master Tiin. A note had been wrapped around the unassuming card. *0200, Rast. You're a Padawan, so bring a few datapads so anyone watching the holocams will think you're just going to the Library for some late-night studying.*

A time and a place: late, late at night and the statue of an old, famed Jedi warrior that stood guard over one of the larger and airier halls that crisscrossed the Temple.

Anakin grinned as he peered around a corner, not tired at all despite the hour. *Obi-Wan is so smart. I knew he'd find a way!*

Listening and reaching out with the Force as he went along, Anakin carefully made his way through the hallways, lingering only once when he sensed a night-owl probably on his or her actual way to the Library up ahead.

His heart was thudding by the time he finally saw the old bronziunm statue of Blademaster Rast, a Jedi hero of the Old Republic, towering on a pedestal almost as tall as Anakin at the entrance to the spacious hall further ahead.
Beneath it, in the shadows of the Master's sculpted cloak made deep by the late hour, another shadow lurked, one invisible in the Force and beckoning him with quick waves of his hand. "Skybrother!" he whispered, elated.

Anakin hurried over and hugged him as tight as he could with one arm, balancing the datapads along his hip. Obi-Wan hugged him back tightly and pulled him further into the dark beneath the statue, pointing at the card Anakin held. "Let's go," he said, holding up another one and tapping the faintest outline in the metal. A door slid open as Anakin stared, dumbfounded.

"Worker corridors," Obi-Wan said, stepping inside as Anakin followed and giving a sarcastic bow to the statue outside as his Force presence ghosted back into Anakin's awareness. "For those of us unfit for viewing in the main halls."

The door slid shut behind them, leaving them in a nondescript corridor with bare walls lit only by dull yellow bulbs.

"Does this run the whole length of the hall?" Anakin whispered, awed as he stared around.

"These run through the whole Temple, minus the high-security areas like the Library vault," Obi-Wan said proudly. "They didn't bother with holocams in these corridors, either, since only people they trust can get in anyway." He held up and then tucked his own card away into a pocket on the mechsuit he wore, a plain black affair that went from the wrists to the ankles, belted in the middle and covered in pockets. "Keep that hidden in your room," he said, pointing to the one Anakin held.

"How did you get it?" he asked, impressed.

"Well, a mechanic lost his ID a couple of weeks back and it was a huge pain, he told me, because they had to cancel it and make him a new one. In the meantime they gave him a blank one, kind of like a visitor one." Obi-Wan shrugged, studiously casual. "So I found out where they kept the visitor ones and took one from the stack."

Anakin couldn't stop smiling. "I knew you'd figure out something! So what now?"

"I could show you my room. Or we could go exploring… I haven't gone exploring because I knew you'd want to go too." There was no real urgency for either of them: they were both thrilled just to see each other, to be able to talk and laugh without a Master or three looking on disapprovingly from a balcony or the next table over.

"I haven't seen most of this place," Anakin agreed, trying to decide where they should go first.

Obi-Wan affectionately ruffled Anakin's hair as they thought about what to do. "So do you like this style?"

Anakin made a face. "It's weird having short hair, and the braid kind of tickles my neck sometimes." He tugged on it, opening his mouth to explain what the braid meant, but the flicker of envy in Obi-Wan's eyes told him that Obi-Wan knew exactly what it was.

"Did they give you a saber yet?" Obi-Wan asked, trying to keep the jealousy out of his voice as they stood together in the sickly twilight.

"Just a training one. I have to build one after I've been here a year, Master says, which I think might be later than all the other Padawans but I'm really far behind, or ahead because I'm so young, I guess, to be a Padawan." Anakin fussed with the datapads, not wanting to make Obi-Wan unhappy by talking too long about his own training. "I don't know," he shrugged, beaming up at Obi-Wan.
"But you're here! And I want to see your room. Then let's go explore!"

"Are you sure?" Obi-Wan asked, increasingly aware of his own plain suit and lack of a braid, remembering the brief glimpse he'd seen of Anakin's quarters the first day Qui-Gon had taken them both there and dropped Anakin off before leading Obi-Wan along to the technicians' wing and the stone-faced Eferian in charge of it. "It's really small and boring."

"It's yours," Anakin said encouragingly. "You said something about books when we ate together last time. I want to see!"

"Ok." Obi-Wan had to smile at Anakin's curiosity and led them off, the two weaving their way past storage crates and around at least a dozen corners. "The other techs found out I like to read and they drop off datapads all the time when they're done with them."

"For free?"

"Yeah, but I run errands sometimes for them too. They send me out to get things."

"You get to leave the Temple?" Anakin asked, stunned. This was one thing he had been able to figure out despite only a brief time spent around the other younglings here: the ability to leave the Temple on your own for any reason was like growing wings and flying around the central spire.

"I do. It's no big deal. I mean..." Obi-Wan said, and then stopped at Anakin's thrilled glow in the Force.

"Forget the Temple. After your room let's go explore the city!"

Obi-Wan waved his hand and laughed. "It's not that easy, skybrother. That's a totally different security system to get in and out."

"Ok. Well, by the time you figure it out I should have my own saber. And then we can go exploring. Maybe even way down in the lower levels, the scary ones!"

They both nodded, excited just imagining it and the tiny spark of Obi-Wan's jealousy unable to stand up to his pure joy at being with his best friend again. "I never told you the real ghost stories about the lower levels. You were too young."

"Am I old enough now?" Anakin said, stroking an imaginary beard.

"You might be. Come on!" Obi-Wan told him, slapping his card against another faint outline. The wall opened, revealing the soothing darkness of a carpeted hallway and a long line of doors. They darted across to one on the other side and Obi-Wan ran the same card over it, the two hurrying inside as the door shut behind them.

There wasn't much more space to move forward once they stepped in: it was a small room, all right, just big enough for a bed tucked into one wall with a set of shelves over it and a narrow table pushed up against the other side. The shelves and table were already half-full with datapads and droid parts, the bed as neatly made as Obi-Wan had always left his back on Tatooine during winter nights when the two of them curled up together in Anakin's bed instead.

It didn't matter how tiny it was, though. The room felt like Obi-Wan to Anakin through the Force, a bittersweet, soul-deep blend of joy and ache that reminded him of the time he'd found a beautiful duneflower blooming alone in the middle of a salt flat.

Obi-Wan lived here, so it felt like home.
Anakin happily sat the datapads down on one of the few clear spaces on the worktable and flopped on the bed, rolling over onto his back. "You know, you can borrow any of the ones I brought if you like," he said, pointing over at the stack. "They're ones the Librarian recommended but I can take them back whenever, she said."

"Really?" Obi-Wan said, picking them up and tapping them to see what they were.

"There's one on meditation, which is so, so boring. But there's one on the Force, too! It's drills for Initiates, and I'm done with it but I haven't taken it back yet. That one's good. A lot of the drills are like our game 'How High, How Long?'"

"Am I allowed to practice?" Obi-Wan asked with a frown. "Or will the Masters get mad about that?"

"You should practice. You're just as good as me. Who cares what they say?"

"I think we will if they find out."

"Then they don't find out." Anakin sat up and drew his legs in to sit cross-legged, dropping into Huttese for a moment. "'Better to go around the Sarlacc than try to shake its hand,' you know?" He thought about it as Obi-Wan did the same, trying to find a way to solve this particular puzzle. "I think you could do it if you hide yourself. Like how you hid yourself out in the hall, or the way you hide me?"

"Let me try." Obi-Wan stood up taller, concentrating, and the warm light of his Force presence slowly disappeared as if a fog had rolled in over it. He then looked down at the datapad in his hands and opened them, the device slowly lifting into the air as he remained invisible in the Force.

"Like that," Anakin said quietly, impressed.

"Heh," Obi-Wan murmured, pleased, as the pad dropped back down and his aura came back into Anakin's view. He ignored the twinge of pain lighting up the back of his mind. I can get better. I will get better. "Can I take the meditation one and the Force one? That gives you two to walk back with. Let's see. So you'll take back History of the Order and Holocron Creation?"

"Sure! We can trade out every time we meet. Oh, and that holocron one reminds me… Show me that holoprojector you were talking about at lunch last week? The one you were trying to fix?"

"Oh, that one." Obi-Wan shifted a stack of datapads on the desk to put the two new ones at the bottom, trying not to appear too eager at the chance of getting to at least learn something Anakin was being taught. He picked up a caseless collection of wires and bolts that resembled a bird's nest more than anything else and tossed it to Anakin with a sigh. "Good luck. It's a 73A-9 they were going to throw out, so I asked if I could have it. All the wires are intact, but something's still not right."

Anakin sat up, running his fingers along the tiny metal frame, fascinated. Obi-Wan picked a small roll of tools and one of the datapads from the shelf above the bed and sat down next to him, their shoulders and legs touching as he settled in. "See, according to this page all the 73s are twitchy. Maybe it really is just broken."

"I'll figure it out," Anakin promised, the two content as they sat together while he puzzled over it, Obi-Wan watching him work and handing him tools as Anakin asked for them. They forgot about exploring for the few hours they had before they had to sneak Anakin back, too happy to be next to each other and doing something that they had always done, for a brief while able to forget about
the strange, sometimes frightening place they had found themselves in as they tinkered with the projector.

"We can't do this every night," Anakin reluctantly said, voicing what they were both thinking as they stood in the same worker corridor they'd begun the night at. "Master keeps going on and on about attachments and he'd be really mad if he caught us. Sometimes he checks in on me after lights-out to make sure I'm there." At Obi-Wan's worried expression he shook his head. "He's not here tonight. Some kind of mission yesterday and today off-planet."

Obi-Wan nodded, relieved, and tucked his hands in the two hip pockets of his suit. "What are attachments anyway?"

"Us. Friends. Caring about people. Jedi are only supposed to care about everyone, not one person. Master says if you use up all of your caring on one person you don't have enough left for everyone else."

Obi-Wan made a face and rolled his eyes. "That's stupid."

"Yeah. I know." Anakin stayed close to him, not wanting to open the door and go back out. "I'll find a way to let you know when it's ok again, all right?"

"Ok. I'm in the hangar bay helping out most afternoons."

He hugged Obi-Wan before he darted out, Obi-Wan sliding his hands out of his pockets to hug him back. "See you soon!" Anakin whispered, waving and hurrying out into the darkened hallway.

Obi-Wan waved back, feeling better than he had in weeks. When he walked back to his own room, no threat of a Master or anyone else checking in on him, he ran a hand over the now-working projector and smiled softly over at the new datapads. *We're still skybrothers. He isn't forgetting about me.*

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**The present.**

The training salon below rang with happy shouts and the static of lightsabers crossing, Initiates practicing forms in orderly pairs spaced about the room and two instructors moving between them with equal amounts of praise and critique.

It was Ahsoka's weekly day off from classes, and she rested against one of the balconies that ringed the spacious room, arms folded over the railing and gaze distant. It hadn't been so long ago she had been one of those Initiates, eager to please and dreaming like all of them about becoming a Padawan, about being chosen by one of the impressive Masters that towered over them in both form and the Force.

*I couldn't believe it when the Council said they were sending me to Anakin Skywalker to be his Padawan. No tournament, no formal meeting, just get on a ship and go find him on the front. They weren't really calling him the Hero With No Fear yet, but we all knew who he was.*

*I was so excited to go. I was so excited when he accepted.*

She turned away and walked off, disappearing back into one of the smaller halls that ran alongside
the training salon, on her way to her room. *But now I have to wonder... why did the Council choose me for him?*

*Did I help them somehow? Did I help keep my master asleep all this time, focusing on a Padawan instead of his own thoughts so he wouldn't remember anything about the mind wipe? A Padawan who gets into trouble a lot would be perfect for that.*

Her skin crawled at the possibility. *I guess it depends on when they mind-wiped him. We still don't know when that was.*

She could go around asking knights Anakin's age about him, about if he'd ever said where he was from and had he ever changed his story about that. *None of them know him at all, though. And, let's be honest, while I'm at it, I could also just go straight to the prison down below and toss myself in.*

*If they found out I knew, the Council would...* She hesitated, unsure of how to finish this. *Would what? Keep me in jail? Banish me?*  

*Or just mind wipe the both of us and send us off to the Senate later this month?*  

A few Padawans she knew from classes hurried past her on their way to breakfast, staring at her in awe as they went.  

Ahsoka had learned quickly and early on that becoming the Padawan of Anakin Skywalker brought more trouble than anything else when it came to her peers as her friends became too jealous or too impressed to stay friends with her anymore. Now as she passed this group, their eyes wide with amazement, she felt her heart squeeze in her chest at what they whispered to each other. "There she is!" "I want to be just like her!"

*I can't do this.* Ahsoka hurried onward and rounded the first corner she saw, swallowing and trying to ignore the sick feeling in her stomach.  

*I don't think I can stay here, be a Jedi, after all of this.*  

*What will Master do? What will I do?*  

Pressing at her temples, Ahsoka sighed as she came to her room and tried to smoothe out her feelings as the door opened. *Anxiety, worry... guilt?* She hesitated in the doorway: something other than her own feelings was circling about her, a pang of negative energy that grew stronger the more she examined it. *Master?*  

Reaching out with her mind, she brushed against their bond and found it heavy with shame and embarrassment. He felt close, probably in his own room, and she strode off in that direction, wondering what had happened and her own concerns forgotten for the moment, as they always were when something was wrong with her master. *He's supposed to be training, isn't he?*  

"What happened?" she asked as soon as he opened the door and came in, glancing around. "Is it something with the Council?"

"No. I, well, Obi-Wan and I had a fight," he muttered, going back and sitting down at his desk and the now-half assembled miniature droid there, cursing himself for not remembering to dampen the bond between them on his way back. "It was stupid. I... I was stupid."

"How bad was it?" she asked, watching him grind the tip of his soldering pen against a delicate ring of metal hard enough it was surprising it didn't snap.
"He kicked me out for the day. But I can come back tomorrow."

"Oh. Well, that's not so bad. Right?" What did you two fight about? she wondered, but didn't dare ask, sitting down next to him in the empty chair and picking up the next piece lined up along the table to give to him.

"I just got so mad, Snips. I don't get mad like that. Not at other people," he told her, never looking up.

"It's probably just stress."

"You don't even know what we were fighting about."

"I could guess?" she offered with a slight tease to her voice, trying to lighten the mood.

"Don't," he warned.

"Ok." She fell silent for a bit as he worked on the tiny droid. "Master?"

"No."

"But."

"No."

She looked on as he jabbed at the pieces with the pen, smoke rising up in lazy lines as he soldered seams together, letting the silence stretch out between them before trying again. "Hey, Master?"

"Yeah?" he sighed in exasperation, finally glancing up at her.

"I think that's upside down," she said quietly, pointing at one end. "You're putting his head on his butt."

Anakin blinked and stared down at the parts as if seeing them for the first time. "Oh."

Ahsoka tried to hold back a laugh as he very carefully set down the pen and tapped it off as if he had planned to put the pieces together like that. And then he let out a snigger and she did too, the worst of the tension between them breaking as cleanly as a layer of ice in spring.

"This is me," he said, holding up the droid with one hand as he buried his face in the other. "Oh, Snips, it was bad," he groaned from behind his fingers. "Really bad."

"Would you like me to go talk to him? See how he is?"

Anakin dragged his hand down just enough to uncover his eyes, looking at her gratefully. "Would you?"

"Only if I get to keep the butt droid," she solemnly declared, holding out her hand for it.

He gave the unfortunate arrangement to her slowly, eyebrow raised. "What are you going to do with it?"

"I have no idea but you are not allowed to fix that," she chuckled. "It's too funny looking."

Unable to argue that point, he sighed and leaned back in his chair, folding his arms. "So, uh, what you going to say to him?"
Ahsoka considered it, standing up and leaning against the table as she crossed her arms too. "Probably something like 'Are you ok? Master is stupid sometimes. He was stupid with you and he's sorry.' And then I'll show him the butt droid to show him how distracted you are."

"No, for kriff's sake, leave that here," he demanded, swiping it back from her and setting it down out of her reach. "I shouldn't have you go. I should go myself."

"Nah, I think you need to stay here. Let me handle it, Master. Really."

Anakin let out a soft exhale and looked up at her, thankful. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. You stay here. Mess up some more droids. I'll talk to him."

"Thank you. I'll com the guards to let you out and say you're running an errand for me."

"No problem, Master."

Well this isn't exactly how I imagined spending my morning, Ahsoka mused, rubbing her forehead as she drifted high above the skyline in one of the public transports that crisscrossed the districts around the Temple.

It was easy to joke around with and tease her Master, and even easier when he wanted distraction from things that were bothering him, but as soon as she was alone again her earlier worries and doubts stole back in to whisper just loud enough for her to hear. *He told me on the way back from Tatooine that he's not giving that speech. The Council won't like hearing that. What will they do? I don't know, but whatever happens, I'm not going to leave Master alone. Either with the Council or with a Sith.*

She closed her eyes and tried to enjoy the faint breeze the transport's screens let through. *I know Obi-Wan loves him.* The image of the two young boys meeting in that awful room floated in her mind, Obi-Wan's sharing of the memory with her allowing her to even recall the warm touch of Anakin's hands as he had helped him up. *He loves him more than anything. And Anakin says Obi-Wan didn't want to become a Sith. I believe that.*

*I just wish I knew more. Maybe today he'll tell me the rest of it? Whatever Anakin said clearly set him off.*

Focusing on the gentle heat of the morning sun on her skin, she put away her fears as best as she could, and focused on a happy memory while she waited for the tram to get to her stop.

*The first time I met Master.*

*It was a long siege on Sikara, and the Temple dropped me off on the command ship in orbit. A squad let me ride down with them to Master's position. She remembered all of the white-armored men around her, trying her best not to stare at the faces made similar by bone structure and coloring but then crowned with ten different haircuts and detailing on their armor. I liked them.*

*And then I was on the ground and there he was, sitting on a crate of supplies, getting his arm patched up by one of the medic clones and laughing with him about something as bursts of artillery*
fire went off somewhere in the distance.

I had never really imagined the Anakin I'd heard Temple stories and rumors about to make jokes. Ever. The entire speech I'd memorized about how grateful I was and how hard I'd work just disappeared and I stared at him until he noticed me, trying to reconcile the Perfect Jedi with this very real one in front of me.

"You're early!" he said, standing up and tugging his tunic sleeve back down over the bandage as the medic looked on. "Sorry I didn't come meet you at the ship." He walked over and bowed, "Ahsoka Tano, right?"

I think I bowed. I was too awestruck to remember if I did or not. "Wow, you're tall." I can't believe that was the first thing I said.

"Anakin Skywalker, and yes, I am," he nodded with another hint of a smile, and pointed at the side of my head. It took me a second to realize he was pointing at my silka beads: they were so new to me I'd forgotten they were there. "I got Grandmaster Yoda's message that they'd already done the formalities with you back at the Temple. So I guess you accept me as your Master?"

"If you'll have me," I said, suddenly afraid he'd change his mind.

"I do. I've seen your records. Smart. Quick learner, they say."

He didn't mention my discipline record, all the fights I'd gotten into, all the trouble I'd been in. Not a word.

That's when I knew I liked him. "I guess. I'm stubborn. I don't give up easily."

"That makes two of us," he said, sounding pleased. "Listen, Padawan, first things first. It's bad luck for a shinie to go out in the field without a nickname."

"That's what the clones say, right?"

"Yeah, and I agree. You never mess with luck. So we need to get you your own as soon as possible." He studied me, thinking. "Maybe in the next few days something will come to me."

Ahsoka smiled at the recollection of how long it had actually taken: once the surprise attack from the besieged army had started later that same day, bombs and blaster bolts raining in, the two of them had quickly discovered their shared love of sarcasm.

And I've been Snips ever since, she thought, feeling better as the announcer called her stop and she stood to get off. Maybe I'll share that story with Obi-Wan if he wants to hear it?

The paths leading toward the main entrance of Obi-Wan's building were meticulously maintained, neat little rows of white and pink blossoms marching along either side of them, their scent just sweet enough to be noticeable as Ahsoka took a deep breath and let her mind drift, trying to reach up and out toward Obi-Wan. It's ok. Whatever Master said, he didn't mean it, she told the air, knowing her exact words wouldn't make it but hoping some of her feelings would.

She stepped inside the large, empty space of the lobby, dazzling sunlight replaced by the soft glow of lamps and fresh flower arrangements sprawling from dainty tables along the walls. Walking over to the elevators, she tapped the button and waited as someone else entered the lobby behind her, boots clicking as they walked over toward the elevators as well.

"Hello, girl."
A blunt wave of the Force slammed her shoulder against the wall and then flung her into the elevator as the doors slid aside with a pleasant chime. She crashed against the back wall of it, slamming her head against the tastefully burnished metal so hard the cool surface felt like fire.

Sliding to the floor in a dazed heap, Ahsoka scrambled for her sabers, but they were gone, yanked through the air into a black gloved hand that floated, ominous, in her blurred vision. A second stretched into an eternity as she felt more pulses through the Force and heard the crack of the security holocams breaking and the door sliding shut as she stared up in horror at the hooded face of Darth Maul.

"Ahsoka Tano," he said, his voice pleasant as the Force tightened painfully around her throat and arms, forcing her upright to sit against the back wall of the elevator. "Padawan of the famed Anakin Skywalker."

He took a step forward and knelt directly in front of her, his subdued grey Coruscanti coat pooling in rich piles on the floor as he leaned in close and pulled his hood down.

*Help! Please! Master! Obi-Wan! Help!* Ahsoka strained against the invisible bonds almost choking her, too panicked to focus properly enough to reach either of them. *I have to calm down! I have to calm down!*

The harsh, nightmarish lines of black and red on the face before her shifted as Maul raised an eyebrow and smirked at her, enjoying the dread rolling off of her. "I'm so glad you're here, Tano. Perhaps you can explain what's going on with my apprentice. Whatever happened earlier today has him so upset I felt it a klick away."

*How would he know?* Ahsoka's stomach turned in disgust as she realized how close Maul and Obi-Wan's mental link likely was given all of the meditation they'd done together.

The monster in grey seemed to be considering something. "I figured Skywalker would show up eventually, but you'll do."

"Leave them alone!" she gasped, fury blossoming in the middle of her terror.

Unimpressed with her answer, Maul tilted his head, his eyes glinting a cold yellow in the shadows of his hood. He closed the fingers of his outstretched hand and the pressure on her throat grew tighter, breaths now hard, wheezing things she fought to force in and out of her lungs. "Tell me, girl. Is my apprentice plotting against me? Perhaps planning to kill me?"

Ahsoka felt a painful shard of the Force slide along through the words, sharp and obsidian as he probed her mind for the answer. *No, he can't know!*

Maul blinked in surprise as a barrier instinctively shot up between them, leaning in closer as if he could get a better look at her soul that way instead. "I suppose that's answer enough. You shield like he does," he scowled. "Arev has been busy, hasn't he?"

There was a pause as he weighed this new bit of information while she writhed in the invisible bonds holding her up, darkness beginning to slip in around the edges of her sight. "Does he think to take Skywalker as his own apprentice?"

Ahsoka growled mindlessly at him, her last bit of strength going to maintaining the unseen wall between their two minds despite the panic and rage blacking out almost all rational thought as Maul flicked his hand and the cold line of the Force around her throat constricted further.

"Stubborn, aren't you?" was the last thing she heard. Maul stood and watched as she finally passed
out, sliding bonelessly to the floor as he tapped the com on his wrist and waited for his apprentice to answer.

"Yes, Master?" He sounded bone-tired and weary in more than the body, the same way he had felt in that distant echo of emotion that had surprised Maul at his own meditation earlier that morning.

"Arev, I am taking control of the situation immediately. Leave the apartment now and meet me at our secondary Outer Rim safe house in twelve hours. I have Skywalker's Padawan. We will lure him out with her and capture him there."

"...Yes, my Master."

"Oh, and Arev? No more contact with Skywalker until he gets there. We do things my way now."

"Yes, my Master."

*For all of your shielding, you can't keep the fear out of your voice now, can you? What has happened to you, my proud apprentice?* Maul sighed as he clicked the com off and reached down, yanking Ahsoka's off of the dead weight of her arm. *Do you actually care for these pathetic Jedi?*

The tiny bit of metal bright against the black leather of his glove, he tapped it once to com the first audio channel programmed in. *And that should be...*

"Snips? That was fast. How did it go?"

*Her Master.* Maul gave a broad grin at the Jedi's curious and hopeful tone. "Skywalker."

A pause, and then an angry snarl. "Who is this?"

"Darth Maul," he answered, nudging Ahsoka's shoulder with his boot to push her over onto her back as he leaned down and turned on the holo to show her to the camera. "I have your Padawan, boy. If you want her back, you will listen very carefully to my instructions."

"Where are you?" he hissed as Maul turned the visual channel back off.

"It doesn't matter. What matters is where we will be. Mustafar, northern hemisphere, 20.01, 38.4. Be there in twelve hours. Alone. Any clones or Jedi but you so much as enter the atmosphere and the last com you get from your Padawan will be of her being thrown awake into lava." He waited a moment to let that image sink in. "Are we clear? Mustafar, northern hemisphere, 20.01, 38.4. Twelve hours."

"I will kill you, you-"

Maul snickered at Anakin's sputtering fury and turned the com off as Anakin began to curse at him, tucking it into his coat as he hit a random floor button and the elevator began to move again.

Everyone in this building was rich, with their own private speeders nice and neatly docked just outside their apartments, just waiting to be borrowed if the owners were no longer in need of them. *I could go up to Arev with her,* he mused as he studied the girl sprawled limp in front of him, *but let him travel alone. Let him have time to think about where his priorities lie. I will not give up on him just yet.*

Chapter End Notes
Hello, hugs and love to all of you, dear readers, and Happy Halloween to those of you celebrating it!

Thank you, thank you for your kudos and comments as always! They make my cold, black Sith heart warm and fuzzy as always! :D

And yep, for those of you wondering when Maul was going to step back into the picture... well, here he is, the overachiever showing up ahead of schedule. Imagine him doing jazz hands?

Feel free to share any thoughts about this chapter or if you'd like to see HIM dropped in some lava... I can't change the plot, but I always love seeing reactions to characters. XD

My next update will be anywhere from next Sunday to next Wednesday, depending. Thanks again for all of your kind words and support!

My Tumblr: writegowrite

Need something nice and soothing? I recommend my girlfriend's Fem!Obi-Wan story "Copper and Gold".
Hello, readers! Before we get into this week's looooooong chapter (23 pages in Google Docs), I wanted to share the fact that wonderful and amazing reader and Tumblr user hevraska made a playlist for this fic!!!!!!

THANK YOU SO MUCH! It has a great, fun beginning and then just really beautiful atmospheric songs plus some most excellent lyrical match-ups for our dear Obi-Wan and Anakin. I've been using it to write to ever since I got it. <3 Love, love, love it!

The World Undone playlist by Tumblr user hevraska

Tracklist:

Bad Boy Good Man by Tape Five
Six Feet Under by Billie Eilish
Wings by Niklas Aman
Salem’s Secret by Peter Gundry
Gravity by Sara Bareilles
This Night by Black Lab
Stripped by Shiny Toy Guns
Friction by Imagine Dragons
Manatu by Te Vaka
Bu Gece by Tarkan

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The past.

Name days were not celebrated at the Temple, and Anakin's twelfth one according to the standard galactic calendar began with the same routine as always. He stretched in bed and sat up, doing his best to meditate, which to him, despite ample amounts of practice, still felt as useful as sweeping a porch in the middle of a sandstorm.

Once he'd put in the bare minimum his lessons required, he slid out of bed with a wide yawn and wandered over toward the refresher, trying to remember which class he had first this morning. Showering and dressing, he tried tugging his sleeves down a bit more over his wrists. I guess Master is right. I'm going to need new ones soon as fast as I'm growing.

He liked the idea of being taller, but lately it felt like he was nothing but arms and legs any time he tried to do the saber forms he'd learned.

The door chime rang, marking the daily delivery of his breakfast, and he took it over to the small table and ate as he read a datapad, trying to memorize the last few wars in a long string of them for
an exam later in the day.

When he left, on his way to his first class, he felt his heart quicken a little as he made his way toward the wing of private training rooms where nearly all of his lessons were every day. There was the ghostly outline of a worker corridor door set into the wall where the line of salons began, and on the wall next to it at waist height was a small black line, a narrow smudge.

The type of mark a clumsy droid might leave if it scuffed a part against the wall. Or, as Anakin knew, the type of mark a mechanic's grease pencil would make.

Anakin's face stayed calm, but his heart quickened and as he passed he dragged his hand along the wall and let a finger pass through the middle of the mark, splitting it into two. Rubbing the grease off against his pants, he tried not to sail down the hall.

*Master is still resting up in the Halls of Healing from his last mission, so it should be ok. And Obi-Wan said last time he might have a present for me for my name day! I wonder what it is?*

Their system was simple and had taken a few forms before they had settled on this, but the process had worked beautifully for a year now. When Obi-Wan could meet up late the following night, much trickier now that he was fourteen and the hangar bay mechanics had brought him over to the night shift that most of them worked, he would follow the hidden passages up and lean out to leave a mark on this wall in the predawn hours before returning to his room to go to bed.

If Anakin could meet up that night too he'd wipe away the middle of it on his way to lessons, leaving two marks behind so Obi-Wan would know a random cleaning droid hadn't taken the whole mark off.

Even as rarely as they were able to meet, sometimes a month going by with no mark to catch Anakin's eye or a split one for Obi-Wan to find, they alternated the exact time and place they met up every few times just to be as safe as they could. *So we said last time tonight at oh-one-hundred in the worker corridor over by the Room of a Thousand Fountains. Anakin grinned and then did his best to hide it, to let his feelings sink down and away like a stone drifting down into a river.*

He liked training for the most part, learning how to listen to and corral the wild river of the Force that flowed around him. He liked learning about other worlds, about robotics and survival and exocultures. *I just wish Obi-Wan could be there with me in class. He's so good at meditating and stuff now, just from all the datapads I give him and what I tell him from my classes.*

*I wish I could teach him how to use a lightsaber. He'd be really good at it. I know he would.*

There was no anger in this thought anymore, just a simple, reluctant acceptance of a greater power that couldn't be pushed or fought against in the form of a ring of robed men and women sitting high above the Temple. It was not the first injustice Anakin, a former slave, had faced in his short life. The Council wanted them apart.

Then the Council would have that, at least by daylight.

His classes dragged by in an almost intolerable slowness, lessons and forms and recitations punctuated by meals in his own room and a visit to his master in the afternoon.

"Padawan! How are you doing?" Qui-Gon asked as Anakin bowed in the doorway, waving him in.

"Good, Master," Anakin smiled back. "I brought the data pads you asked for yesterday." He set them down on the table next to the bed and sat down himself, pulling up a chair.
"Thank you. Oh, did you get the First Lineage Wars memorized yet? You were worried about that, weren't you?"

"Yes, I think so," he nodded proudly.

"Recite it for me. You know Master Mundi won't excuse you if you forget any of the minor conflicts."

Anakin closed his eyes and began speaking, names and events flowing out in a smooth rhythm and sitting up a little taller as he sensed Qui-Gon's approval through the Force.

"Very good, Anakin," he said once Anakin had finished and looked over at him to see how he'd done. "I think even Master Mundi will find little to complain about there."

Anakin beamed. "Thank you, Master."

"Now, I don't want to keep you around this boring place too long. Off you go. I'll be out of here in another few days, they tell me."

"Ok, Master! I'll come see you again tomorrow!" Anakin waved, barely remembering to bow again before he left, happy for both the fact his master was on the mend and that he'd be out of the way long enough for Anakin to have a proper name day for once.

"A year of shade and ten of water, youngling," Obi-Wan congratulated Anakin, hugging him in the near darkness of this particular stretch of corridor.

"This is my last year for that, you know. Next year you'll have to call me 'young man'," Anakin smiled back, hugging him and stepping back to tuck his well-worn ID card away in his robes.

Obi-Wan studied him with a fond look. "You are getting taller."

"But you just keep growing too! I'm never going to catch you."

Obi-Wan thought about this, leaning back against the wall with his hands in his suit pockets and doing his best to look nonchalant but unable to hide a sparkle of excitement in his blue eyes. "You might. We'll see. Anyway, would you like your present?"

"Yeah!" Anakin looked around. "Where is it?"

"This way. Come on." Obi-Wan pushed off the wall and strode off down the corridor, the highlights of his auburn hair catching orange in the sulphur yellow bulbs glowing overhead as they passed under them.

They walked quietly for some time, Anakin losing his bearings as to exactly where they were after the third elevator and something like the twentieth turn. "Where are we?"

"Along the outer wall down under the Temple basements… and here we are," Obi-Wan stopped in a wide corridor large enough for a speeder or two and pointed at what looked like a squarish grate set into the wall. A murky, velvet blackness sat in the spaces of the grate, indicating open air likely fifty or so levels down from the surface. As Anakin watched, puzzled, Obi-Wan tapped his own card along an old, rusted reader tucked up next to the grate. It slid aside noiselessly into the wall.
"Damn thing was loud the first time I did it, but some oil fixed it right up," Obi-Wan explained, smiling as he stepped back. "This is an old automated repair droid path. I found it the first time a few months ago exploring one night when you couldn't come."

Anakin felt a breeze drift in to rustle his robes and moved, fascinated, toward the hole gaping open in the wall. "What's out there?"

"Coruscant."

Blinking, the word in this context as unfamiliar as a one from an unknown language, Anakin repeated it. "Coruscant?"

"Come here," Obi-Wan motioned, pointing outside when Anakin leaned out along with him and looked out to either side. There was the distinct, echoing feeling of emptiness below and all around them, like he was peering out over a small, very narrow gorge: the wall of the Temple spread out around them, smooth save for a narrow ledge only a foot or so wide that seemed to run from the grate out in either direction until it disappeared into the murk on either side.

Anakin looked across the gap toward the featureless expanse of walls along the other side and after his eyes adjusted saw a series of pipes running up the walls across the way at different intervals and what seemed to be a flat path atop one wall almost directly across from them, some long-forgotten roof of an even lower building.

"I found our way out and back in," Obi-Wan explained breathlessly. "No guards, no ID cards or disguises, none of that other stuff we thought of." He pointed up through the ceiling. "Even the shield stops somewhere above us, coming back in to meet the wall, I guess. I tested the way across here by throwing things across."

"How are we going to get across?" Anakin wondered, thrilled and scared at the same time.

"Jump," came the answer, and Anakin turned to stare at Obi-Wan's wild grin.

"Jump?!"

"Just like old Master Lakan's roof. Just, uh, a little higher. And further," Obi-Wan reassured him.

"How are we going to make that?"

"With the Force. I help push you over and then you pull me. Aim to land and grab that bigger pipe there in the middle of the two smaller ones. We climb it up to that rooftop and follow it until it hits a street. On our way back we start higher, right? Because we're on the roof over there. Then we aim for the ledge running along the wall here to the grate and the other one uses the Force to keep him pushed up against the ledge until he can get back inside."

Anakin laughed as his heart beat faster, thinking about how their original game of "How High, How Long?" had evolved into one of them lifting the other to press him flat against the ceiling of Obi-Wan's room and see how long he could keep him there, usually while the one floating made faces and told jokes to try to break his concentration. Anakin's record was four minutes, Obi-Wan's two and a half. He's right. We can do this.

There was also the enticing fact this was something his Masters would be horrified if they knew he was even thinking about, let alone doing. Mundi and Koth would just fall over dead of shock on the spot. "All right. Let's do it."

"Well, first we need to change." Obi-Wan reached over behind some ancient-looking crates of
droid tool attachments and pulled out a small canvas bag. Digging around, he tossed Anakin a soft ball of clothes before getting out another one for himself. "You'll stand out in the mid-levels too much."

"Is that what we're looking at out there? What's in the mid-levels?"

"Nothing actually trying to eat our faces off. Maybe just mug us."

Anakin grinned, patting his saber on his belt. "Let 'em try."

Obi-Wan snickered and they hurriedly changed, stripping down and pulling on cheap, nondescript clothes easily available to a young tech with a salary. Stuffing their original outfits into the bag and hiding it behind the crates, they turned back and looked at each other with wide eyes.

"You've got your saber, right?" Obi-Wan asked. "And your ID card? We need them to get the grate open," he said, leaning out to show Anakin the same sort of reader set into the wall outside. "I guess that was their idea of security whenever this was closer to the surface back in the day?"

Anakin nodded, patting the pocket in his long jacket and the other one his saber was zipped into before he backed up against the far wall, just enough room to get a good sprint going, his breaths coming quick and shallow with adrenaline as he realized what he was about to do. "Ready. You?"

"Yeah." Obi-Wan moved back out of the way and took a few deep breaths, looking inward with his mind's eye to the soft glow of the Force, inviting it out to swirl around him and focus as he did on Anakin. "Middle pipe."

"Yes, sir," he saluted, giving Obi-Wan's Force aura time to bleed into his, to mingle with it as surely as if they were holding hands like they used to when they were younger. Taking one final breath to steady his nerves, he ran as fast as he could, flinging himself out into the darkness.

He cleared most of the distance on his own and before he could start dropping the Force was slamming him the rest of the way to land hard against the pipe. Grabbing the cold metal and sliding down a little, he let out a breathless cry of victory, wild and free, as he felt the sheer emptiness stretching out beneath him, hungry and thwarted.

"Anakin!" Obi-Wan hissed from the opening. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah. Help me up, would you?" he panted over his shoulder, starting to shimmy his way up the pipe. The air thickened and pressed up from under him, helping him along the rest of the way until he cleared the top and crawled over onto the path there, rolling over onto his back and a belly-deep laugh escaping him.

I could have died. But I didn't.

And I'm outside of the Temple. For the first time in three years!

He rolled over and sat up, waving down and across the gap to Obi-Wan. "Give me a minute."

And once they were ready, in another jump and flash of dull grey clothes, Anakin easily yanked Obi-Wan the rest of the way with the Force, guiding him to smack against the same pipe. He pulled him up with the Force and then his hands, grinning so wide it almost hurt. "We did it!"

"We did!" Obi-Wan gasped, hair in his eyes as he tumbled over to roll onto his side on the ledge. He lay there for a moment before sitting up, a relieved sigh escaping him. "Kriff me, we did it."
"Of course we did. It's us, skybrother," Anakin said, flexing his arms and adrenaline pumping through him. "Let's go see the mid-levels!"

As it turned out, there was no sand and no fearsome pair of stars hanging overhead, but the mid-levels around the Temple reminded Anakin quite a bit of Mos Espa back home, a midnight version with more neon and less heat. The crazy jumble of stores and vendors lay piled high all around them, stretching upward in an endless rainbow of glowing signs and anchored by dull, dirty streets and crowds of sentients from every corner of the galaxy hurrying along or loitering about in perfect opposition.

Obi-Wan and Anakin stood in the alley that had led them to this main street, shoulder to shoulder as they basked in the frantic, wondrous chaos of it all, their elated expressions hidden by the hoods of their coats but clear to each other through the Force. "What's that?" Anakin asked, pointing at one little stall across the way where a heavenly aroma came pouring out in billows of smoke up into a half-repaired vent.

"I think that's called shatual. Roast meat. Mandalorian, maybe?" Obi-Wan thought aloud, trying to remember. "I've never been down here before."

"Really? But you can leave any time."

"On errands and my days off, yeah. But I wanted to save any real exploring for us," Obi-Wan smiled. "I knew we'd find a way to get you out eventually."

They wandered for the next hour in bliss, eating snacks and wandering in and out of the stores, Anakin's unerring sense of direction always pointing them back to the main street when they got too far down a side alley or turned around in narrow passages. No one paid them any mind, the confident walk their childhood had given them and the cheap clothes Obi-Wan had bought them allowing them to blend in with the mid-level crowds.

Intent on finishing off a pastry of some kind, a soft white bun with a red dot in the middle and a lovely custard inside, Anakin finally looked up to find they were walking down a quieter street, the only thing of note down this way a gaudy, green stretch of building on their left that appeared to be a gambling hall, the steady beat of bass and singing pouring out from inside. A host of beautiful girls of various species leaned out and called to the lighter crowds that passed by this stretch of road. Obi-Wan had slowed too, peering down the darkened street ahead of them, trying to decide if they should go any further.

"Hey, sweetheart!" one called affectionately.

"You two lost? Need some company?"

Obi-Wan sighed, not even looking across the street at the open windows of the hall as he continued to think. "Ignore them, Anakin. I think this is the second street we crossed over from after that bridge..."

"Let's see what's under the hood!" a Twi'lek teased, motioning for Anakin to pull his hood down.

Anakin pretended to not know who they meant and with exaggerated gestures looked around and pointed a finger at his chest, loving how the cluster of pretty women let out giggles of amusement. "Yes, you!" one called.

"So I think we should..." Obi-Wan said, turning back to find Anakin pulling his hood down. "Anakin?"
"Ooo, look at that handsome boy!" another declared, whistling. Anakin gave them a playful smirk and lifted his hands in the air, starting to dance in place, shaking his hips and turning in place in time to the bass almost rattling the windows of the hall.

Obi-Wan shook his head in disbelief, unable to resist returning Anakin's grin as he stepped back to give him some room.

The women gave approving catcalls and one began clapping along to the beat, the others joining her, as Anakin danced around, happily making a fool of himself as Obi-Wan laughed and laughed and started clapping along too.

"Ooo, look at him go!"

"Now there is a dancer, ladies!"

A door slammed open off to the side of the now crowded windows, a very annoyed and very large Nikto stalking out and waving his arms. "Get out of here, you little bastards!"

Anakin jumped and almost fell into Obi-Wan, who caught and held him steady as they started to back up.

"Get lost!" the Nikto continued, taking another step as the women behind him booed and made faces at his back.

Obi-Wan waved a hand in apology and pulled on Anakin's arm. "Come on, let's-

"Eh chu ta!" Anakin proclaimed with gleeful exuberance, tossing up two fingers at the bouncer.

"Oh, you little punks are dead!" the Nikto spat, barreling across the road toward them.

"Run!" Anakin shouted.

They took off, fear and excitement streaming through their bond in the Force, propelling them around a corner and down a street and into an alley and around another corner, running for so long they lost the bouncer and the rest of the crowd. When they finally slowed, the only sound left was their own panting and the distant hum of traffic on the main street.

"Where are we?" Anakin said, bent over with his hands on his knees as Obi-Wan crouched on the ground, trying to get his breath back.

"Don't know," he panted.

Standing back up, Anakin looked around with curiosity. "Not much along this street, but look at that!" He pointed to a massive, rusted door set in the middle of a plain wall a little further down the way. "That thing is huge!"

"Abandoned too, from the look of it," Obi-Wan said, standing back up to follow Anakin as he wandered down toward it. "Looks like a delivery door for a factory."

"Think we can get in?" Anakin asked, stopping in front of it and staring up at the mottled metal.

Obi-Wan ran his hand along a corroded panel, a couple of the buttons crumbling under his hand. "Well, not that way."

"Think we could push it? The hinges show it swings in."
Obi-Wan grinned, adrenaline still pumping through him. "We can try."

They linked hands, Obi-Wan lifting his left as Anakin did his right, and closed their eyes, their Force auras weaving together and then out toward the door. There was a long moment of silence and then, as the Force piled against the door like waves against a rock, it began to shift open with a long, high shriek, rust shaking loose from the hinges and the sound echoing up and down the lonely little street.

"It's working!" Obi-Wan cheered as Anakin gasped, but then they lost their concentration and it clanged shut again.

"Again," Anakin whispered and they gripped each other's hand tighter, driving the Force back into place around the door. The door shifted again, a little easier this time with the worst of the rust knocked off the hinges, and they instinctively stepped forward together, taking another as the door opened more, a sliver of total blackness inside. "Just a little more!"

The door swung open halfway and they bolted inside, letting go of the Force and letting the massive weight of it clang shut behind them as they stood in darkness.

Obi-Wan reached over and found Anakin's shoulder in the gloom, not wanting him to wander off. "We didn't think to bring any lights," he sighed.

"Oh, that's no problem." There was a slight rustle of fabric, Anakin digging in a pocket, and suddenly a bright line of blue-white sizzled into life on his other side. "See?" he smiled.

Staying close together, they let their eyes adjust to the gloom, Anakin holding his saber off to the side. A massive chamber came into view, cluttered with the silhouettes of a dozen giant machines and conveyor belts, everything old and covered in dust.

"No one's been here for decades, maybe longer," Anakin said in awe as they poked around.

"No one could get in, unless they're like us."

Anakin stopped right in the middle of turning a corner, frozen in place. "Wait."

"What is it?" Obi-Wan said, dropping back next to him and looking from the floor to the distant ceiling in wonder at the size of the place.

"I have an idea. A really good idea. The best kriffing idea ever."

Obi-Wan grinned. "Ok, what?"

"So you do all my lessons, right?" Anakin began carefully, working through the possibility he'd just realized as he said it aloud. "I teach you everything they teach me back at the Temple about meditation and the Force and stuff. But we've never been able to teach you sabers other than diagrams or whatever from books because even if you borrowed mine there's not enough room in your room, right?"

As Obi-Wan listened, he felt his heart slow and then come to a perfect stop. "You're saying make this place into a training hall?"

"Yeah," Anakin nodded enthusiastically, pointing around with his saber. "If we got that door open we could definitely work together and clear all this stuff out from the middle."

"I…" Obi-Wan had bitterly and completely given up the hope of ever being able to learn the art of
the lightsaber almost two years ago and it almost hurt to think he would have another chance at it.
"I don't have a saber. How would we practice?"

"I'll get you a training one, maybe two for both of us. Yeah, two so there's no way I'll damage my
own messing with the settings and have to explain why I was messing with them to Master."

"How are you going to get training sabers?"

"They don't keep them locked up from us Padawans, really. Why would anyone steal a training
saber? You can't actually hurt anyone with them. They just sit out for the Initiates to use when they
go into the salons for lessons."

"Will you get in trouble?"

Anakin grinned. "Did anyone ever catch me back home when we stole stuff? I mean, really. Ever?
But… if you want to be really thorough," he thought about it, staring out into the blackness of the
factory, "I could even take three and plant the third on this Padawan that I see bullying Initiates
sometimes. No one would believe him if he said he didn't do it."

Obi-Wan put his hands on Anakin's smaller shoulders, stunned at the notion this could actually be
happening. "You'd... really teach me?"

"Everything I know. I'll be your blademaster," Anakin agreed, bringing his own saber in a smart
snap up in front of his face and bowing. "I promise."

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_The present._

After Maul's awful ultimatum ended with a sharp click, Anakin sat back in his chair, speechless
and his spine made of ice that crept around to stab into his lungs and stomach, unable to see the
room or anything at all inside it.

Something rang.

A cheap, standard com sat on Anakin's desk off to the side, one of three he, Obi-Wan, and Ahsoka
had split up among themselves their last evening on Tatooine so it'd be easier for them to reach
each other. He stared at it, startled out of his grim reverie.

It rang again and he snatched it up to answer it.

"Anakin!" Obi-Wan hissed, voice tinny from the cheap speaker. "Anakin, please listen. I had
nothing to do with-"

"I know." Anakin felt his heart tighten, needing reassurance. "Will you help me fight him?"

"Yes. I told you I would. I will. I swear."

"I know," Anakin snapped, standing and pacing around his room. "I just… Look, what is this place
on Mustafar?"

He heard Obi-Wan sigh, thinking about it. "An old, abandoned mining facility we keep as a safe
house. There's only one landing pad and too far of a fall on all other sides to land and sneak in from
any other direction."

Anakin stopped, stomach twisting with the next question. "Will he kill her?"

"Only after he has you."

"We have to save her, Obi-Wan."

"We will. But Anakin?"

"Yeah?" He was already getting his saber, clicking the familiar, comforting weight into place on his belt.

"You must not listen to anything he says. Don't even talk to him or answer him, whatever he says. He will try to throw you any way he can."

"I won't."

Anakin replayed that conversation over and over again in his mind as he sat back down at his desk, numb, in quarters that felt emptier than they ever had before. Looking down at his hand as if it were someone else's, he brushed the droid parts from earlier away from the middle of the desk and fished a small holo recorder out of a drawer to set it in the now empty space. Taking a deep, shaky breath before turning it on, he stared into the tiny lens to make his recording.

The formal phrasing came easy, made smooth by years of practice, even if the words sent his heart pounding. "Most respected members of the Council, Darth Maul has taken my Padawan. He has threatened to kill her if I don't come alone. Please send reinforcements to Mustafar as soon as you receive this message." He rattled off the coordinates, voice almost failing him as he whispered, "I can't let him kill her. I can't."

Clicking it off and locking it with a code he used for Council messages, he threw on his cloak and stalked out through the Temple, the recorder in his hand and his saber heavy on his hip.

When he reached the wide cavern of the hangar bay he handed the holo off to the dockmaster as he signed out for a ship, giving a terse command. "Have this taken to the Council in one hour. No more, no less. This is a Priority One message. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

_I have to save her._

The dockmaster asked if everything was alright, concerned by Anakin's short temper and angry scrawl across the permission forms, but Anakin only gave him a smile made of ice and bowed politely before walking over to the ship.

Hyperspace, the endless hours of blue, had given him the time to scream and rage, to beat his fists bloody against the walls of the cabin he tried vainly to sleep in and then slink away to nurse the wounds, curled up in the corner of the ship's refresher as he tried to think his way through what could happen to the singing pain of his battered knuckles.

_Either Maul dies today or I do. But not Snips. Whatever happens, not Snips._

He imagined a dozen scenarios, seeing bodies sprawled across the plain flooring in front of him. In most of them Ahsoka was one of the corpses, face frozen in mid-scream, blue eyes wide and staring at him, asking why he couldn't save her.
"I don't know if I can do this," he moaned to himself, clutching at his head and banging the back of it against the wall behind him once and then again.

_I forgive the Council. I will forgive them anything if they help save her._

"Please be all right, Snips. Please just hold on," he begged the empty room and the Force around him, but the deep, intense bond between them remained silent from what Anakin could only pray was distance and nothing worse.

When his ship finally shot back into realspace above Mustafar, a tiny speck of metal drifting high above the smoldering ember of a planet, he was back in the pilot's chair, knuckles wrapped and a dim, gut-deep terror inside him.

Jaw clenched, he focused only on the rote routines piloting demanded as best he could, his heart the same roiling furnace that stretched out in burning, writhing seas below.

_**Stabilize orbit.**_

_**Set landing coordinates.**_

As Mustafar rose up and swallowed the skies, obscuring them with long, billowing clouds of grey and black, Anakin reached out with the Force, trying desperately to feel Ahsoka's presence somewhere below him in the jagged hills that came into view, a low range of volcanic rock the ship's autopilot was guiding him down toward.

The only thing he could sense was his own fear, sharp and rancid in the back of his throat. _I can't face Maul like this. He'll kill me in a second._

And then Obi-Wan. And then Snips.

Flipping on the autopilot, the ship lurching for a second as it lowered its speed from what Anakin had been pushing it to, he sat back and closed his eyes, trying to marshal his thoughts into something approaching order. _This is not about revenge today. This is about Snips._

If I panic, she dies.

His fingers slid over the controls. _If I can see her or get him to tell me where she is, I fight my way past him and get her and get out. If I can't see her or he won't tell me, then we fight._

And what if she's already dead? doubt whispered, stealing in like a winter wind across his soul as the ship chimed with a final approach warning.

Anakin opened his eyes, fear instantly cooling into hatred as strong and bright as steel as the abandoned mine and its landing pad drifted into view ahead. _Then I take him apart a piece at a time._

Loathing, the desire to annihilate, welled up and overran everything else. It was strangely luminous, searing and beautiful like a massive sun beating down on a baked planet caught in too close an orbit, and it sang to him. _Maybe I should do that anyway. He should die for what he's done._

Anakin examined this newly freed feeling inside him with a distant, morbid fascination at how alluring it was and how the Force around him surged as he considered it. _For what he did to Master. For the fact he dared to touch my Padawan. To hurt Obi-Wan._
"Dismember him, he thought to himself with a snarl. Then death. Maybe."

"What am I doing?" he murmured, stunned as he realized what he was thinking, what he was enjoying imagining.

The Force receded at his revulsion, still taut in the air around him but nothing like that flash of pure power of a moment ago. But even as Anakin's shame rose in the back of his throat, he knew it was too late to stop himself from liking it. It feels so... powerful. Using my hatred like that.

*Is this what Obi-Wan was trying to tell me? About using my emotions?*

*Then I will.*

*Anything to get Ahsoka back,* he told himself firmly, doing his best to ignore those darker feelings he'd spent his whole life up until this moment trying to avoid.

*Emotions are a tool. Just like a saber. That's all.*

*I have control,* he tried to reassure himself without much conviction as the mine revealed itself to be a series of caves dug into the base of the hills, bottomless holes in the ruddy shadows of this world. The landing pad in front of it had been designed for cargo carriers and was so large a dozen of Anakin's ships could touch down on it.

He took over the flight controls without glancing at the board, whipping the ship down on the furthest point of the landing pad from the caves, never taking his eyes off them. They loomed like eyes in the rocky walls of the hills, a dozen black pits staring at him as he unbuckled the flight harness and stood up to walk to the back of the ship and the ramp lowering down to the duracrete, every sound loud in his ears.

*Where are you, Sith?*

As he strode down to the ground, cloak a dark shadow trailing out behind him, the acrid ghosts of smoke and ash twined around him, the only welcome he received. The land growled and muttered with lava flows all around, small rivers of molten metal and rock weaving around the larger outcropping of hills ahead of him, casting the entire area in orange and red shadows, but nothing living moved.

Anakin held out a hand and sent the Force out again, this time laced with a challenge, an unspoken dare for the monster lurking somewhere up ahead to show himself. Just as he thought he felt something, like the echo of a chuckle, another sound rumbled overhead: a ship grinding through the atmosphere in a tight circle inward toward them.

*Obi-Wan,* he thought, glancing upward as a grim possibility fought its way past his anger. *Is Maul waiting for him to arrive so it'll be the two of them against me?*

A deep, spiteful sense of pride made him stand taller. *Let him. Obi-Wan's on my side. I know he is.*

Anakin watched as the small ship came into view through the spark-lit haze, another plain civilian vessel. It circled and landed near his, away from the caves, Obi-Wan's stony face underlit by the control panels inside. The ship sighed to the ground with a heavy thud and then Obi-Wan was coming down out of it, his own cloak on and hood up.

*His shielding... he has it so much in place it's like when we first met.* Anakin gave a somber nod as Obi-Wan approached in a swirl of black, back in the original robes Anakin had first met him in. He was beautiful and frightening, a ghost of this unnerving place as much as the shadows of the hills...
were.

As happy as he was to see Obi-Wan, it unsettled Anakin to see the determined stride, the grim line of his mouth, where he was so used to gentleness and warmth. This is Darth Arev. This is not my Obi-Wan.

"He hasn't shown himself yet," he said as Obi-Wan came to a stop in front of him and drew his saber, lighting the red line of it to spill out over the duracrete.

Obi-Wan nodded. "I can sense Ahsoka. She's hidden back in one of the caves." There was no emotion in his voice and only ice in his eyes as he spoke, glaring past him toward the hills: it seemed to Anakin that Obi-Wan had come prepared to die as well, and that grim fact sobered him further despite his newfound hope at what Obi-Wan had said about Ahsoka.

"Remember what I taught you," Obi-Wan told him quietly. "Use your instincts. And do not listen to him. Do not speak to him."

Anakin snapped on his own saber, the blade sparking to life and casting them both in fine blue gilt as the weight of what was about to happen slid over his heart as heavy as a grave marker. His whole life, every brief moment of happiness, every chance at more, might be over within the hour, the last thing he saw his master's killer and the clouds swollen with fire and cinders overhead.

Drawing in and letting out a deep breath, he called on the unwavering flame of his rage.
"Together?"

"Together," Obi-Wan said, his sad smile a crack along the ice. "I know what he plans to do to you and I will not let him take you."

"He can try. Let's go get Snips back."

They strode off toward the caves, one young man glowing as brightly as a full moon in the Force while the other lay hidden behind clouds of shielding. The hard click of their boots on duracrete gave way to gravel and then rough sand as they got closer to the dark, gaping holes in the hillside, the tang of soot and fear in every breath Anakin took.

Halfway across the bare land between the hills and the landing pad, Obi-Wan slowed and held out his free hand across Anakin's chest. "There. On the left."

Anakin looked back from a cave off to the right he'd been watching, dreading what he would see, what horrible thoughts and memories might come back to him at the sight of the demon that had plagued his life and his dreams for so long.

A black-cloaked shape, hooded and still, the long glinting line of his saber in hand but the weapon unlit, its owner still too far away to attack. But his greeting carried across the dead land, calm and confident.

"Anakin Skywalker."

Anakin clenched his jaw in bitter satisfaction as he took in the hooded, marred face: nothing rose up to distract him from the boiling seas of his feelings. It was almost a relief to realize that for all of the evil Darth Maul had done, for all of the horrible jagged energy that hung in a dull cloud around him, he was just a man.

And men can be killed.
The Force crouched low and close around Anakin, hungry and eager, as smog and sparks drifted past them, three shadows lit by the glow of sabers and the hellfire of the lava oozing across the plain all around them.

Anakin and Obi-Wan separated to stand far enough apart to not be a single target but close enough to present a unified threat to their opponent as Obi-Wan spoke coldly. "Bring Tano to us, Master."

"Us?" Darth Maul lifted a gloved hand to pull his hood down and repeated the word casually, as if he'd misheard him. "Us, Arev?"

"Yes, us," Anakin sneered as Obi-Wan shot a warning look over to him.

Maul threw off his cloak and lifted his chin, the frightening angles of his tattoos shifting. He studied the two of them with disdain clear in his sulphur-hued eyes. "You no longer wish the death of the Council, apprentice?"

"I wish to protect these two more."

Maul shook his head, not entirely surprised. "Even if it means your own death?"

"I will not let you have Skywalker."

Maul spun the twin blades of his saber behind him and slid a foot out through the rough black sand they stood in, disappointment clear in his voice. "Understand that I will take no pleasure in killing you, Arev."

"Nor I you, Master." Obi-Wan answered softly.

Obi-Wan bowed, momentarily flipping his red saber to a reverse grip, and murmured what sounded like a formal phrase in the harsh tones of a language Anakin didn't know.

Anakin's skin crawled with disgust at the obvious respect in Obi-Wan's tone: he gripped his own saber tighter and glared across the barren ground at Maul, who frowned at Obi-Wan and returned the bow as he replied with a different, equally courteous answer in the same language.

Rising, eyes fixed on Anakin with utter distaste, Maul spoke, each word slow and meaningful. "You will suffer for costing me my apprentice, boy."

"Where is my Padawan?" Anakin glared down the line of his saber at him.

"She lives. For now," he added, tilting his head in curiosity as he took in the furious halo of the Force surrounding Anakin. "You're already halfway to the dark side, Skywalker. Do you know that?"

Obi-Wan shot forward in a sudden, vicious attack, slashing through the air where Maul's chest should have been as Anakin leapt forward, but their sabers met only empty, smoky air as Maul took two swift steps back and used Obi-Wan's momentum to shove him past with a violent push of the Force against his back as he easily repelled Anakin's swing.

Obi-Wan rolled through the rough gravel, regaining his feet just as Anakin's blade slashed down again at Maul, a bright flash of sizzling heat where blue met red. "I will never be like you!" Anakin growled, forcing the blade down with all of his strength.

Maul laughed, entranced by Anakin's fury, and gave a swift kick to Anakin's chest, forcing him back just enough he could back off and face Obi-Wan's next attack, a wild arc of red raining down
again and again along Maul's own saber staff. "Are you sure?"

"Shut up!" Anakin roared as he threw himself back at Maul, thrusting and slashing so hard the bones in his hands rattled with every hit. And it wasn't enough. It wasn't nearly enough for the rage howling inside of him, bloody and red and hungry.

*I want him dead. Dead!*

He struck out wildly, almost striking Obi-Wan, Maul gracefully dodging and delivering a blow that would have taken Anakin's legs off if he hadn't jumped to the side on pure instinct.

The two tried to get in close again and again but their rhythm was off, like two drums just a half-beat off from each other and Maul elegantly weaving in and out of those gaps.

The land smoked all around them, a sullen hellscape, the clash of their lightsabers just another flicker of light across the blacks and greys of this world as the fight wore on, and Anakin realized with a frantic, angry despair the third time it happened that Maul was going easy on Obi-Wan when Obi-Wan came in to attack from his side, pushing and driving him away when a killing blow was possible.

*He's aiming to injure him... he thinks Obi-Wan will come back to his side after this?* Anakin thought incredulously, momentarily coming back out of the trance of instinct he was fighting to stay within.

*No, he plans on making him.* "Come on, you bastard! It's me you want!" Anakin yelled, diving in with wings of blue light, blade whirling.

Throwing himself around with a savage curse, Anakin's saber just missing his neck, Maul shoved at the air with his free hand and Anakin went flying to land hard against the hillside behind them, sliding down the rocky face with a cry of pain as Maul parried another sweep of Obi-Wan's saber, their two clashing in blinding lines of red.

"He isn't worth this!" Maul sneered at Obi-Wan, leaning across the frantic hiss of their crossed blades, taking one step forward and then another, his black boots crunching through gravel as he pushed Obi-Wan's feet back in a slide toward a rivulet of lava winding along the ground a few meters off.

Obi-Wan said nothing, shoving back against him as hard as he could.

Anakin rose far behind them, dazed and steadying himself against the sheer rock he'd hit and trying to get his breath back.

"Let the girl go, Master!" Obi-Wan rasped, his own Force aura shot through with just as much fear as anger. "Please!"

"Turn on him, Arev," Maul commanded, voice low and smooth for the horrible, harsh shadows their lightsabers cast on his face, his yellow eyes intent on him as he kept forcing him backward with expert hits, smoothly herding him toward the line of lava. "Last chance. Turn on the Jedi, wound him, and I will forgive you for this."

Obi-Wan said nothing, lost in the lightning flashes of instinct driving his swings, barely keeping up with his master's attacks.

"You can remain my apprentice," Maul continued with a grunt as he neatly deflected a desperate hit. "You can still have your revenge. Skywalker will be our weapon and your pet."
The lava was close now, its heat harsh against Obi-Wan's back, and he wondered how much agony he would feel from the imminent slashing strike he'd seen his master use so many times before the burning lava swallowed him up. "I can't!"

Maul gave a snarl and spun, but just as the killing blow fell he was yanked back hard across the ground, the tip of his weapon grazing the air just in front of Obi-Wan's face and so close he could smell the distinctive tang of the saber's ozone over the haze all around them.

Obi-Wan watched, stunned, as a tidal wave of the Force sucked Maul back across the ground toward Anakin, who was stalking toward them both with eyes widened in nameless, incoherent fury. He threw his free hand out in an arc across his body and Maul flew into the air toward the same cliff Anakin had hit, but his own violent rage fought with Anakin's, storm clouds of the Force rolling in from opposite horizons, and he broke free at the last second to land with a roll across the dirt and leap up, blades spinning as Anakin leapt at him with a howl.

Obi-Wan ran to rejoin the fight, now a blur of blue and red, saber clashes the buzz of angry hornets, throwing himself back into the middle of it just in time to save Anakin from a vicious downward thrust and deflect it back into the whirl of black that was Maul.

Obi-Wan is mine! Anakin's soul called out, reverberating through the Force as he drove forward with a new wave of hits, faster and harder than before. Obi-Wan fought as close to him as his own shadow, slashing out where Anakin retreated, falling back when Anakin leapt in, the two of them finding their rhythm together as surely as they had under the stars on Tatooine.

The three of them clashed again and again, streaks of lightning across the barren ground, no more offers or curses or threats as the Force billowed in dark clouds around them and they fought on in wild sweeps and thrusts. Maul was silent now, as lost in concentration as they were, riding the wild, unseen winds of intuition as the hisses of strikes echoed all around them.

Snips is mine! Anakin wanted to roar, the Force swelling up higher and stronger than thunderclouds building in a muggy summer night as he slammed his blade against Maul's over and over, lighting his face in harsh blue and red shadows, forcing him to dance back.

A thought darted across Anakin's mind, one of vicious pleasure, and it almost cost him a leg as he barely avoided a wild stab of red light before Maul turned in a sweep of cloak and retreated across the field toward the caves, deflecting their blows from behind as they chased him. There was fear in his eyes. I saw it.

He flung his hand out toward the cave Maul was headed toward, his soul screaming with the effort as he imagined pulling the ceiling down. The Force sung with hatred around him and followed the line of his fingers, an ear-shattering roll of cracks echoing ahead and a few mammoth rocks crashing down to the ground and sending waves of grey dust rolling outside.

Master was mine! And you killed him! Anakin screamed incoherently, giving reckless chase across the lifeless land as Obi-Wan ran alongside him with a fearsome snarl on his face.

Maul spun back to face the two rushing toward him, slamming his foot down as he held his blade out and the Force bloomed around him like the aura of a dead sun, just barely repelling Anakin's new and stronger attempts to bodily lift him once again. "Perhaps I was wrong! You're already one of us, Skywalker! Look at you!" he laughed, breathless and mad with the dark power that coursed through the air around the three of them as they all came together in another rapid-fire series of strikes before drawing apart.

"Don't listen to him!" Obi-Wan shouted just before Maul kicked him squarely in the head, sending
him stumbling backward before he jumped and aimed another kick at Anakin, the tide turning against him only seeming to give him more strength.

"So much hatred!" Maul declared with a vicious grin as the three locked blades again and ricocheted off of each other. "It feels good, doesn't it?" he taunted Anakin as he leaped back out of the way with an incoherent growl.

"I will kill you!" Anakin howled.

*Master's body in the little creek, the shallow currents pulling his hair over his face.*

The image came out of nowhere, as solid as a hit, and Anakin stumbled just for a moment, Mustafar replaced with the autumn colors of Takodana.

Maul dove in with a triumphant cry and wide arc of his blade, but Anakin was there and then he wasn't as the red saber swept down and harmlessly away, thrown aside with another roiling gust of the Force from Obi-Wan, who had cried out at Anakin's faltering.

Reversing direction, Maul whirled quickly enough to deflect the killing blow Obi-Wan aimed at his heart, but in that moment as they swung past each other Obi-Wan's saber left a long, deep cut across Maul's chest and then leg, tracing deep, hot pain as it went.

Stunned, Maul limped back, spinning his staff in a reflexive wall of red in front of him.

"Go! Get Ahsoka!" Obi-Wan shouted at Anakin. "Now!"

Anakin hesitated for only a second, looking between the two, and then the wild torrent of his emotions receded enough he could sense what Obi-Wan had. Ahsoka was in one of the smaller caves behind where they fought, alive and afraid.

He ran as fast as he could, boots catching and throwing gravel as he went and the smoky atmosphere thick and heavy in his lungs, leaving the master and the apprentice in the whirlpool of a slow, wary circle around each other.

Once Anakin had disappeared into the far-off entrance of the cave, Obi-Wan made an offer to Maul, a low murmur across the hum of plasma. "I will let you live, Master. Swear you will never seek out Skywalker or Tano again and I will let you escape."

Maul lashed out with a few savage strikes, clutching at the Force but his agony rattling it into meaningless noise all around him. Obi-Wan was the one to thrust attacks aside easily now, a grim certainty on his face as he watched Maul stumble once and then again, free hand clutching at his side and a new rattle coming from his lungs.

"Let me escape? I don't need your pity, Arev." Maul told him, his words thick with pain as they kept tracking each other in a loose circle, a grey ashiness stealing in under the red of his skin as he fought to stay upright.

Somewhere in the distance there was a cry through the Force, a happy one of recognition and relief, and Obi-Wan knew Anakin had found Ahsoka. "You don't have my pity. You took me in. You trained me. Go."

Maul weaved back and forth like a drunken man along the path they cut through the dirt, and when Obi-Wan stepped forward to repeat himself Maul laughed suddenly, spooking him into jumping back.
"I knew this day would come," Maul said to the sky, "But I didn't think it would be this soon." He turned off his saber, the twin red blades dying away, and dropped it, his fingers too numb to hold it anymore. He brought his intent gaze down to Obi-Wan. "Do it, apprentice. Become the master."

Obi-Wan knew that was coming, but the way he recoiled from the words showed how he felt about it.

Maul shook his head. He held his arms out, summoning up the last of his strength to keep his voice steady. "Spare me," he coughed, "the indignity of Skywalker taking me back to the Council, Obi-Wan. Do that for me."

Giving a loud, agonized growl, Obi-Wan spun in to attack. His face stopped just short of Maul's, his saber buried in his master's chest and the sickly sweet smell of cauterized flesh in both their lungs as they stood together in a horrible tableau.

Obi-Wan saw the torture in Maul's eyes as he felt it slam across their mental link. He yanked the blade free, the icy fire of the weapon as sharp as the agony spreading through Maul's body, freezing the life out of his master. A wordless cry escaping his lips, Obi-Wan dropped his weapon and caught Maul as he stumbled and fell.

Obi-Wan had no joy in his heart at the death of his terrifying master, only sadness and horror, as he felt Maul's consciousness fade like the volcanic sparks that landed and dimmed all around them until there was only perfect, empty blackness where that fearsome presence had sat in the back of his mind for so long.

"Obi-Wan!" Ahsoka yelled from somewhere behind him.

Anakin was running up with her, both of them calling out for him, as he knelt and laid the heavy weight of Maul's body down in the warm sand, perfectly silhouetted in the unearthly glow of the lava streams behind them.

"Are you alright?" Ahsoka gasped, running to kneel next to Obi-Wan while Anakin stopped a few feet back.

"Yes, he didn't hurt me," he said after a moment, struggling to find words as he hugged her tightly. "You?"

"I'm ok. He just put me in a cell," she reassured him, hugging him back as Anakin stared at the two of them with wide eyes and a sudden ice creeping through the air.

"Anakin?" Obi-Wan said, twisting around to look up at him. "What is it, Anakin?"

Obi-Wan's mouth was moving, but Anakin didn't hear him. All he could see was the red of the sparks drifting down around them, the way Obi-Wan's shoulders had tilted when he leaned over to set Maul's body down.

Red sparks.

Red leaves.

Master lying dead on the ground, a form crouched over him.

And in a horrible moment, the inverse of that beautiful, soaring realization of his birth on Tatooine that had arched up above him like the sky itself, Anakin felt the ground of his soul open onto a bottomless abyss of complete and total darkness as a single fact floated up into his mind in horrific
"You killed Master," he whispered in a voice raw with emotion as he pointed at Obi-Wan. "You killed Qui-Gon."

Chapter End Notes

And done for this week! Thank you all so, so much for reading and all of your kudos, comments, thoughts, and support as this fic starts to move into the final arc! You are the BEST! :D

The next update will be sometime between next Wednesday and Saturday, and I'll catch up with all the comments from last week tomorrow.

And yes, some of you have been calling the Qui-Gon reveal for a couple of chapters now... Nicely done!

Feel free as always to let me know what you're thinking will happen or what you thought about this chapter! I love hearing from you. <3

Oh, if you're after even more angst, how about some Fem!Obi-Wan style? My girlfriend can hook you up with her new fic After the End of the World, in which Obi-Wan makes a very different decision about the Revenge of the Sith Mustafar battle.
The past.

In the darkness of an artificial cavern of shadows and dust, two silhouettes spun around each other, the blazing green of their training sabers clashing in sparks as they attacked and parried, leaving a trail of fireworks in the air as the sharp pops of contact sizzled white between them.

"Come on!" Anakin shouted gleefully, jumping back and swinging his blade in a wide, showy arc behind him. He was almost taller than Obi-Wan now even if his shoulders hadn't filled out like Obi-Wan's had. Anakin was strong and lean with seven years of Temple training behind him and his fighting style an equal mix of grace and raw power. "Next hit is the winner!"

Obi-Wan laughed, breathless, and danced back, waving his free hand as he pointed his blade at Anakin. "No, you're trying to lure me in for that stupid figure-eight attack!"

"It's only stupid because you can't break through it!" Anakin teased, panting and whirling his lightsaber once in a flourish as they slowly circled each other.

"I will one day!" Obi-Wan promised with a grin, blue eyes watching the tilt of Anakin's shoulders rather than his face, waiting for the inevitable charge when Anakin got tired of waiting.

Anakin had taught him for so long and they had sparred so many times it was like fighting one's own reflection at this point. They knew each other's weaknesses and preferences, feints and dodges: the challenge was usually no longer in who was superior but who would slip up first and give the other the chance to take advantage of that mistake.

Obi-Wan only had to wait two more circuits of the unseen line they followed around each other before Anakin charged him with a swift set of attacks bordering on reckless, pounding at Obi-Wan's defenses but forgetting his footwork as he landed hit after hit. Obi-Wan neatly slipped his foot around Anakin's ankle and shoved him back with the Force, sending him spilling across the duracrete floor in a flailing pile of arms and legs.

Anakin rolled back out of it, whipping his saber up to stop just short of Obi-Wan's neck as Obi-Wan's came to rest over Anakin's chest. They stood there, blades hissing and the distinct scent of ozone in their lungs as they took, deep, steadying breaths.

"Draw?" Obi-Wan finally asked, face close to Anakin's.

"Draw," Anakin admitted after a moment, swallowing and taking in a long breath. "Though I would have taken your head off."

"And I would have gotten you through the heart," Obi-Wan replied.

"So who wins?"

"I guess we both do." They shut their sabers off, the weak lighting they'd rigged around the walls of the factory leaving them in a hazy gloom as they stood up straight, still close enough to touch and their breathing just beginning to slow back down.
"So we give each other a kiss, then?"

"Yeah, unless you want to change the rules," Obi-Wan said as nonchalantly as he could, his eyes intent on Anakin's with a familiar playfulness as they tucked their sabers into place on their training belts.

"Nah." Anakin took the final step into Obi-Wan's opening arms, sliding his around Obi-Wan's waist as he leaned in close. They kissed, the salt of their sweat sweet on each other's lips, nothing else in the world except for the handfuls of fabric bunched in Anakin's hands as he clutched at Obi-Wan's back and the soft, damp curls of Anakin's hair tangled in Obi-Wan's fingers.

There had been many kisses given this way in quiet, dark places, many more touches and shy affections growing bolder with time, but Anakin was still in awe of how incredible it all felt. Back in Mos Espa he and Obi-Wan had once stolen a speeder bike in the middle of the night and ridden it as fast as they could through the darkened canyons to the south of town. It had been thrilling and terrifying, entrancing and frightening all at once.

Kissing, touching Obi-Wan felt like that, every nerve in Anakin's body taut and glowing with heat at the slightest brush of Obi-Wan's lips against Anakin's or his fingers against Anakin's skin.

But tonight he reluctantly pushed Obi-Wan away, knowing they didn't have a lot of time left before they had to get back to the Temple. "I have something for you."

Obi-Wan stole one more kiss from him and then stepped back, a curious look on his face as he took Anakin's training saber and dropped both of them in a box they kept off to the side. "Really? What's that?"

"Well, I have to go on a mission with Master during your name day next week," Anakin said.

"Yeah," Obi-Wan nodded, no bitterness in his voice. They hadn't been able to sneak in another name day meeting since Anakin's twelfth, and he was just happy he had been able to see Anakin on this particular night before he and Qui-Gon left. "I know. Some negotiation thing, right?"

"Yeah, Master is still refusing to take me on any combat missions," Anakin shrugged, walking back over to their pile of civilian clothes they'd changed out of for their training garb as casually as he could. "So I wanted to give you your present early."

Obi-Wan smiled, folding his arms, curious to see what Anakin had for him. "Eighteen is a pretty big name day, so let me guess. A keystick to a speeder bike? A set of pink holos?"

"Hey, you liked that one with the Twi'leks we found!" Anakin laughed, rifling around in the pile of fabric.

"I think you liked it more!" Obi-Wan grinned, tilting his head. "Where'd that go, anyway?"

"Well, I figured Master would find it sooner or later so I had to get rid of it. But," Anakin said with a wide, innocent shrug of his arms before he went back to searching through their coats, "I thought some other Padawans could get some use out of it. So I left it in the Library."

"Anakin!" Obi-Wan laughed. "Seriously?"

"Yep. I switched the nameplate out with a random one on the Old Republic treaties all we senior Padawans have to study. Last time I had a look it'd been checked out about fifty times."

Obi-Wan chuckled and shook his head as Anakin turned back around and tossed him something
that glimmered in the dim light.

"Happy name day, skybrother. A year of shade and ten of water, sir."

Catching the present easily, the glint of metal and weight in his hand soothing and familiar, Obi-Wan stared down at it and his voice faltered as he realized what he was holding. "This… this is your old saber. The one you lost at the beginning of the year."

"Yeah, that's the one," Anakin beamed proudly.

Obi-Wan stared at Anakin, utterly lost. "You were on punishment detail for three months copying out old scrolls, I remember. Qui-Gon was furious with you for, what was it? Dropping it over the side of a transport, right? How… how did you get it back?"

"Well, I knew we'd be going to the Senate building, one of those regular visits we always take the transports for. So the night before I buried the real one in the Temple gardens. I'd put together a replica that looked pretty much the same if you didn't look too closely. And it didn't have a crystal like mine did, of course."

Blinking, working through it in his mind, Obi-Wan spoke slowly. "So you had already made the replica and were just waiting for a chance to 'lose' it."

"Yep," Anakin said. "Started babbling about how the Force was calling to me and hopped the railing. Danced around on the bow with my saber hilt in hand and 'slipped'. The saber went flying over the side. Tragic, really." He thought about it for a moment, smiling at the memory, and then squeezed Obi-Wan's shoulders when he said nothing. "You forgive me for not telling you, don't you? I wanted it to be a surprise!"

"Of, of course," Obi-Wan stuttered happily, finally finding his voice. "Kriff me, you're insane." He lifted the saber in stunned disbelief as if testing to see if it was actually there. "This is really mine now?"

Anakin hugged him and nodded. "I know it feels too much like me because I built it and I used it so much, but the important part is you have a crystal. We can use it to make you your own," he beamed, tapping the metal casing.

Obi-Wan laughed and pulled Anakin in for another kiss, hard and grateful and full of adoration. "I can't believe you did this for me!" he whispered, staring down at the saber.

"I have it all planned out. You're in flight classes and you'll be a cargo ship pilot, right? I'll be a Jedi Knight. So like we said before, we'll just make sure you apply for the same fleet and flight group I'm with. Maybe we can even be on the same command ship. And then when you're off and I'm off, now that you're going to have your own saber we can go do secret side missions."

"The two secret Jedi?" Obi-Wan chuckled, knowing it was an impossible idea but caught up in Anakin's enthusiasm and the way he glowed in the Force at the thought of the two of them together again, whenever they wanted.

He knew, too intelligent and too observant to not see it, that even into adulthood the Council would still control Anakin's life and could cut Obi-Wan off from his job with the Temple and entire occupation with a few well-placed coms to the main shipping companies if an 'attachment' was discovered and found to be a problem.

But bitter logic could wait. There was Anakin, smiling and proud, right in front of him, so happy and excited for their future together Obi-Wan couldn't help but feel the same. "So we'd have secret
missions, huh?"

"Yeah."

"What would we do?"

"Have adventures," Anakin smiled, imagining it already. "Have adventures and help people. Like we used to do back in Mos Espa. Me and you. Maybe we could free some slaves or something when we go to planets that have them."

"You are mad," Obi-Wan whispered adoringly, pulling him in for another eagerly returned kiss. They lingered together as long as they could, not wanting to go back, their arms around each other and foreheads touching as Obi-Wan felt the weight of the saber in his hand and Anakin's hand on his cheek. "I love you."

"I love you, too, skybrother."

The present.

"You killed Master," Anakin repeated, his words hanging in the hot, acrid air between them, drifting like ash down to Ahsoka and Obi-Wan where they knelt next to Maul's body. The three of them were still for a moment, lost souls frozen in the hellish black landscape that stretched out around them.

"Anakin," Obi-Wan began, golden eyes wide as Ahsoka stood up, shocked. This can't be happening. He has to remember more than that!

"Anakin, listen to me-"

"You killed Master!" Anakin snarled, stumbling back and the line of his saber dying away as the broken, distorted shadow of his memory fully resolved itself into Obi-Wan's back as he knelt over Qui-Gon. There was nothing else yet, just as it had been with Tatooine at first. The moment before, the moment after, everything else was still blank in his mind. But that instant was clear enough, riding in through Anakin's mind on a tidal wave of pain so bad he could barely see. He killed Master. He killed him.

Obi-Wan was looking up at him in utter disbelief and horror, still kneeling on the ground, making no attempt to move. He had known this was a risk, that Anakin would remember this memory first before all others, but whenever he'd tested Anakin on it the mind-wipe had stayed firmly in place. They had to make it one of the strongest parts of the mind-wipe, as important as that day was, he thought with such bitterness and hatred the Force wavered dark around him. "Anakin..."

"Shut up," Anakin spat with tears in his eyes, betrayal and anger spreading like unseen wings up into the marred heavens around him.

The blue of Anakin's saber streaked to life and caught in the gold of Obi-Wan's eyes before they were suddenly blocked by Ahsoka sliding in front of him. She had her arms out, palms up as she tried to calm Anakin, saying something in frantic tones. What was she saying?

"Master, wait! Please!"

He growled and pointed his saber at her, fighting to find coherent words. "Out of my way, Snips.
"Master, he loves you! He would never hurt you!" she retorted, gesturing back at Obi-Wan in a panic, the ache from both of them ricocheting in her mind through her old bond with her master and her new one with her friend.

"LIAR!" Anakin screamed, and Ahsoka cringed at the psychic echo. "Out of my WAY!"

"Why would he kill Master Jinn? Why?" she begged even as Obi-Wan cried out a warning to her, and Anakin twitched and stumbled to his knees as a new agony shot through his mind, a searing explosion that almost blinded him.

He let out an animal-like howl of rage and the Force unfurled in a near-solid wall, slamming both Ahsoka and Obi-Wan over Maul's body and sending them flying on their backs through the rough gravel and sand. "I will kill you!" he hissed at Obi-Wan, forcing himself back to his feet and taking one heavy step after another, his boot crunching down on the ground next to Maul's sightless eyes. Was he crying? He wasn't sure: there was only the blinding throbbing in his mind and the heavy weight of his saber in his hand. "You lied to me! Everything was a lie!"

The words hit Obi-Wan harder than he'd imagined they ever could when he'd morbidly pictured this sort of situation unfolding, a crack spreading through his soul at Anakin's hateful scowl. "No, it wasn't!" Obi-Wan gasped, wincing at the thunder of the Force rumbling around the three of them as it drew in close to Anakin to circle around him in ominous waves.

Ahsoka scrambled backward as Obi-Wan regained his own feet and drew his saber, a red line snapping into place next to him. "I love you!" he cried, his own anger shooting out in sharp, jagged lines through the Force. How can you still not remember us? Any of it? The Council did this to you. The Council took you from me. And I will murder them for it, he swore to himself for the thousandth time since Maul had taken him. All of them! "I love you, Anakin! You know that!"

"Shut up! No more tricks!" Anakin shouted in a hoarse cry. He threw himself at Obi-Wan in a wild set of swings, their blades meeting in a vicious arc of sparks and light, red against blue.

Letting out a furious yell of his own, Obi-Wan returned his attacks with his own, just as violently beautiful, just as bone-jarring when they connected. He was aiming to injure Anakin, to bring the mindless onslaught to a stop, fighting the darkness inside him that wanted to give in to sorrow and hopelessness, to kill both of them and put an end to their suffering. No! I will never hurt him! Never!

But Anakin was faster now, more skilled, in tune with the shadows that had haunted his life and whispered to him where to hit and when and taking away Obi-Wan's choice in how the fight would go. Obi-Wan had never fought him like this, and as Anakin's fury grew in great, terrible thunderheads of the Force all around them, Obi-Wan found himself no longer in control of the fight but struggling just to stay alive and uninjured.

Ahsoka could only watch, hands dropping to her sabers but trembling above them, refusing to take hold of them and join the fight. She couldn't force herself to draw, terrified if she did Anakin would turn on her and not even sure in her stunned state who she would help. Simple, primal fear beat at her mind, easily amplified by the blackness riding into her spirit through her link with Anakin, paralyzing her where she stood and drying any words she might have called out in her throat.

"I will kill you!" Anakin grunted over their crossed blades before Obi-Wan delivered a swift kick
to his chest that sent him sliding back in the sand to a cloud of fine black silt rising up around him.

The torment seething in Anakin's mind was like the tide coming in, rising higher and higher with every passing second and taking more and more coherent thought with it. The first few minutes of their fight he knew who he was fighting: the Sith, the lying bastard that had taken his Master four years ago and then come back to trick him, to mock him by making Anakin fall in love with him.

He stabbed and dodged and thrust with wild abandon, too lost in rage to note that he had finally, ironically, reached that level of intuition and instinct Obi-Wan had been trying to coax out of him the entire time they'd trained as Obi-Wan fought him off with a frenzied anguish.

Obi-Wan saw but had no time to think about it, returning strike after strike with his own, growing more and more afraid deep within himself. *Is this it? Is this the day I die? At Anakin's hand?*

*I deserve to*, he thought for not the first time as he threw himself back, Anakin's saber stabbing where his throat had just been and the hiss of the blade loud in Obi-Wan's ear.

*But I can't. I can't leave him alone with the Council!*

Maul's words came to him, slipping quietly beneath the chaos in his mind as he forced Anakin back with a whirlwind of hits aimed at his chest and legs. *You will continue to lack your full strength in the Force until truly embrace your hatred and make it yours. All of it.*

Obi-Wan screamed and charged Anakin, a terrifying apparition of black and red as he let in all of the horrors he'd tried to keep at bay for so long.

*I was not strong enough to save my mother.*

*I wasn't strong enough to save you, skybrother.*

*I hate them all.*

*But not as much as I hate myself.*

And the dark side surged around him in ridges of ebony and ice, slamming into Anakin's fire with such power Ahsoka squinted and took a step back, instinctively shielding her eyes even though the storm front before her was invisible.

As the fight wore on and the pain built in Anakin's mind, brutally destroying everything but itself, things fell away, names and places and feelings until finally, at the bitter end of the arc of his suffering, there was only the saber and the opponent, the moving thing that he would kill. Destroy. Annihilate.

He would leave nothing behind.

No living thing would survive this black desolation choking the air out of him. He existed in a hollow, airless void, his concept of self obliterated by the all-consuming madness that propelled him forward in hatred toward the one he fought, the one that hid behind a waving fan of red light and a cold wall of the Force that enraged him with its power that dared to challenge his own.

That one, his opponent, flickered bright like ice crystals in the Force. No. Two of them were here,
he realized with a savage, deranged snarl. Wherever here was.

Two bright lights in the Force on this dead, barren world he could no longer name. Two lights he no longer recognized any more than he would have recognized his own name.

His world was pure animal misery, vast and incomprehensible, never-ending.

All light had to die, the light that cursed him and blinded him. There was no light in his world. There was only darkness.

And he would extinguish those two lights as surely as a boot stamping out a flame.

Obi-Wan's instincts sang to him in a rough staccato as he blocked and dodged Anakin, flinging himself back and to the side as he made futile attempts to wound him. The Force howled around them with Anakin's insanity, terrifying Obi-Wan with its increasing power despite his own newfound strength in it.

If he gets any kind of focus back he'll realize he can just choke us to death with it! "Ahsoka!" he barked, not risking a look back over his shoulder where he sensed the horrified girl, trying not to succumb to the waves of poisoned emotion rolling through her bond with her master. "Get to the caves!"

"He'll kill you!"

Maybe that wouldn't be so bad, his despair hissed even he shoved forward with another thrust, pushing Anakin back. Why did he have to remember that moment? he cried silently once again. Of all our lives together, why that first?!

The split-second distraction almost cost him his life as Anakin whipped his blade over his head down toward him in a vicious surprise attack meant to disembowel him, a frightening marriage of instinct and training that spoke of no mercy and no quarter given.

Obi-Wan realized with cold horror that Anakin as he knew him was no longer in control: this was a monster birthed in the agony tearing apart Anakin's mind, the years of warped repression at the Council's hand come full circle to show its nightmarish face and revel in wanton destruction as it peeked out from one of the deepest cracks in the mind-wipe that had taken away everything. There would only be teeth in this creature's smile, sharp and razored and meant to rend him and anyone else that came into reach into bloody scraps.

He means to kill me. And her. I can't let him do that. I can't!

"GO!" He thrust aside another one of Anakin's wild attacks, ducking and snapping a kick across Anakin's face to send him spinning to the ground with a thud. Obi-Wan spun around and ran, sprinting alongside Ahsoka as they covered the last few meters to the nearest cave entrance.

He threw a glance over his shoulder to see Anakin crawling toward them for a few feet, a wide, insane grin on his face as he pushed himself back upright and started walking slowly toward the caves, his saber spinning carelessly at his side, death making its way toward them in a hiss of slurred footsteps through gravel and the billow of a dark cloak.
Ahsoka was whimpering in fear and reflected pain from Anakin, and Obi-Wan grabbed her hand and yanked her further back into the shadows with a hissed whisper, his own long history with Anakin's temper allowing him to channel enough of the fury away he could remain in control. "Be quiet." She felt a strange heat course through her, and then the sensation of closeness, as if the world had doubled somehow.

_Are you shielding me?_ she gasped, covering her mouth as they scrambled back into the maze of passages that linked this cave to the others around them, Obi-Wan's hand clenched tightly around her wrist.

_Yes. Keep moving_, he answered silently. Somewhere behind them Anakin gave an infuriated, inhuman-sounding growl at his prey effectively vanishing from his sight in the Force.

The mining caves were arrangements of perfectly geometrical niches and walls, right angle after right angle carved out by drills and droids working on preplanned trajectories only adding to the nightmarish surrealness of the moment. The two hurried together as fast as they dared through the still, suffocating air, every small scrape on the rough rock that was the cave floor loud in their ears.

Obi-Wan guided them through a warren of black tunnels lit in garish crimson light by his saber as they made their way up through a roughly hewn stairway far in the back reaches of the cave and came out higher up, the cave mouth ahead of them showing only starry sky at this level. He powered his saber down and looked around, never letting go of Ahsoka, trying to find a place to tuck them both into that would be defensible if it came down to it.

He was concentrating so hard on this and on Anakin's black hole of a Force signature in the level down below them that it took Ahsoka jabbing at his arm twice to get his attention.

_Obi-Wan! Obi-Wan!_

_What?_

She pointed out into the sullen clouds of the Mustafar night sky. _Don't you hear that?_

They moved as one toward the entrance, staying in the shadows, drawn to the low, guttural droning like moths to a flame.

A gunship.

_The Council?_ Ahsoka thought, Obi-Wan nodding grimly as he pushed her back further into the dark with his free hand as the blunt shape cleared the haze overhead and began circling around.

_Anakin's moving back outside_, he thought back to her, even though it wasn't necessary to point out. Anakin was a huge, inverse bonfire in the Force, a writhing void of flame and torment, and he stalked out back into sight down below with his saber out and looked up into the sky at the gunship.

_What is he do-?_ Ahsoka started to ask, and then squinted as the Force shot outward from Anakin in a new black halo.

As the gunship smoothly glided through the waves of smoke and cloud above Mustafar, Council
members Mace Windu and Pong Krell stood amid a small group of elite commandos pulled from other Coruscant-based squads, the arid winds coming up off of distant lava plains blowing through the open doors of the gunship and everyone swaying gently as they held the loops overhead. The soldiers were all white and black lines and stoic faces, their deadly grace no less apparent than the robed Jedis that stood in the middle of them as they looked down at the ground still far below.

These particular clones were often called upon for sensitive work the Temple didn't want too much attention to be drawn to, and were paid accordingly. They'd overseen several strange situations in the ten years since this particular squad had been put together, and if they had any thoughts about this particular mission none showed on any of the faces that mirrored each other almost perfectly as the ship glided into a final, circling approach above the coordinates Skywalker had given the Council in his message.

Windu, more grim than usual, had briefed them as they'd dropped from the small, incognito command ship waiting in orbit overhead. "Men," he'd said. "When we get there one of two things is likely to have happened given that we're an hour behind. Maul will have killed Skywalker and Tano and probably left, or Skywalker will have killed Maul. If the second has happened there is a good chance Skywalker will be out of his mind with rage given the fact Maul murdered his Master and at this point possibly Tano. This mission it is especially crucial that all orders given are followed immediately and without question, for the safety of Skywalker. While we hope to recover her alive, Tano is secondary in this mission. Consider him your priority."

There had been no questions or hesitation. There never were with these particular men, and Windu was thankful for that as he looked over the barren field below as the last wisps of spark-strewn clouds fell away. A quick glance over the area and through the Force told the two Jedi all they needed to know, an entire story spelled out in a crumpled heap of a black-clad body and the mindless insanity of the Force signature of the other figure emerging from a cave in the rocky hillside they came in over.

Maul lay dead, Skywalker's mind-wipe had apparently cracked long and deep, and there was no sign of Tano anywhere in the Force.

"Maul murdered Tano and Skywalker murdered him," Windu frowned over at Krell, who was looking down in morbid fascination at the small silhouette that turned his face up toward them. The soldiers around them said nothing, awaiting orders, their armor clanking as the ship continued in a wide bank.

"He's in so much pain. How is he still conscious?"

"He's the Chosen One," Windu answered with a biting sarcasm, and then the whole world jerked left and alarms screamed to life around them.

"Report!" Krell shouted, grabbing at the door and an extra loop as the ship shuddered violently and the Force slammed upward into it, shaking it harder than any turbulence had a right to do.

"He's dragging us down, sir!" the pilot yelled, voice strained as he fought the sudden pull on the gunship.

"That's impossible!" Krell spat as the ship gave another lurch and a fresh cacophony of alarms sounded as the pilot jerked the ship back to level, coasting just a handful of meters above the ground.

"Not for him!" Windu retorted, yanking a rappel line over from its anchor on the far wall with the Force and snapping it to his belt. "Men, stun bolts only! Now!" The commandos jumped out of the
ship, dropping down in flashes of white and black as Windu sailed down with them, rolling and coming up on his feet in the black gravel, purple saber flashing to life.

Skywalker was still focused on the noise and bulk of the ship, saber hanging forgotten at his side and right hand up and clenched as he fought the low, straining thrum of the vehicle's engines, lost in a mad desire to destroy this new intruder into the never-ending night of his suffering. Windu ran fearlessly toward him, all of his training allowing his awe at Anakin's power to slide past him without tangling him in it, the soldiers right behind him and their weapons at the ready.

"Now!" he called, drawing up just short and spinning his lightsaber in a showy defensive stance in front of him to distract Anakin.

Skywalker turned toward the waving line of violet just in time to take two stun bolts in the chest from two of the commandos behind Windu, letting out a rough cry as the blue electricity danced and sizzled around him. He collapsed forward into the dirt soundlessly, unconscious and the tidal forces swirling unseen around him sinking back into a muted, sullen silence.

The land was still once again, only lava flows and plumes of smoke moving in lifeless undulations across the horizon.

Windu turned off his saber and jogged over, boots crunching through the gravel and sand and the wind of the landing gunship throwing his robes and cloak into disarray as he came to a stop in front of Anakin's motionless form. Krell hopped down from the ship and walked over to join his fellow Master, pushing the gathered clones aside and growling at them to go collect Maul's body and take it back to the ship.

"So," he said once the clones had left, idly glancing up at the caves around them as he broached the topic neither wanted to talk about. "Is this the aftereffects of that mind-wipe you briefed me on?"

"The aftereffects of it breaking. Something triggered one of his true memories, probably the fight where his master died."

"Can't we just patch the broken part of it up?"

"No," Windu sighed disapprovingly, shaking his head. "We're going to have to take apart and repeat the entire mind-wipe." Cursing under his breath, he knelt and lifted Anakin's head by the hair, finding his eyes rolled back into his head before lowering it back to the warm ground. "I didn't like this the first time we did it. I don't like it now."

"Well, he can't be allowed to leave. He's the Chosen One, isn't he?"

Windu snorted, waving a hand over Anakin's body and closing his eyes as he tried to ascertain how far down the mind-wipe had splintered. "Incredibly powerful, yes. We just saw that. But some all-saving messiah? No, I don't think so. Get his saber, would you?"

"You don't believe in the Prophecy?" Krell asked as he picked up Anakin's hilt from the spot it had rolled off to a few feet away and tucked it into his robes for safekeeping.

"Personally? No. But I do believe in the Order. And the Order needs him. We've made ourselves need him. So back he goes."

Krell nodded, thoughtful. "Wait, didn't you say it took ten of you last time to do this? We only have seven, and four actually at the Temple right now if you count us."

"We'll discuss that when we get there. We only have a few hours before he wakes up again."

Windu waved over two of the clones to carry Anakin back to the ship. They jogged over, one heading back to the ship first to bring a gurney.

"There are sedatives on the ship."

"No. We keep stunning him every time he wakes up on the way back. He has to be awake for the... procedure. And clear-headed. No drugs at all in his system."

Krell shrugged and looked down at the clones kneeling next to Anakin with the gurney. "You heard him."

"Yes, sir," one responded as the two slid their arms under Anakin's limp body to lift him. Windu stalked back ahead of the group, jabbing at his com and tersely relaying the details to the rest of the Council through a secure audio channel.

Krell watched all of this happening and snickered to himself as he trailed off after the clones and their precious cargo. "And here I thought being on the Council was going to be boring."

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Only when the landing party had left, the gunship roaring back into the sky to disappear into the sluggish ceiling of clouds overhead did Obi-Wan let Ahsoka's wrist go and the wall of shielding fell away. The two stood, faces lifted to the sky, Obi-Wan's eyes as bright with rage as Ahsoka's were with horror at what they had heard the Masters talking about below.

"We have to save him," she whispered into the darkness, soul still ringing with Anakin's pain.

"We will." Obi-Wan clenched his jaw and looked over at her. "We take my ship back, get into the Temple, rescue him and get back out." His gaze dropped to the ground. *Even if you hate me, I won't let them hurt you like this, skybrother. Once you're safe, then I can... what? Let you kill me? Yes. If that's still what you want.* Fighting tears of despair, he took a deep breath and lifted his head, not seeing anything in front of him. *You'll never remember me, will you?*

"How are we going to get into the Temple? They think I'm dead and they'll stop you at the front gate."

Obi-Wan whirled in a trailing line of black and stalked back into the cave. "Leave that to me."

"Obi-Wan."

The anger in her voice stopped him where he was, and he looked over his shoulder. "Yes?"

"Did you kill Qui-Gon?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I... I will tell you all of it on the way there," he told the ground after a moment, lost in memories that swam over the dull rock and coarse gravel but unable to give voice to any of them at that moment.
She stared at him long and hard, considering his words, before shaking her head and massaging her temples with an exasperated sigh. "On the ship, then. Let's go."

Obi-Wan said nothing, stunned as they hurried down and out of the caves, emerging into the barren field still marked with the gunship's landing gear and the frantic scratches of footprints. She is completely ready to risk her life going after him, he thought with a mix of gratitude and fear for her.

Pausing and holding out a hand to stop her as well, he turned to her, fury and sadness giving a faint glow to his eyes that hadn't been there before, and in the dim gloom around them it was like a wolf watching her from just beyond a campfire. "Ahsoka, you must understand this may be a one-way trip. We might die or be captured trying to free him, and you are young. The Council thinks you're dead. This is your chance to walk away free of them. You could have your own life away from all of this."

"And leave Master to them?" Ahsoka snarled as she batted his hand aside and strode onward. "No. Never."

In that moment Obi-Wan felt a swell of affection for her as strong as his love for Anakin. Please let her fate be better than my own, he quietly prayed to whoever and whatever would listen as they crossed the landing pad to their ship.

Please let her and Anakin escape all of this.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, thank you, thank you all for reading, for your comments, and for your patience as this update went up a few days later than usual! <3 <3 <3

(I know a lot of you were worried about Obi-Wan dying, but see? Obi-Wan survived this chapter! There's some good news in the middle of all this, right? I hope?)

Two more chapters and a possible epilogue to go in this fic after this one! Please feel free to share what you think the endgame is going to be...

As far as updates, with the holiday and family visiting I'm going to say the next one will be sometime at the tail end of the next two weeks, so by the Tuesday after this next one. Thank you all once again for reading! <3

And a Happy Thanksgiving to my fellow American readers! Hope you have a safe and happy one with your loved ones! :)

Thank you as always to my dear girlfriend Fireflyfish for her editing. You're the best, baby!
Hello, readers! This ended up being another monster chapter, around 13,000 words, so it got split into two like I've done before. Just so no one gets excited because I said there were only two chapters left, this and the chapter after it are NOT the final update on the story. Chapter 24 will be the final one (unless I end up splitting it into two also). Thanks as always for reading!

The past.

Anakin lay on his back in his bed, lost in the hazy glow of streaks of dawn light cutting through the shades and across the room. They draped over his bare, lithe chest, the sheets, and the back of another young man lying curled up against him on his side, giving warmth to his companion’s pale skin.

Smiling into Obi-Wan’s hair, Anakin kissed him on the top of his head and rolled over into him, pulling him into a loving, sleepy embrace. This was much easier to do now that he’d finally shot up to well over Obi-Wan’s height in the past couple of years, and he secretly loved how perfectly Obi-Wan fit into his arms even if the narrow bed felt even more so now.

“Good morning,” Obi-Wan murmured into Anakin’s chest, breath warm on his skin.

“Good morning,” Anakin smiled down at him, stroking his back in a leisurely arc of his free arm. “You are so lazy.” The room was peaceful and still, the rustle of the sheets and the low hum of the air circulator in the background the only sound other than their whispers.

“You wore me out,” Obi-Wan grinned up at him, yawning and stretching before sliding his own arms around Anakin.

“More than usual?”

“Definitely more than usual. I think you like having to stay quiet,” Obi-Wan said in mock judgment, leaving little kisses along Anakin’s throat.

Anakin sighed happily and leaned into Obi-Wan’s gentle affection, savoring it. “I don’t want you to go.”

“I don’t either, but even if he’s away on a mission there might be others about in the halls if I wait much longer.”

Giving him a hard, breathless kiss, Anakin pulled away with a bit of a pout. “One more before you go?”

“Heh,” Obi-Wan said, pulling Anakin down for another kiss. One turned into another and then another, both of them enjoying the teasing heat and weight of their bodies pressed together, the delicious friction of their hips grinding together through thin bedclothes.
Anakin loved being close to Obi-Wan like this, a beautiful war between them fought only with the insatiable lust of youth, new and eager lovers straining against each other in the dark of night and more recently in the bright light of day whenever and wherever they could safely manage it.

Eyes closed and arched down over Obi-Wan, lost in the sharp loveliness of Obi-Wan’s teeth nipping at his bare chest, Anakin at first didn’t hear the set of knocks immediately followed by the distinctly muted hiss of his door opening, the door that he had never been allowed to put locks on.

“Good morn--” Anakin’s eyes flew open at the heavy bass of the voice as Obi-Wan twisted under him in the direction of it, the two frozen in horror.

Master Qui-Gon Jinn stood transfixed in the simple entrance of the room, shock pinning him in place as his greeting died away and he blinked, unwilling to believe what he saw in front of him.

Throwing himself off of Obi-Wan, Anakin blushed all the way down to his throat as he grabbed his shirt from the end of the bed and started tugging it on.

Obi-Wan sat up and did the same, eyes dropping to the floor as he searched for the pile of his mechsuit in a frantic rush. A heavy, dangerous quiet hung between the three of them, once again the only sound in the room the rustle of fabric as the two young men hurriedly dressed.

Qui-Gon watched, the Force growing darker and angrier as he waited. As they fumbled with their clothing, Qui-Gon’s gaze slid from Anakin’s flushed face to Obi-Wan’s equally red one and he finally realized why his Padawan’s companion looked familiar.

Him.

Taking a long, deep breath, Qui-Gon ground his teeth together.

The Coruscanti boy that came with Anakin from Tatooine! How? When? We separated them almost ten years ago!

“Anakin,” Qui-Gon said in a low tone utterly devoid of emotion, a tone Anakin had never heard from him before. It terrified both of the young men as they stood awkwardly on either side of Anakin’s narrow bed, Anakin shifting from one foot to the other as Obi-Wan stood rigid, trying to look past Qui-Gon as if he weren’t there. “What is this?”

Did they meet again somehow? He’s a mechanic. That’s right. That’s where we sent him. Did they meet again in the hangar bay?

“You’re back early, Master,” Anakin said accusingly, drawing a thunderous look from Qui-Gon at his audacity. The master felt his usual inner calm tremble violently, irrationally, and repeated the first line of the Code to himself. There is no emotion, there is peace.

“How long has this been going on?” he managed to say, gathering the words and sending them out in much calmer tone than he wanted to. We can fix this, Qui-Gon tried to reassure himself. It’s not intimacy. Or attachment. It can’t be as long as they’ve been apart. Just a youthful indiscretion after a chance meeting, most li--

“It never stopped,” Anakin retorted, lifting his chin and reaching out over the bed to grab Obi-Wan’s hand as the dawn rays fell in stripes over their arms. Obi-Wan took his and squeezed back, though in his fear it felt like his fingers were the only muscles working in his entire body.

“It... never... stopped?” Qui-Gon’s eyebrows raised at Anakin’s words and dropped again into a glower at the gesture between the two of them. After a moment of consideration, his voice came out in such a faint, quiet ghost of itself Obi-Wan wondered if he was going to hit them as much rage as he was clearly struggling to hold back. “You... you two are coming with me to the Council.
Obi-Wan gave Anakin’s hand another squeeze, this one a warning not to say anything further, before letting go. “Yes, sir,” he said with as much dignity as he could, his mind racing as he and Anakin fumbled with their boots on opposite sides of the bed. What’s going to happen? What are they going to do?

For all of Obi-Wan’s practicality, he and Anakin had never really discussed what would happen or what they would do if they were caught, their stolen time too precious to spend on such depressing thoughts and their young hearts too confident to truly imagine it ever happening. Now, after Qui-Gon turned and walked out into the hall with his spine rigid and hands clenched tightly behind his back, Obi-Wan caught Anakin’s eye and mouthed *Hangar bay*? as he flicked a small hand sign.

Anakin nodded before glancing at Qui-Gon’s stiff back, heart still pounding. Back in Mos Espa they’d always arranged a meet-up point before embarking on more dangerous mischief in case they got separated, making an old folk gesture to give luck to their choice before they set off. He returned it almost absent-mindedly, too afraid of his master’s wrath to think much past the moment.

*I’ve never seen him so angry. Not even when I ‘lost’ my saber and we had to take a special trip back to Ilum for a new crystal.*

When they emerged Qui-Gon gave a clipped gesture down the hall, following behind them in icy silence and his gaze heavy on the back of Anakin and Obi-Wan’s heads. It was both the shortest and longest walk of Anakin’s life as the simple walls passed by and he desperately tried to think of a way to explain them both out of this without Obi-Wan being punished.

Anakin knew the Council loved him. *They’ll never blame me but I don’t know what they’ll do to Obi-Wan. It turned his stomach as he wondered just how bad things could get. They can’t charge him with anything, right? They can’t arrest him. Can they?*

For his part Obi-Wan felt a certain, terrible knowledge pass through the Force into him that something awful lay ahead in their future, dark and looming and growing ever closer with every step they took.

For the first time since they had been brought before the Council all those years ago, Anakin and Obi-Wan stepped inside the austere spaciousness of the Council chamber together, strong young men instead of boys.

The Council had changed since then, Obi-Wan observed, eager to distract himself from his nervousness and noting a few different faces from the ones he’d seen over and over again in his angry reminiscing about that fateful day they’d arrived from Tatooine.

Their footfalls echoed in the chamber as they came to stand in the middle of it with Qui-Gon stopping at the outer ring behind them, the room as bright and airy as it had always been to Anakin but charged with something dangerous and unusual: a mix of shock and growing anger from the assembled masters as Qui-Gon spoke with a sharp line of disappointment threading through the bass of his voice.

“Honored members of the Council, I... discovered this morning that my Padawan has been harboring an attachment for years, hiding it from your esteemed eyes and my own as well. An
emotional attachment so deep Anakin has lied to all of us about it for years in order to preserve it.”

“How did you come to find this out?” Master Koth asked, puzzled, as others started to whisper all around him and over empty chairs to whoever was seated closest to them.

“I found them together in Anakin’s bed just a few minutes ago.”

The faces that glared at Obi-Wan only softened a bit when they turned to Anakin, and ice began to creep along Anakin’s stomach as he fully began to understand just how much trouble they might be in. He tried to look ahead and not flinch away from the hard looks, the careful examination the masters were now giving him and Obi-Wan as he stood with his hands behind his back, one hand clutching the other almost painfully.

“Is that…” Master Windu asked, trailing off in disbelief.

Qui-Gon’s answer showed he could hardly accept it himself. “Yes, the Coruscanti boy who came with Anakin from Tatooine.”

“We separated them,” Master Mundi argued, checking a datapad. “He’s a mechanic, in the pilot program. Due to graduate in a few months, it says.”

Hearing what they had always suspected said out loud in the airy space of the Council chamber, Anakin and Obi-Wan could only exchange startled looks, never imagining it would be declared so plainly and with so little emotion.

“We didn’t separate them well enough, it would seem. Please, Anakin,” Qui-Gon invited him, his words so coldly polite they cut along Anakin’s back. “Please tell them what you said when I asked how long this had been going on?”

Flustered, he mumbled an answer.

“Louder!” Qui-Gon shouted at him, startling him and a few of the other members of the Council with the booming echo of it.

“I said, ‘It never stopped,’ es… esteemed Masters,” Anakin repeated to the ground, all of his bravado from earlier gone at the sheer disappointment radiating out from those around him, unable to look up and meet the wide eyes of the men and women he’d tutored under and learned from for half of his life.

Shame battled bewilderment. *We didn’t do anything wrong!* he wanted to cry. *This isn’t wrong! It’s never felt wrong once! Stop trying to make me feel like it is!*

“Betrayed our trust, you have,” Yoda said after a moment, speaking for the first time since the trio had entered the room and to both of them. His voice was sad, so disappointed Anakin felt his heart crumple in his chest even in the middle of his growing anger. “Skywalker, know well the path you must walk. Ask anything of you, we do not, that ask of ourselves we do not. No attachments have we members of the Council. And you. You! Too dangerous, it is, to risk attachments with the destiny you have.”

“And you,” he said, looking at Obi-Wan, who stood up taller as Anakin wilted, no long years of lessons and encouragement between Obi-Wan and the Grandmaster to give his words the sting for Obi-Wan that they had for Anakin. “Knew better you did. Selfish, you were. Tolerate this we cannot.”

Yoda thought for a moment, wrinkled face intent on the ceiling and Obi-Wan’s heart hammering
against his ribs as he wondered what the decision would be.

“Bandomeer. To the Agricorps you will go,” the Grandmaster finally offered to the approving nods of the others seated around the room, faces lifted in haughty satisfaction wherever Anakin turned as a dozen silent conversations happened at once through the Force.

“What? The farmers?” Anakin spat as Obi-Wan blinked in confusion.

“Exactly,” Master Windu replied as the Grandmaster sat back, nodding as the group finished conferring silently. “He took advantage of the kindness we showed him in giving him shelter and a position. He will not again. He will be banished from the Temple and he will never work as a mechanic or a pilot in the commercial sector without our recommendation.”

“But even after his deceit, angry we are not. Only wish to help him, we do. And offer him shelter we do, shelter he will need,” Yoda added, closing his eyes as if to declare the matter settled. “Tomorrow, to his new life he will go.”

“On the other side of the galaxy!” Obi-Wan retorted, too astounded to stay quiet any longer.

“Silence, boy,” Master Mundi said, pointing a warning finger at him. “You are lucky we are giving you that much!”

“No! Hypocrites!” Obi-Wan shouted, waving his arm around to point at all of them as Anakin stepped closer to him, fists clenched. “You’re all hypocrites! You all talk about love and compassion but you don’t care! You don’t care about any of it!”

“Care, we do.” Yoda opened his eyes as if he hadn’t heard Obi-Wan’s angry words at all, voice serene and in control as he studied them from his chair. “Today to pack, we will give you. On to a shuttle this instant, we will not push you. Unless in this way you continue.”

At Anakin’s stunned expression, mouth agape, Yoda waved a hand. “Say your goodbyes here, Skywalker. Then on to your classes for the day.” There was a challenge in the casualness of that last command, a test to see what Anakin would do at being told to return to his studies.

“We could just leave, you know. Leave the Order. Both of us,” Anakin declared, regretting it as soon as the words came out of his mouth: the room’s atmosphere turned to ice, several of the masters freezing in place.

Obi-Wan shot him a warning look, willing Anakin to stay silent just this once before things got any worse.

Master Koth seemed to thaw first, and he cleared his throat before speaking. “After all of the care and teaching we have given you, you wish to leave?”

“I… no, but… This isn’t fair! None of this is fair!”

“Your mind is clouded by attachment, Anakin,” Master Koth said with a mix of pity and sympathy, rubbing his forehead. “Don’t you see? The sooner you clear your mind of it the easier it will be to understand.”

“Perhaps our problem is that we spent all of our efforts on Anakin and did not acknowledge,” Master Mundi checked the datapad again, “Obi-Wan’s issues.” The words hung in the fallen snow of the Force all around them, cold and heavy with judgment.

Obi-Wan’s back stiffened, but he linked his hands behind his back and waited as a few other
Masters nodded, attempting to put on his most penitent face and wondering if any of them would believe it when all he wanted to do was scream and rage at them.

“You are the one that encouraged this, aren’t you? You were jealous he was accepted and you were not, weren’t you?”

He looked down at the ground, not expecting that question and hating that there was the slightest bit of truth at all in the observation.

“Do you love him? Truly?” Master Mundi asked, face bland.

Obi-Wan nodded, staring down at the ground and suddenly feeling more tired than he’d ever felt in his young life. Anakin glared back and forth between them, not liking where this was going.

“Then you must allow him to reach his full potential, which he can only reach here.” Master Mundi thought about it. “Also, if we are being honest, if both of you were to leave the Order and attempt to strike out on your own, it would only be a matter of time before a syndicate or slavers got ahold of Anakin,” he said, shaking his head. “You’re old enough now to discuss these things so let’s discuss them clearly. Anakin shines like a beacon. You know he does. And you know you can’t protect him as the Order can. Will Anakin find your love worth being taken and made a pleasure slave in some nameless brothel or sport for hunting in one of the more vicious systems?”

“Stop! Just stop!” Anakin interrupted with an angry cry, not wanting to hear any of this. “Please!”

Obi-Wan reached over and put his hand on Anakin’s shoulder, squeezing it tightly as he bowed. “I… I never wanted him to come to harm. I just… wanted him next to me. Like we’d always been.”

“His place is not next to you,” Master Windu pointed out. “It hasn’t been for years.”

Obi-Wan shoved his hands in his pockets and let out a long, trembling sigh as Anakin gaped around the room. “It is!” Anakin retorted as the Force around Obi-Wan swirled with wide streaks of anger and darker threads of doubt and fear, almost eclipsed by Anakin’s own storm of emotion.

“No. They… they are right. I… I should leave for what I’ve done,” Obi-Wan murmured to Anakin sadly. “I am sorry, Anakin. I am so sorry. I will show myself to the door and go pack,” he said, hugging Anakin and looking up at the last moment to stare intently into his wide eyes before he turned away.

He strode out of the room without looking back, wiping away angry tears on the black sleeve of his mechsuit.

“We know you are upset, Anakin, but you must understand--” he heard, and the door slid neatly shut behind him, cutting off all sound save his footsteps in the hallway as he made his way down the empty corridor to the lift waiting at the end of it.

Obi-Wan rode down in silence, fighting with the anger that swelled up so powerfully inside him he thought it might crush him. He stood with his arms crossed, seeing and hearing nothing but what had just happened, over and over again, as the doors opened and he stepped off, habit taking him into the worker corridor just around the corner from the elevator entrance. As soon as he was in the dim emptiness of the bare length of hall that ran parallel to the main corridor he let out a curse and
slammed his hand against the wall, hitting it again and again and swearing as he beat his fists against the bare metal. No one else was around and he only stopped when enough of the rage had been expelled through his fists he was able to think clearly again.

*Kriff the kriffing Council. He’ll meet me at the hangar bay. I know he will.*

Ten minutes later he stood in the tiny refuge of his room, every available bit of space there packed with books and datapads and droid parts stacked on shelves and in corners on the floor, his neatly-made bed the only place completely clear.

The door drifted shut behind him, leaving him in the dim light of the single bulb overhead. He looked around, musing over how much of his life he’d spent in this little room, lost in reading or learning what he was not supposed to.

Obi-Wan thought about how lonely it had been most of the time, how special it had been when Anakin could meet him and they could sit and talk in low whispers late into the night.

*Stolen moments. And we were so happy for them. So happy for a few hours a month. Sometimes less.* He grit his teeth and laid down on the bed, rolling over onto his back and looking up at the low ceiling of the bunk that he’d plastered with fleet insignia stickers and sketches of his favorite model ships and droids over the years.

Peeling one of the larger drawings back, he gave a sharp knock to the small metal panel there and knocked it loose, turning it on edge and pulling it down to reveal a small dead space in the architecture. He reached up with his other hand and pulled out his lightsaber, tucking it into a hip pocket before he reached back up, fishing around again until his fingers caught a small fabric bag.

Tugging it out, the muffled clink of credits loud in the silent room, Obi-Wan stuffed the bag in a chest pocket and replaced the paneling out of habit. *Why am I bothering to put it back? I’ll never come back here*, he realized, a strange sadness mixed in with his vicious joy at the thought of it. *Never. I swear it.*

Rolling back to sit up, his legs over the side, he leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees and his face in hands, attempting to fight down the rage stalking him. *They will not keep us apart. They have no right to!*

He took deep breaths, trying to turn his mind inward and away from thoughts of what had just happened, to force inside the vast, devouring beast that wanted to destroy everything around him in a mad fit.

It took a half hour, but when he looked up again into the tiny burnished metal mirror hung across from his bed the face that met his gaze was calm. Almost icy.

He wore that mask all the way down to the covered walkway that joined the hangar bay to the Temple proper, and as soon as he crossed into the large open space filled with neat and orderly rows of ships and the scent of solder and fuel, he scanned the room for one of the many other techs he worked with every day. *Preferably one of the lead techs.*

*And there’s one now.* Zeroing in on another black-suited human dragging a large fuel line from a badly damaged aethersprite, he walked over and picked up the loose end dragging behind him.

“Hey, Ben,” the man said with a grin, turning to talk over his shoulder as they walked along. “It’s not your shift. Am I that good looking?”

“You know I can’t stay away, Tenk,” Obi-Wan chuckled, heart hollow but smile all the brighter
for it. “Are any of the space-class ships we got in last week repaired yet?”

“Yeah, the two at the end are all ready to go. They just need test runs, the usual. High orbit and back.” Tenk tossed the heavy length of the fuel line off his shoulder into careful coils as Obi-Wan helped, threading the end to land with a slap atop the pile. “You volunteering? Want to trade shifts or something? I thought you hated test runs. Said they were boring.”

“Well…” Obi-Wan lowered his voice to a conspiratorial tone, pulse pounding as he did, “one of the browns has haughtily informed me you can’t do an engine-cut triple roll successfully without the Force.”

Tenk snorted. “Oh, is that so?”

Obi-Wan waved his hand in a mockery of someone using the Force. “He bet me 100 credits I can’t do one. I was thinking I’ll give you 20 if you let me take one of those two ships up with him in it as soon as he gets here.”

Laughing, Tenk nodded in approval, slapping Obi-Wan on the back and pointing down the line of ships. “Go for it. Use the blanket admin code instead of yours and I’ll tell the boys not to say anything if anyone asks. And Ben?”

“Yeah?”

“Make him puke on the way down and you can keep my 20.”

“Yes, sir.” Obi-Wan forced a snicker and gave a mock salute as Tenk looked past him, squinting.

“Is that him?”

Obi-Wan let out a breath of quiet relief as he turned to see Anakin with his hood up walking into the bay alone, headed straight for them and moving quickly. “Yeah. Thanks, Tenk.”

_I'm sorry, friend, but this is our only chance._ He clapped Tenk on the shoulder as the man walked off, and strode on to meet Anakin halfway, throat drying up as he got closer to him but pointing down toward their ship.

They walked together, each step taking an eternity, Obi-Wan resisting the urge to reach out and touch Anakin, to make sure he was really there. Every sound around them was loud, every whir of a drill and hiss of a saw, as the ship loomed larger and larger in front of them. “How much time do we have?” Obi-Wan asked under his breath.

“Not a lot. Master walked me back to my room to get my things for class. I got my card too and ditched him the first time we passed by a worker door.”

“No. I let myself drop back a few paces so I wasn’t right next to him. So I ducked in and closed the door before he even started to turn around. He probably thinks I ran back to my room or down to go see you in yours.”

“So we should have around,” Obi-Wan thought about it as calmly as he could manage, “fifteen minutes or so before he panics. Our ship will be warmed up and in flight in five.”

“Ok,” Anakin said, worriedly looking back over his shoulder, his eyes hidden by the hood but his fine mouth twisting in a frown as they ascended the smooth silver of the landing ramp.
Obi-Wan stopped at the top of it, both of them now out of sight of the hangar bay, and put his hands on Anakin’s shoulders, leaning close to him. “Do you want to do this?” he asked slowly, grey-blue eyes intense.

“Yes.”

“I mean it, Anakin. We don’t come back after this. Ever. You will not be a Jedi after today. Ever again. Is this what you want?” He gripped Anakin’s shoulders tightly, fabric bunching under his long fingers, as Anakin pulled his hood down.

Anakin cupped Obi-Wan’s face in his hands, the motion a solemn vow. “Yes. I want to be with you, skybrother. I can’t imagine never seeing you again. And they… they act like they own me. Like I’m not even a person. You should have heard them after you left.”

Obi-Wan ran a hand through Anakin’s short, spiky cut, pulling him close for a hug. “I can imagine. Come on.”

They hurried into the simple cockpit of the two-person sleeper transport, a small one meant for delegate visits or simple travel to safe systems. Obi-Wan slid into the pilot chair, easily punching in the general admin code all the mechanics were given access to their third year of service. As he was typing in the long set of digits, he reached under the dash with his free hand and pulled out a small blue circle of metal and wires.

He dropped it and stomped on it, kicking the mangled remains to skitter across the floor into a corner.

“Tracking device. In this type of model, there might be one more in the aft storage closet,” he said to Anakin without looking away from the colorful sweep of the control board. “Go look for it while I get us warmed up.”

Anakin nodded and hurried off to the sound of the ramp grinding up to rest against the ship and the first rumble of the engines powering up. Everything felt strange and distant, like this was a dream he had yet to wake up from. Leaving the Temple. Stealing a ship. This goes against everything I’ve ever been taught, he thought with a pang of guilt as he tossed down and crushed the secondary tracker with his boot.

But as he jogged back to the front, sliding into the copilot seat and strapping in, he looked over at Obi-Wan and felt all hesitation burn away in a flash of anger. They never let him become what he was supposed to. They took away his chance to become what he could have been. They kept us apart.

They might teach kindness and light but they never showed it to us.

The roar grew louder, and when Obi-Wan called the launch and the ship rose in a steady rattle of thrusters from the ground, Anakin felt a heavy, indescribable weight slide free from his heart as they glided out of the hangar bay and up into the morning sky.

He reached out and put his hand on Obi-Wan’s arm, earning a smile before Obi-Wan went back to keying in the warm-up subroutine for the hyperdrive. The comm gave a gentle chime, pulsing green, but Anakin reached over and slapped it off, earning a giddy laugh from Obi-Wan.

“Where do you want to go?” he asked Anakin, sitting back as the autopilot took over and steered them the rest of the way into the inky wash of space.

“Away from here.”
Obi-Wan nodded, his hands flying over the controls in quick jumps and slides of his fingers. “We’ll jump to a nearby system just to get us off the Coruscant scanners and then we can decide from there.” He slapped the last button and sat back, grinning over at Anakin as he took his hand and held it tight. “Hold on, skybrother.”

Anakin gave a small smile back as the strangeness of the day slowly thawed into recognition of what he was doing. It sent a cold, invigorating thrill down the back of his neck and out through his entire body, icy and electric. *Runaways. We’re runaways.*

Hyperspace swallowed them in a meteor shower of blue and white streaks.

Nothing was said for a long while as they ran diagnostic checks on the ship that were usually done before take-off, calling off system reports and numbers to each other like they’d flown together a hundred times before, the call and repeat soothing and familiar.

When the ship dropped out back into realspace, a tidal wave of black rushing all around them dotted with three moons wreathed in clouds and a massive gas giant rising up in a purple arc before them, Obi-Wan leaned back and let out a sigh of relief.

“We did it.”

“We did,” Anakin said, a nervous, happy flutter in his stomach. “Where do you want to go?”

“Well, we need credits, wherever we’re going to go. I brought my savings,” Obi-Wan said, patting his hip, “but that won’t last us a month. It’s not much.”

They watched the moons drift past, deep in thought, until Anakin finally spoke up. “We could sell the ship.” At the surprise and guilt he felt at suggesting this, he firmly told himself it was the least the Temple owed them. *After nine years of keeping us apart. Nine years of treating me like a thing.*

“It’s a Temple ship anyway, right? We shouldn’t stay in it for too long.”

“Yeah,” Obi-Wan agreed without hesitation, drumming his fingers on arm of his chair as he considered the logistics of it. “But not many people will buy it, either, for that same reason.”

“Pirates, maybe? Someone who doesn’t care what the serial numbers on the parts say?”

Obi-Wan considered this. “Possibly. They’ll give us the lowest price they can, but that should still be more than enough to get us started out on whatever we choose to do.”

“Do you know any systems where we could find some pirates? I mean, that just wouldn’t kill us?” Anakin propped his long legs up on the board, trying to relax and focus only on the immediate problem at hand.

“Well…” Obi-Wan pulled up a star map with a few dry clicks, lanes of small blue dots swirling up into view over the controls and the toes of Anakin’s boots. “How about Takodana? It sits at a nice midpoint between the Mid- and the Outer Rim for traders so it’s not too wild, but I’ve heard there are more than a few shady dealings that go on there. Not many outposts and a lot of wilderness there. Forests, mainly.”

“I’ve never been there, but yeah, that sounds good.”
“Takodana it is, in… 17 hours,” Obi-Wan said, punching in the new coordinates for the hyperdrive. Within a minute they were back in hyperspace, and the two of them let out a collective sigh of relief at the wash of white outside. Every jump, every second away from the Temple without an alarm sounding or a wave of fighters shifting into space in front of them soothed their fears a little more.

“So what are we going to be?” Obi-Wan asked, leaning back into his chair and turning his head to face Anakin.

“Bodyguards? House guards? Mercenaries? I mean, good ones,” Anakin shrugged, each idea enticing as he imagined it for a moment before moving on to the next. “You remember what Tatooine was like. There’s always work for guys who can speak well and handle a weapon.”

“We can be anything we want,” Obi-Wan whispered, in awe of the words as they came out of his mouth and the reality of them hit home.

“Yeah,” Anakin said back, voice equally as reverent.

They unbuckled their seat harnesses and stood, Obi-Wan reaching out to him with arms wide and a welcoming glow in the Force as it swirled out around him, just as bright as his grin. Anakin threw himself into Obi-Wan’s embrace, wrapping his arms tightly around him and tilting his head downward to bury it against Obi-Wan’s cheek. “We made it,” he breathed incredulously, the words warm puffs of air along Obi-Wan’s skin.

“We did.” Framed by the blue-white halo rushing past outside, they shared a long, loving kiss, caresses as reverent as their voices had been a moment ago.

“Wait,” Anakin said, pushing Obi-Wan back a little, surprising him.

“What is it?” he asked, concerned.

“I want this gone.” Anakin reached up and tugged on the soft line of his Padawan braid, swallowing. “I want to cut it off.”

Stunned, Obi-Wan reached out to slowly trace his finger down the braid, giving a bittersweet smile as he remembered all the times he’d played with it and tugged on it while Anakin lay under him in his tiny bunk. “Are you sure?” he said, feeling strangely nervous, like cutting it off would somehow be a more permanent sign of their rejection of the Order than stealing an entire ship.

“Yes,” Anakin said, clearly feeling that same anxiety but determined to do it anyway. “Do you have a knife?”

“I do.” Obi-Wan reached down and pulled a small knife from one of the pockets on his legs, opening it up with a loud click and handing it to Anakin.

As they locked eyes with each other, the symbolism of the moment weighed down on both of them. *There is no going back*, Obi-Wan told Anakin.

*I know.*

Taking a deep breath, Anakin took the cool weight of the knife in his hand and began to sing quietly, Obi-Wan joining in a few words in as soon as he recognized the song. The Force twined as tightly between them as the plaits of the braid as he began to saw through it.

“There’s a dragon
In the heart
Of every sun
But two together
Is the world undone.
Oh, one day, one day,
We will rise up free.
A dragon for you
And a dragon for me.”

The last of the braid gave way and Anakin pulled it free, laughing in pure, perfect relief at the sight of it as they began singing the next verse together.

“Sarlacc nest
In the desert
And bones on the path,
Great Azul’ir
With his sandstorms
And wrath.
Far away we will fly
With wings made of fire.
Skybrothers aloft
In our own white pyres.”

Anakin proudly handed the knife back to Obi-Wan before tucking the braid away in his robes, a reminder of what he would never allow to happen again. No one will own me. Ever again.

They continued singing in soft murmurs as they shared sweet kisses and touches before they finally trailed off into thrilled silence at the end of the song, Anakin pulling him back toward the sleeping quarters he’d passed on his way to find the tracker earlier and Obi-Wan only too happy to be led along.

Long hours and some sleep later, the two found themselves standing outside the ship in a small port called Riale in Takodana, one the navi had marked as snugly in the middle of a patch of autumnal colors streaking out through the forests of Takodana. The trees rose all around them in lovely washes of crimson and gold, drifts of the colors piled against some of the other ships around them that had been there a while. The air was cool, pleasantly brisk, and it sent a few leaves
skittering across the duracrete in front of Obi-Wan as he addressed the rangy, hungry looking 
handful of men that seemed to form the local welcome party.

“We don’t care much for Jedi around here,” one said, gesturing with his blaster to the ship and not 
even noticing Anakin, who now wore a nondescript grey suit similar to Obi-Wan’s that they’d 
found packed away with the ship’s supplies. “700 credits to land here or you get back on your 
ship.”

“We’re not Jedi,” Obi-Wan declared coldly, his accent making the statement even harsher. “We’re 
looking for someone to sell this to. Bring a serious buyer here and you gentlemen will get 800.”

“And if we just take your ship right now?”

“Perhaps a ship is not the only thing we took from the Jedi,” Obi-Wan smiled enigmatically as he 
reached into his hip pocket, a little frightened by how good it felt to watch them start to squirm as 
he let his hand rest there and the Force unfurl out around him.

He’d learned over the years even non-sensitives could pick up on his mood if he dropped his 
shields and reached out like this, and he spent a moment indulging his dark feelings regarding the 
Council before he spoke again. “Have you ever seen a man killed by a lightsaber? I hear that it’s 
quite unpleasant. The wound cauterizes immediately so you can have a literal hole in your chest 
and can live long enough to put your hand through it before you realize you’re dead.”

Anakin grinned as he played along and reached into the pocket where his own was, copying Obi-
Wan through the Force as well. “Yeah, not to mention how easily a lightsaber can cut parts off. It’s 
there and then gone, and you don’t even feel it when it happens. You just see your leg lying on the 
ground, or your arm, or your--”

“Enough!” the apparent leader barked, cutting him off and clearly bewildered by how frightening 
these two apparently unarmed young men were. “Harn, go get that Weequay pirate we met last 
night,” he growled to one of the others. “Now!”

A short wait and long bit of bargaining later at a local tavern Anakin and Obi-Wan found the ship 
off of their hands and their pockets loaded with high-value credits. The pirate that the first group of 
men had found even offered them employ on his own ship, but Anakin and Obi-Wan politely 
refused and bought him and the men he came with a few drinks instead, leaving them all laughing 
and trading stories of their adventures while the two quietly slipped away into the bustling streets 
of the town.

One man in the next booth over watched them thoughtfully as they left, his gaze lingering on the 
doors they’d disappeared out of before it dropped back to his drink.

Outside there was nothing but the cool autumn breeze and Anakin’s elation pouring through the 
Force to meet Obi-Wan’s deep relief the bargaining had not gone sideways.

“New clothes?” he asked after a few weaves in and out of alleys, pointing over to a clothing shop 
where bright-colored swathes of fabric lay hung over rough mannequins under an awning outside. 
Before long they were in the same colorful linens of the local populace, Anakin in a dark green set 
of tunic and pants while Obi-Wan chose a similar outfit in a deep blue, their sabers tucked into the 
pockets of leather belts usually meant to hold a blaster and hidden by the grey cloaks the 
shopkeeper recommended against the crisp weather.

Obi-Wan came out of the changing room and looked down at the pile of black in his arms, the 
plain, utilitarian uniform he’d worn for almost ten years, and then up again at the clerk attending
them. “Is there a trash bin I could put this in?”

Used to odd situations in this land caught between civilization and wilderness, the girl took the garment without hesitation and deposited it in a pile near the back door. “I’ll throw it out for you, sir.”

“Thank you,” he said, running his hands over the collars of his tunic, pleased at how soft and loose the fabric felt, but a certain uneasiness there too at the unfamiliar cut. It felt wrong, in a way, to not be in that suit any longer, to not be weighed down by tools, and when he and Anakin left he felt that same grim feeling from the day before come back, pressing down on him for a second before it was driven away by Anakin’s excited whispers about some exotic speeder coming down the wide, unpaved street.

They spent the day walking around, enjoying the simple feeling of being next to each other out in the open, even if their hoods were up and they were careful about what they said to each other out loud.

First they went back to the spaceport, where a quick stop by the public transportation office told them the shuttle transports that went to other planets and systems usually all left around midday, and that they’d just missed the departures for that day. “We’ll come back tomorrow,” Anakin said quietly as they walked away to discuss things, Obi-Wan nodding. “We shouldn’t stay here too long.” They returned to the clerk and paid for passes on one of the long-range shuttles that stopped off at several Outer Rim worlds, securing their seats for the next day under false names and heading back out to find a place to stay.

Together, Anakin thought with joy as he looked over to Obi-Wan walking next to him. The whole galaxy was theirs to explore, and they would do it together. As we always should have been.

The present.

Everything hurt.

The dull roar of a gunship engine washed in all around him as Anakin woke up, and he distantly understood he needed to keep his eyes shut.

If he sat up, if he moved, they would shock him again. They’d already done it twice, three times? Why? What have I done? he wanted to beg, barely able to form questions beyond the searing agony attempting to devour his mind whole. There were images surfacing there he didn’t understand, blurred and richly colored streaks across his consciousness: a young boy crying in a dark room, a pair of pale hands made red with clay, a dimly lit hall that seemed to stretch on forever, green flashes of a training saber. His consciousness was both drawn and repelled, wanting to look at them more closely but recoiling from the white-hot pain that surrounded each one.

It made the jagged, rough pain of the stun bolts he’d been subjected to seem almost pleasant by comparison.

“I think he’s awake, sir,” someone said nearby, drawing closer in a solid thud of boots.

No, no, please! He could barely remember his name and had no idea what he was doing here on
this ship, but he knew he didn’t want to be stunned again. “Please!” he whimpered, eyes snapping open as he felt someone lean over him. “Please don’t!”

Master Krell and a clone trooper loomed over him, looking at him thoughtfully and haloed by the lights of the ship above them. “This should be the last time we have to do this, Skywalker,” Krell said matter-of-factly. “But don’t worry. You won’t remember any of this soon enough.”

The Council.

A feeling swept through him, pure and horrible, unencumbered by fact, logic, or memories and so primal it sent Anakin’s heart thudding hard enough he could feel it in his throat. The blurs of color in his mind shivered, trying to resolve, and scattered again.

I hate the Council. I hate all of you!

“Do you?” Krell answered, unamused by the thought so violently projected at him. “Well, you won’t remember that either. Hit him.”

Another round of electricity, hungry and merciless, cascaded through Anakin and blackness crashed down once again.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter will go up as soon as I can cut and paste it in. :)

Thank you all so much for reading this far! Wow, I can’t believe this story is almost done!
Descent

Chapter Notes

A quick note: This is Part Two of two of the massive, 13,000 word update for this week. Please note this is NOT the final chapter of this story. Thanks for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The past.

The next morning came in soft yellow light to the little room Anakin and Obi-Wan had rented from one of the small inns that sat tucked away between shops and restaurants here, all of the businesses single lines of buildings cut out from the forest around them and the trees never far away, the bittersweet scent of evergreen all around them, even inside.

Obi-Wan lay in bed with Anakin and watched out the window some orange leaves fluttering down in the strong breeze coming up from a nearby lake they’d seen during their descent to the planet. The world was quiet and peaceful in the first rays of dawn, and he felt Anakin’s warmth next to him and listened to his slow, measured breathing with a thankfulness he couldn’t begin to express. It’s all so different from when we woke up in the Temple just a couple of days ago.

He lay there happily as Anakin slept on, not wanting the moment to end, thinking idly about what they would do and where they would go until Anakin finally stirred and rolled over into him, marking the official beginning of their morning a couple of hours later. They made love, still unable to resist the nearness of the other after so long apart, and cleaned up in the attached refresher afterward with laughs and teasing, scrubbing each other clean in the shower and stealing kisses as they did.

They finally got dressed and split their credits between them for safekeeping, tucking their sabers away and tying their cloaks on before heading out toward the shuttles an hour before they were due. It was a slow, pleasant walk, the fall color rising all around them in waves that trembled with every fall breeze and the smell of open fires from some of the restaurants and encampments around them smoky and rich.

The wind tugged on their clothes as they finally reached their destination and stepped up off the crowded, unpaved dirt road to the steps of the public travel hangar, leaving the throng of people milling past behind them to head inside.

A tall, hooded form stepped out at the top of the steps over them, a dark brown shadow lurking in the cool, dim entryway, completely still save the swing of his robes as he came to a halt in the middle of the entrance and turned to face them.

Obi-Wan froze mid-step, Anakin jerking to a halt next to him.

“Anakin,” Qui-Gon said, not moving, as two men that looked to be twins stepped out to join him. They were dressed in casual clothing, blasters slung at their hips, but Anakin recognized them immediately as clone troopers. “Don’t run.”

They can’t shoot us in front of everyone, Obi-Wan realized, darting a glance over to Anakin and
fighting down a swell of panic clawing up his throat. *Or they’d have their blasters out already.*

Anakin sent a furious, frightened acknowledgement and they both began to back down the steps slowly, toward the cover of the crowd flowing by below.

“Don’t, Anakin,” Qui-Gon warned, his Force signature sparking.

*Do we split up?* Anakin asked.

*No. Together this time.*

They whirled as one and threw themselves back into the crowd in blurs of grey, earning a few startled shouts and curses from the sentients they shoved aside as they ran.

Anakin didn’t dare to look back, feeling Obi-Wan next to him and the explosion of anger in the Force behind them. Whatever had happened back on Coruscant after he and Obi-Wan had left, Qui-Gon had apparently borne the brunt of it, and the righteous fury he felt rolling past him frightened Anakin more than the clones with their blasters had.

Faces rose and fell as he shoved and darted his way through the pedestrians, and then he almost ran into the side of a large, four-legged beast a primly dressed man was riding atop. The surprised curse from the rider lasted only a second as Anakin reached up and pulled him down, tossing him out of the way with the Force back into the crowd, knocking several people over back in the direction of Qui-Gon and the two troopers trying to force their way over to them. Screams went up all around them as the two clones drew their weapons and four jittery men drew on them, thinking they were the ones being attacked.

Obi-Wan was already clambering atop the nervously prancing steed and reached down to jerk Anakin up behind him. “Come on!”

He snapped the reins, hoping he was doing it right, and at the piercing whine of one of the locals’ blaster bolts shooting overhead the creature let out a loud cry and lunged off toward the forest, almost throwing both of them off into the surging, panicked crowd all around them.

Anakin held on tight and Obi-Wan gripped the pommel of the saddle with white knuckles as their mount charged aimlessly forward into the red-laced woods.

They rode through the forest so long the sun rose higher in the sky, Obi-Wan kicking the beast’s sides every time it started to slow, pushing it onward through the trees and bushes, both of them constantly looking over their shoulders at the direction they’d come from and the ominous foreboding once again returning to rise up in the back of Obi-Wan’s mind.

“Do you think we’ve lost them?” Anakin finally asked when the trees grew so thick together the animal, now panting, couldn’t make its way between them.

“We should keep going on for as long as we can,” Obi-Wan answered, sliding off the saddle as Anakin did the same. He gave a pat to the mount’s flank, as he’d read to do in one of his many books, and the animal gratefully set off at a slow trot back the way they’d came.

“The trees are so thick here I don’t think they’d be able to read us from a ship, and the further out
we get the less likely they’ll be able to fan out and find us. We’re easy to track right now,” he continued, pointing back along the trail of broken branches and trampled ferns underfoot. “I thought about this as we were riding. The last hill we crested it looked like there was a stream somewhere just up ahead, still mostly hidden by trees. If we walk to the stream and walk down along its shallows, actually inside it, we won’t leave any tracks.”

They hurried along through the forest as quickly as they could, the eerie silence of the land under the canopy broken occasionally by bird cries or the distant rustle of leaves high overhead when a particularly strong gust of wind broke through. Anakin’s heart pounded as they picked their way along past lush orange plants and tree trunks wider around than he was tall, this orgy of color and life no less unnerving to the Tatooine-born young man than the man-made perfection of Coruscant had been at first. Obi-Wan hurried alongside him, trying to outtrace his growing dread.

Finally breaking through the tree line, they shot out into a little clearing, a rich and dark vein of earth with a narrow creek running through it, shallows scattering over rocks. Red maples towered overhead, ancient trees brilliant and crimson, their fallen leaves scattered here and there in the dirt.

Obi-Wan let out a soft curse, only half-surprised even as his stomach dropped, to see Qui-Gon waiting atop a few rocks by the creek and a speeder parked in the brush behind him.

“How?” Anakin asked in a strangled voice, taking a step back as Obi-Wan whirled, looking for the clones that had come with Qui-Gon, but the forest remained silent and motionless around them.

“I knew you’d have to cross here eventually if you kept running. I simply opened my mind to the Force and let it guide me to the right stretch to wait at,” he said with the clipped tones of a man almost through with his patience, glaring over at Obi-Wan. “No clones came with me. They’re back in the town.”

“Why not?”

“We need to talk. Alone.”

“Talk about what?” Anakin spat as Qui-Gon took a long stride down off of the rocks and approached them. He halted at a healthy distance on the other side of the tiny creek, neatly blocking the direction they’d been running in until now.

“Your return to the Temple, Anakin.”

“We are not going back,” Obi-Wan declared, moving closer to Anakin.

“Ever,” Anakin added, blue eyes narrowed.

“Beyond the deceit the two of you perpetrated for years against the Council and myself, you stole a ship. You stole a ship and then… and then sold it,” Qui-Gon said as calmly as he could, though the Force spiked around him again in a furious halo. “The Order could have the two of you jailed for years. And yet, even so, here is my offer to you, Obi-Wan. Walk away right now. Walk back to the town. No one will stop you when you get there. Keep whatever credits you earned, and go. Never return to the Temple. Anakin, you will return with me and we will let this unpleasant episode go.”

Obi-Wan glared at him. “Kriff your offer. We are leaving.”

“Anakin cannot be allowed to leave the Order. We cannot risk the safety of the galaxy if he falls into the wrong hands. He must return to the Temple and the path of the Light without distractions. You must go on to Bandomeer, Obi-Wan, or away. Forever.” There was no mistaking which option Qui-Gon preferred.
“What makes you think I’d want to go back after all of this?” Anakin asked, stunned and starting to wonder if he were in some strange nightmare that only looked like real life. “Or him?”

“Anakin, it is your destiny. This is your last chance. Come with me,” Qui-Gon said, holding his hand out across the shallows that ran between them. “I swear to you what I am offering right now is more merciful than what the Council wants to do. I left the clones behind to make you and Obi-Wan this offer. Do not make me regret it, Anakin.”

“Does the Council want me dead?” Obi-Wan sneered. “Is that it?”

“No. Even as angry as they are, they do not wish your death,” Qui-Gon said, still offering his hand out across the water.

Anakin looked at Qui-Gon’s hand, remembering all of their lessons together, all of the small kindnesses his master had shown him over the years. He didn’t hate Qui-Gon, but he had never been close to him, his master always too reverent or caught up in the grand ideas of what Anakin’s fate meant for the Order to truly befriend Anakin. “What does the Council want to do?” he asked warily.

Qui-Gon studied the both of them, letting out a heavy sigh of resignation. “You are to both have your minds wiped so that you do not remember each other. At all.”

At the horrified gasps from both Anakin and Obi-Wan, Qui-Gon shook his head and lowered his hand. “I do not wish that to happen, but I am to bring you both back to the Council. Please come back willingly so that we may avoid such an unfortunate thing. There is still time for the two of you to avoid it if you just come back with me of your own free will.”

“Until they change their minds and do it to us anyway?” Obi-Wan hissed, the Force freezing into shards all around him. “You will not have us. Out of our way.”

Anakin could only gape in shock as he imagined Obi-Wan toiling away on Bandomeer with no memory of Anakin at all, just as he would sit in the Temple waiting for orders, no memory of Obi-Wan. Like puppets.

Like slaves.

Fighting back tears of rage, Anakin threw off his cloak and drew his saber, bright blue sizzling to life and catching in glints on the gurgling water of the creek. “You heard Obi-Wan. Out of our way.”

“I can’t let you leave, Anakin,” Qui-Gon said, fighting back another surge of emotion as he took in the sight of his own Padawan sinking into a ready stance across the creek. You drew your weapon on me. On me!

Qui-Gon shoved off his own cloak and let it fall to the ground, pulling his lightsaber free from his belt. He lit it, a slow slide of green light pointing down at the ground as he held his saber arm loose and reminded himself not to give in to his anger, to the shame and guilt and hurt that his own Padawan had caused him after years of care and teaching. This is my reward? This?

When Obi-Wan yanked his own cloak off and tossed it to the side, Qui-Gon was puzzled deep inside the calm he was trying so desperately to maintain. When Obi-Wan went for what Qui-Gon thought was a blaster and pulled a lightsaber out instead, the blue line of it blooming bright and cold in an offensive stance across his chest, that last surviving bit of calm snapped, swallowed up in a violent fury that coursed through him. “Where… did you… get that?” he growled, almost
choking on the words.

“Think hard,” Obi-Wan smirked, halo wreathed in ice. “You’ll figure it out.”

Snarling, Qui-Gon threw a hand out and a wall of the Force slammed into Obi-Wan, sending him sailing back to thud hard against one of the trees behind them. He slid down to the ground just as Anakin launched himself at Qui-Gon, blade spinning wildly. “Don’t touch him!”

Qui-Gon easily parried and forced Anakin back, stunned at the intent behind Anakin’s thrusts and feints. If his Padawan was holding back, he certainly didn’t seem like it.

Their boots splashed along through the creek as the two fought in a whirlwind of green and blue, Qui-Gon aiming only to injure as Anakin sought to frighten him with the threat of much worse: Anakin fought with skill beyond his years, beyond any Padawan had a right to. *He is the Chosen One.*

*I must not hurt him!*

Meeting hit for hit but with more effort than he cared to admit, Qui-Gon waited for a chance and swept his hand back and forward. Anakin was sent flying into the brush as well, branches cracking as he slid back through it in painful slaps against his body.

Obi-Wan let out a savage growl, on his feet again and bounding toward him, spinning his blade to release it in a violent swing upward toward Qui-Gon’s chest.

Qui-Gon took a long stride as he dodged it and flung Obi-Wan across the creek into another tree, rounding just in time to catch a strike from Anakin, who had jumped back on his feet and charged him, the line of his saber wild and coldly beautiful as it wove through the air.

Shoulder smarting, Obi-Wan rolled and came back upright, rejoining the fight with a furious shout as he jumped and dove at Qui-Gon, who stood aside in just enough time to let the blade flick down across his body rather than through it and then met Anakin’s overhead blow with a jarring block and shove back.

Struggling to find the quiet calm he had always easily retreated into,Qui-Gon tried to ignore the fact staring him in the face and actively trying to kill him in a double bolt of blue snapping and biting at him as he dodged and feinted, looking for a way to incapacitate either of them: *They fight like twins.*

*Anakin trained him.*

*He had to have trained him for years for him to be this good!*

The exquisite bitterness that rode in on the crest of that realization brought with it a wave of red across Qui-Gon’s vision. *For years he lied to me about all of this! His own Master! Kept in the dark like a fool! A trusting fool!*

“I only wanted what was best for you, Anakin!” he shouted, slicing out in a vicious sweep of jade to knock Obi-Wan aside as Anakin bore down on him, his Padawan’s saber sliding in a dry hiss along his own and Anakin’s face close to his. “Don’t you see?”

“No!” Anakin cried, anguish evident in the harsh blue-green light sizzling between them. “None of you did!”

Qui-Gon spun just in time to avoid a thrust of azure from behind, and Obi-Wan and Anakin danced
back as a pair to opposite sides of him like young wolves stalking a solitary animal. “Will you kill me, Anakin? Is that what you want to do?” he called out. “This is madness!”

“No! Just let us go, please!” Anakin begged, lowering his saber to talk, and deep within his icy rage Qui-Gon saw his chance to end this travesty. Qui-Gon threw himself in a saber attack aimed at Obi-Wan as he shot the Force out with his other hand, throwing Anakin back to crash against one of the larger trees behind them.

Anakin rolled to lie groaning on his side on the forest floor, trying to force himself upright and away from the dirt and the red leaves there but too dazed to sit back up. One leaf lay against his cheek, cool and smooth, as he watched the fight continue, watched in horror as Qui-Gon began taking control of the situation, driving Obi-Wan back with superior bladework and strength.

“Give up!” This is all your fault! You did this to Anakin! Qui-Gon blazed with the Force, a fury so white and hot there was only the desire to keep swinging, to bring low this serpent that had corrupted the Chosen One almost beyond hope. He started to fling Obi-Wan back with the Force rather than use his blade, sending him to crash against trees and logs. “You don’t even deserve to die by a saber!” he howled, so lost in the fire of the moment he didn’t recognize his own voice. It felt good to punish this brat, to make him suffer for all of the wrongs he had done to the Order. According to Qui-Gon's orders, Anakin had to be brought back alive.

Obi-Wan was optional.

Every time Qui-Gon threw him, Obi-Wan stumbled to his feet and kept coming, blood now tracing its way down his cheek, but something fearsome began rolling up into thick currents around him, a black swirl of the Force that seemed to rise from the earth itself and grow larger with every painful new slam of his body into the ground or the trees.

“You never cared about us, about him. Get out of our way or I will kill you,” Obi-Wan whispered in a guttural vow of hatred as the Force roiled behind him, pulsing and dark, and the next time Qui-Gon tried to lift and throw him nothing happened as his efforts sank and vanished in that cloud of black, Obi-Wan marching toward him with his teeth ground in pain and a murderous glint in his eyes.

Qui-Gon narrowed his eyes in disgust at the raw emotion pouring forth from Obi-Wan as he slid his foot back to ready another attack. “You will bring nothing but pain to Anakin! You have been corrupted by your own hate, Obi-Wan!”

“If I am, you have the Council to thank!” He lunged forward and they spun around the clearing in a new dizzying tilt of blade against blade, white clashes and searing pops of ozone on ozone. “Let us GO!”

They were close to Anakin again, and he threw himself back on his feet, dazed and trying to call his saber back to his hand.

As the blade came flying through the air to his palm, Qui-Gon broke through Obi-Wan’s defenses, forcing him back so quickly he tripped over his own feet in an effort to avoid the blade greedily sweeping through the air just shy of his throat.

Obi-Wan landed hard on his back in the dark earth and Qui-Gon whirled his blade and dove in for the kill, a stroke of green angling straight for Obi-Wan’s chest. I have you!

“NO!” Anakin shouted, stumbling over and lighting his blade as he sank to his knees in front of Obi-Wan, throwing his saber up but a split-second too late to completely block his master’s strike.
Anakin! Qui-Gon cried out in a panic through the Force. Framed in adrenaline, the moment stretched out for a long, silent eternity as all sound faded away and the green bolt of his blade fell like an arc of lightning down toward Anakin, who could only stare at the blinding light that would soon slash his head in two.

In that same eternal second, Anakin watched Qui-Gon’s face crumple in shock, felt the finest muscles of his master’s body twitch through the Force as Qui-Gon desperately pulled back as much as he could, and then a searing pain shot across Anakin’s face.

Anakin slapped a hand to his cheek and let out a tortured cry, stumbling up and back as he gripped his saber tighter, the rich smell of the earth heavy in his lungs.

YOU HURT HIM! Obi-Wan shrieked across the Force at the flash of Anakin’s pain in his soul, time slamming back into motion as he reacted on pure instinct, lunging upward to stab Qui-Gon through the chest before the master could bring his saber back down to block him.

The blue blade sank in easily through cloth and flesh in a ring the color of hot coals and the smell of burning meat.

Qui-Gon fell to his knees as Obi-Wan yanked his saber free with shaking hands, wrath rendering him unable to speak as Anakin dropped to a kneel in shock at the sight and the pain through his bond with his master.

“You will not have him!” Qui-Gon spat in rage and grief as he collapsed onto his back, every breath harsh as he panted and looked up at Obi-Wan leaning over him with eyes wide at what he had done, the master’s thoughts rushing along in vicious, unforgiving clarity. I am dying. He has killed me. He has ruined Anakin. Mocked me. All these years. He cannot have him. No. He will not have him.

No.

No!

YOU WILL NOT HAVE HIM!

The Force swelled up around Qui-Gon’s sprawled form like a tidal wave breaking on shore and he dug his fingers through the soft, dark ground, clawing aimless, deep gouges in the earth as he rolled over to sit up.

Taking a step back, too late to escape the Force crashing down over him, Obi-Wan let out a savage, feral cry as his arms and legs broke in a horrifying string of cracks and his throat and chest began to crumple in on themselves. Toppling to the ground, Obi-Wan screamed as his ribs snapped and his windpipe collapsed under the full, naked fury of Qui-Gon’s last mindless, vengeful attack.

“Obi-Wan!” Anakin screamed, the white-hot line tracing down his own face forgotten as Qui-Gon collapsed once again with a final, rattling gasp, his master limp and motionless and the ugly, brutal power that had sustained him the last few seconds of his life fading like smoke out into the Force. His body rolled down and over to land halfway in the creek, hair trailing out and a bright red leaf catching in it as it drifted by on the water.

Obi-Wan thrashed about, clutching blindly at the earth and wheezing for air as Anakin dropped to his knees next to him. “No no nonononono,” he moaned, reaching down and grabbing Obi-Wan, sending out his Force presence in a rush of heat and light so quickly it almost made him pass out with the initial wave.
You can’t die! he repeated over and over again, lost in Obi-Wan’s pain, giving all that he had to the viciously broken and torn wreck that was Obi-Wan’s body. Please! “Stay with me,” he repeated until he was hoarse, the words a simple prayer, not even hearing himself as he worked, hands tight on Obi-Wan’s shoulders as he spasmed on the ground before him.

When his own body began to cry out for relief, he redoubled his efforts and kept going, sending more and more of himself to repair the torn tissues and fragmented bone, draining all that he had into the black hole of Obi-Wan’s injuries. An unseen vortex formed around him, a powerful column of light and energy as he pulled all that he could from himself and the Force that had always hung close around him, willing himself to stay conscious through the transfer down into Obi-Wan’s body. It was like holding hands with the sun on one side and lightning on the other, harsh and painful and Anakin trembled over Obi-Wan, now silent and only aware of that great river of the Force crashing through him.

When it began to slow, his body unable to take any more and the lull allowing the first rational thought back into his mind, he was dimly aware the sun was setting overhead and Obi-Wan was still and breathing more normally below him, blissfully unconscious even as his body shuddered in continual pain. Please, please let this be enough!

“Stay with me,” he managed to whisper one last time, and then he slumped over to the ground, passing out next to him as the last thread of strength holding him upright snapped.

It was night when Obi-Wan regained consciousness, every nerve singing agony and his body awash in pain. It took a long, hard-fought battle to focus on the world around him, to realize where he was and what all of the shadows around him were.

The forest.

Qui-Gon.

Anakin.

Anakin was a dim shape lying close to him, but his Force presence told Obi-Wan that he was alive. Exhausted and drained almost to the point of death, but alive. For now.

Are we both going to die here? Obi-Wan wondered distantly as he stretched out a trembling hand to rest over Anakin’s, unable to focus any more clearly than that.

Anakin stirred and opened his eyes, his fingers twining weakly through Obi-Wan’s. The smile he gave Obi-Wan, a twitch of shadow, said that Anakin was dimly aware of the same possibility and a strange sort of peace crept across their bond. “Together,” Anakin breathed, the word almost lost in the call of crickets and frogs in the forest around them.

They lay together, the gentle touch of their fingers soothing despite all of the pain, and both drifted in and out of consciousness for long, nightmarishly hazy hours.

Obi-Wan woke the same night, or two or three later-- he had no sense of time left anymore-- to the loud grind of a ship overhead.

There were feet on the ground soon afterward, moving all around him, men speaking quietly and
angrily over him about how there were three sabers they’d found instead of the two they’d expected and how important it was someone be moved carefully.

Anakin was sleeping, his chest rising and falling so faintly it was hard to tell, but Obi-Wan was dimly aware they were talking about him.

Leave my skybrother alone… he thought in delirious terror as he tried to hold on to Anakin, willing his hand to tighten, to keep Anakin by his side, but shadows leaned down from overhead and pulled him away, Anakin’s fingers sliding out of his and into the darkness around them.

No! he pleaded silently, and then a pair of boots came to stand in front of him, shining dully in the ship lights behind them. A clone trooper knelt and frisked Obi-Wan, jostling him, and in the midst of his indescribable pain the Jedi above him spoke. Drowning in the agony searing through him at the soldier’s rough search, Obi-Wan was not able and would not be able, no matter how many times he tried in later years, to place the Jedi’s voice.

“Bag of credits, sir. Looks to be the same amount as Skywalker’s.”

“Noted. Put it on the ship, and prep Skywalker only for the flight back.”

“Yes, sir. And this one, sir? Should we put him out of his misery if we’re not taking him? He’s pretty far gone.”

“No.” A pause, and then words chosen so carefully they were bitten off. “We will leave him to the will of the Force.”

“Sir? All respect, but no one’s going to come along out here to help him. He’ll die if we leave him.”

“To the will of the Force, I said.”

“Yes, sir.”

Obi-Wan screamed inside his mind with such hatred it consumed him whole and entirely, swallowing up all there was left of him in its nightmarish abyss. His soul falling into its depths, a tiny glint in a vast, vile black deeper than the night around his body in the real world, he finally and mercifully passed out once again.

The next time he woke, his pain making time pass in the blink of an eye, it was somehow daylight again and the ship and the Jedi and the clones were gone.

Birds were singing in the trees and a shadow was standing over him, the Force around it as cold and vicious as a winter moon come to shine at midday.

“… help… me…” Obi-Wan begged.

And the shadow did.

The present.

“That day I pledged myself to the Sith, and to my master. You have an idea of the rest.”
In the safe, mundane space of the cockpit of their little ship, nothing but hyperspace outside, Ahsoka remained utterly silent as Obi-Wan finished his story, telling the last of it quietly and wearily to the controls in front of them. He hadn’t been able to meet her eyes midway through, and now he sat back and stared at the ceiling, waiting for her reaction, as the hyperdrive steadily counted down another hour gone on their way back to Coruscant and whatever fate awaited them both there.

“Obi-Wan, I…” She reached out and wrapped her hand around his, wanting to say something, anything, but every word she could think of tiny and pitiful in the face of the horrors he had gone through. “You didn’t mean to kill Qui-Gon. You weren’t thinking. And he was trying to kill you… Anakin will understand that. He didn’t want to go back either.”

Blinking and looking down, surprised by the warm touch, Obi-Wan looked at her hand over his as if he had never seen such a thing before. “Anakin. Anakin still doesn’t remember me.”

The broken whisper brought tears to Ahsoka’s eyes, and she fought them and hopelessness back. “He will. He has to.”

“He won’t. He would have by now,” Obi-Wan said, and she could feel black despair rising around him like an inky tide. “I need you to understand something, Ahsoka.” He looked over at her, anger returning sharp and bright to his yellow eyes. “I am going back to free him. No matter the cost. I have murdered men before in cold blood, and I will murder again, as many as I have to to rescue him. With no hesitation.” A chime went off on the board and he turned to it, tapping in a few commands to reset it.

She sat back, blinking and trying to find a response, but he held up his hand and continued, voice tired but firm as he checked another line of lights. “You are not like me, Ahsoka. And I don’t want you to be. When we get back your mission will be to get us a speeder from the on-site hangar bay and meet me at the top of the Council tower. That’s it. I’m going to face the Council alone.”

“You can’t!” Ahsoka exclaimed, unable to believe what she was hearing. “You won’t stand a chance against them!”

“If Anakin is unconscious I will attempt to just take him and go. If he is awake… how things go will depend on him. And there are only four of them on-planet, they said.” Obi-Wan shrugged, glancing over at her. “It’s better than the twelve it used to be,” he said with gallows humor, his grin hollow and hard.

“After all of this Anakin will remember you. He has to.”

“Yes, or… or it will be five against one.” Obi-Wan closed his eyes as he spoke, feeling her anguish through their bond, a mirror of his own.

Holy crap, after five months of writing this story this scene, The Infamous Flashback Scene, is finally written and posted. Man, fingers crossed y'all like it!

THANK YOU so much for your kudos, comments, and support!!! Let me know what you think, how you think the story will end, anything. :D You know me. I love hearing from y'all! <3
Updates: One more update and this story is over! I can't believe it!

I'm planning to post it sometime roughly during Christmas week, so it could be anywhere from the 20th to the 23rd. It's likely to be another monster and I want time to write, do rewrites and edit so I can send this story out the best I can. Thanks again so much for reading! <3
Hello readers,

Merry Christmas, Happy Hanukkah, and a wonderful holiday season and Happy New Year to all of you! It’s been a hard year all around, all the way up to yesterday (please keep dear Carrie Fisher in your thoughts and prayers), but I hope for peace and happiness for you and yours moving into the new year.

We’re finally here, the last chapter ever of this fic! I cannot express how grateful to all of you I am for your encouragement and support of this story, some of you from the very first update back in late June! Your kudos and comments (even a playlist!) kept me going when life and work and my own uncertainty got in the way and I cannot thank all of you enough.

Another giant thank you to my girlfriend and fellow fic writer Fireflyfish, who has patiently listened to me babble about the pair we nicknamed “Arev and Amekin” (Amnesiac Anakin) for the last six months, gave ideas and advice, and helped me edit almost every chapter. You are a goddess among women, baby! <3

Despite writing off and on over the years, and having several unfinished original works lying around, The World Undone is the first solo novel-length piece I have ever finished in my life. It’s an incredible feeling and so inspiring when it comes to working on my own novels and it wouldn’t have been possible without you readers. We authors are nothing without readers to take the hand we hold out and come along with us on our stories. Thank you, thank you, thank you!

Before we get started, since I’ve had people ask, will I be writing more Obikin after this? Of course! Come follow me on Tumblr or subscribe to me here on AO3 for exact updates, but here’s my schedule for the foreseeable future:

Tomorrow, Christmas Day: First chapter of a ballet dance AU (as fluffy as I personally can get, drama, sex), a Christmas present for Fireflyfish based on a prompt she wrote and that I let the cat out of the bag on already (doh!). Probably 10-12 chapters.

Early-mid January: The Twins (dark, sex and violence canon-divergent AU based on this drabble), no idea yet how many chapters but definitely not a one-shot.

Early-mid January: Modern AU (drama, personal demons, sex, growing together) with skilled surgeon Ben Kenobi saving the life of war vet Anakin after a brutal car wreck that takes his arm and almost kills him. Likely another long-form one, 15 or so chapters?

So, all of that said, let’s get on with the show! Here is the conclusion and epilogue of The World Undone. I’m admittedly nervous, hope you like it, and thank you once again for being part of this with me. <3 <3 <3
In the grand chamber of the High Council of the Jedi Order, an artificial night fell as the simple black-out screens fell over the tall, wide windows that ringed the room, the sun vanishing to leave only shadows and the dim, low light of a few lamps set in the walls. The three absent Masters, hazy holo silhouettes glowing more strongly against the stone of their chairs in the gloom that descended, looked on with somber faces as Masters Windu and Krell bowed to them and the two other Masters in the room, Koth and Mundi.

"Fellow Guardians of the Light, Keepers of the Order, Grandmaster Yoda and Masters Narsa and Jakan, we have brought the Chosen One back alive as ordered," Windu intoned, his rich voice a low echo against the high ceiling, waiting until the privacy screens were down completely before gesturing back to the doors behind him. Two of the clone troopers that had accompanied Krell and him to Mustafar came in, the brittle ebony dust of that world still on their boots as they pushed in a med gurney with a sheet draped over it. It drifted silently over the tile, the clank of the men's armor louder than it was.

As Windu began to give his formal report of the horrid scene they'd found on Mustafar to the wavering blue shadows, Krell motioned for the soldiers to stop when they reached the center of the room and folded the sheet back to reveal the tanned face and trademark scar of Anakin Skywalker. His eyes were closed and his breathing regular, but his brows furrowed and relaxed and his jaw clenched as if he were fighting a nightmare.

On Windu's orders the men had already exchanged the Force-proof binders for more conventional restraints in preparation for what was to come, the Council fearing any interference with the intricate process about to take place, and Skywalker's hands lay limp and curled together on his stomach under the sheet, bound tightly by plasticene straps. He appeared oddly fragile, younger than his years, and Krell felt a twinge of pity for him before he remembered the hateful thought Skywalker had projected at him on the ship.

Snorting dismissively, Krell leaned over him to the clones, pointing at them and then the door. "You two go downstairs and tell the regular guards they're off-duty. Replace them, rotate out as needed, and do not let anyone up here until you receive word from us."

Mundi interrupted from his seat, waving a hand as Windu continued behind him to Yoda and the others off-planet. "And remember, under orders of Grandmaster Yoda himself do not interrupt us for any reason. No matter what you see, hear, or feel, we are not to be disturbed while we help Skywalker… work through the loss of his Padawan."

"Yes, sir."

Krell raised an eyebrow, wondering how interesting things had gotten last time they'd gone into Skywalker's mind, but Mundi didn't seem to notice. "Comm that no-interference message out to the Temple Guards and the rest of the security forces as soon as you take up your post. I want it understood perfectly and without question we are not to be disturbed for any reason even if there seems to be a problem. We will handle it. Tano's death is not in the records yet and we don't want talk and rumors until Skywalker is ready."

"Understood, sir," one clone said as they both saluted, no hesitation or question in their near-identical voices but a trace of unease at the strange air beginning to build in the sunless gulf of the chamber.

*Good, Krell thought. At least they do what they're told.*
Once the clones left, their boots leaving faint black marks behind, Koth stood and walked over to stand next to Krell, examining with bloodless interest the unconscious Skywalker as Windu finished the last of his report.

"I do wonder, why are we doing this here?" Krell asked under his breath, motioning around to the lofty space now only lit by scattered lamps and the unearthly blue glow of the holo projectors. "There have to be more discreet places for something of this nature. Of this importance."

Koth gave a patient smile, still looking down at Skywalker, the shadows of his crown of horns falling harsh and dark along his face. "Do not fear, Krell. All is as the Force wills it."

"I don't fear. I just like certainty. There must be a reason for doing it here. Why?"

"There are old legends that say the Temple was built over a Sith shrine, as was often done in ancient times to show complete victory over a world. Have you heard them?" he replied quietly, instinctively making a good-luck sign over his blade arm at the mention of the Order's age-old enemies.

"Yes," Krell said, puzzled at the seemingly random question. "The Initiates like to whisper about it. It's supposedly down at the very heart of the Temple."

"Well, since you're on the Council now one more legend won't hurt," Koth murmured, pinching the sheet and dragging it the rest of the way off Skywalker to pile in a dry rustle on the floor next to the gurney. "They say that when the Council Chamber was constructed they used an altar block from that shrine and buried it in the floor in the center of this room, below where we stand right now, a symbol of the Jedi overcoming the Sith in all ways. The more esoteric version of this legend claims that every time a Jedi treads on it the Sith lose more power in the universe."

Krell stared down at the smooth flooring beneath him and the black lines of floral designs tracing along it in both fascination and repulsion, as if something might come crawling out of it while Koth continued. "We Council members, Guardians of the Light, are of course strong enough to naturally resist any influence such an artifact may have had, but when it came time to use the old ways, the purification of the mind that was needed for young Anakin, its influence was regrettably necessary. The most ancient rituals often call for both the light and the dark in balance with each other."

"All of you touched the dark to do this to him?" Krell was more intrigued than shocked, but kept his tone appropriately stunned.

"No," Koth snapped, drawing up taller. "We did the ritual and simply… well… called upon whatever echoes of the past may be in this room and allowed it to permeate certain aspects of the ritual."

"Gentlemen," Mundi called from his chair before Krell could ask any more questions, and the pair turned back to face the other two Masters present and three that were not. "It is time to discuss how we will proceed."

They moved and sat in their chairs, all seven somberly reciting the Jedi Code in the darkened room as they watched the still form of the young man they'd put so much work and so many years into, the savior of the Order.

When the last words had faded away, Grandmaster Yoda cleared his throat, distance and the signal making the sound a garbled rasp.
"A difficult time this is. Lost is Padawan Tano. Broken is Knight Skywalker, the Chosen One. Dark times these are."

The Masters concurred, some folding their arms as others leaned back into their chairs.

"Know what we must do, all of us. Purified, Skywalker must be once more. Master Mundi, while the basics they have been told, explain further, please, for our new Council members Krell, Jak'an, and Narsa."

Mundi bowed from his seat and folded his hands in his lap as if he were about to explain the finer points of gravity wells or an ancient philosophical text, something abstract and remote from the young man at the center of the ring they formed. "You have all heard of what we are doing, removing attachments to save the purity of mind needed for the Chosen One to walk fully in the Light. The last time this was done, ten were willing to sacrifice, for a time until the effects wore off, some of their own purity in the Force to complete this most necessary task. The other two were off-planet and unable to assist, but agreed with the idea and purpose."

"Serve the Light, the Chosen One must," Yoda added to firm assent from the others.

"What exactly is the task?" Narsa asked from what looked to be his tent on an Outer Rim world, his Twi'lek head-tails shifting as he tilted his head in curiosity.

"Last time, with ten of us, it was to forge new memories to overlay his old ones so that he would keep as much as possible of himself but no longer remember a… deep attachment he harbored for a young man now dead. A dangerous attachment that would have led to ruin," Mundi told them, calm and sure of his words as he recounted the details. "There was no way to individually sift through the entire lifetime of all of his memories to find all of the ones that contained that young man, so blanket 'truths' were created instead and laid down one layer at a time over the others. He was from Coruscant. He had no friends growing up. He had no attachments. He was utterly devoted to his Master and the Order. We let these settle down over his mind and take root over a period of several days, like a heavy snow fall, if you will."

"You saw a hint of this technique when Skywalker and then Tano came to us recently," Windu added, hands behind his back. "That only took two of us to correct a single morning's memory."

"Ah, yes," Jak'an said after a moment, folding his arms into his sleeves. "I was there for that."

Narsa gestured around. "I wasn't, unfortunately. So that is what we do? Repeat that process?"

"No. No longer possible, such finesse is," Yoda declared solemnly. "Even with all seven of us, such a thing would not be possible with such small numbers. Crude this time will be. But effective."

"So what exactly are we doing?" Krell inquired, glancing over at Skywalker's slender body lying limp on the gurney.

"Four of you present there are and immediately begin the purification must before his mind cracks further. Willing to help save the Chosen One, are you, fellow Masters?" Yoda queried in a low croak as he lifted his gimer stick and pointed through the vastness of space to Skywalker.

"Of course," Mundi bowed, his gesture immediately echoed by Krell and Koth and finally, slowly, by Windu.

Krell darted a glance over at him, remembering his words on Mustafar, but Yoda seemed not to notice or was used to caution from his unofficial second-in-command. Sitting up taller in his seat, wherever he was off-world, Yoda next pointed at each of them with his gimer stick. "Much harsher
this purification will be. Not like the subtle layering we last time laid down. Erase all of his emotional memories this purification will. A flood, yes. Strong and powerful. Scour away all of the dirt, it will. New and strong in the light once again the Chosen One will be."

"Will he still be able to give his speeches?" Krell pointed out, thinking out loud as he bowed to the room from his chair. "Forgive my questions, Masters. This is my first time to be involved in such a thing and I am only thinking of the sanctity of the Order and our mission to help the galaxy. Will he be able to fight? What about his memories of Tano? What will the HoloNet say if he acts differently after this?"

"You will see when we move into the deeper part of the ritual," Mundi offered to reassuring sounds from the other veteran Masters. "He will follow any orders given, speeches included, and simple, factual knowledge like his lightsaber training and experience will remain untouched. But yes, as recent as it is we should be able to leave alone the bare knowledge of Tano and her death and Maul's death, preventing any desire for revenge. He will likely become silent, but that can be explained away easily enough as a Master traumatized by the loss of his Padawan."

"Give up their names and voices, the Temple Guards do, to protect the walls of the Temple," Yoda said to the room sagely, noticing Master Narsa's increasingly uneasy expression. "Brave they are. Selfless, yes? Thankful to them we are. In the same way give up his name and voice, Skywalker will, to become a guardian of the Order. Of the galaxy. For his sacrifice, eternally grateful to him and humbled by him we are. No other way there is. For him or for the Order."

He lifted a wrinkled hand and intoned his version of the age-old phrase the Council used to declare discussions amongst themselves closed. "Walk in the Light, we do."

"And the Light walks in us," the others responded, some with more enthusiasm than others but all of their voices echoing in the dim chamber as they lifted hands as well.

"Soon as we can, the remaining three of us will return to Coruscant to perform the ritual one more time and make sure it is securely in place, yes?"

Jakan and then Narsa agreed, the latter far more quickly this time and clearly already talking himself into his participation. Krell hid a smile at how concerned the young Master was with the morality of this particular issue when so much more was at stake. And remember, young one, what Yoda wants, Yoda gets. Go against him at your own risk.

"Good luck, we wish you four," Yoda said. "May the Force be with you." The three Masters' holos flickered out of sight like otherworldly candles extinguished by an unseen wind, the room's lights automatically brightening just enough to make up for their absence.

"Let us begin," Mundi stood, pointing to Skywalker, the shifting of his robes a whisper in the gloom. They moved to stand around all four sides of Skywalker's gurney without speaking, imposing figures looming over Anakin's unconscious form as they sank into a group meditation.

It took time to harmonize their thoughts around the single goal that Mundi allowed to pass from his own consciousness into theirs: unity and peace, strength and calm. We will need all of our focus to counterbalance the chaos Skywalker's mind is likely to contain.

The eternal night of the Council room remained unchanged as time passed, as the four of them firmly wove themselves into the Force presences of the others until they felt strong and secure, like a mountain climber finding strong handholds as he scales a cliff.

"Ready," Windu declared for the group, the word foreign and harsh after such a long absence of
sound, and Koth nodded over to Krell, who stood across from him on Anakin's other side. "Wake him and keep him calm while we begin focusing in on his mind."

Krell looked down impassively at Skywalker, feeling confident, feeling certain, prodding at the human's consciousness with his own, sending a quiet word down through the troubled waters of the young man's mind. *Wake, Skywalker*, he commanded, tinging his voice with the Force.

Skywalker shifted and moaned, blinking and staring up at them all without any kind of recognition in his blue eyes for the four men ranged like sentinels around him. His bound hands twitched absentmindedly as he did, long fingers clenching and relaxing in utter confusion.

"Good," Krell murmured, slowly waving a hand in front of his face as he sent more of the Force through his words. "Remain still, Skywalker."

As his hand passed across Skywalker's face, its shadow obscuring his features in a cloud of black on tanned skin, Krell felt a bizarre sense of reflection, as if his words were coming back to him.

He had only the faintest impression of a wall inexplicably there between him and the young man on the gurney as clarity returned to Skywalker's eyes with a low, murderous hiss.

"No," the Chosen One growled.

And then Skywalker's bound hands were up and clenching the air and Krell was in too much sudden, paralyzing agony to realize the crumpling, cracking sounds he was hearing were coming from his own throat. *Can't breathe! Why can't I breathe?!*

He crashed to the floor, barely aware of the stunned looks of shock and horror on the other Masters' faces as he struggled with all four arms at his throat, his entire world reduced to the beautifully adorned lines of the floor and blunt, suffocating pain.

The last thing Krell heard before he died was Mundi shouting, "Together! Focus! NOW!" *That's the first time I've ever actually heard Mundi afraid,* came the distant, marooned thought before swells of pain and blackness swallowed him forever.

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Obi-Wan strode down one of the worker hallways of the Temple next to Ahsoka, both of them in borrowed sets of Jedi robes taken from one of the many storage units found along the vast network of worker corridors. In a Temple over a thousand years old, four years was the blink of an eye and Obi-Wan had been relieved to find things almost exactly the same as he had left them. It had taken more effort to balance with the Force and cut through the worker door that led into the Temple-across a chasm much smaller and less intimidating now than it had been in his memories- than it had been to find their robes.

"How do you know they'll take him to the Council chamber? Wouldn't that be the worst place to take him?" Ahsoka asked from the cover of her hood, glancing over at Obi-Wan.

"I know, but that's where they did this last time. I know they did."

"How?"

"Holonews channel 434.1, report 32.068," he said almost to himself, reciting words he knew by
heart and seeing the grainy images they went with rise in his mind to overlap the bare walls they passed by. "The Jedi High Council emerged today from their chamber high above the Jedi Temple and Coruscant, ending a sequestered and symbolic three days of meditation, mourning, and introspection over the loss of one of their brightest knights, a human man named Qui-Gon Jinn, to one of the Sith, a rare and ancient enemy of the Jedi."

Glaring ahead, his mouth a tight line as he recalled the next part, he pointed them down another hall and continued, the cold line of words faltering when Ahsoka put her hand on his arm, the weight of it warm and soothing. "The… The knight's Padawan, or apprentice, a young human man named Anakin Skywalker, survived the attack and joined the Council for this impressive tribute to his master, emerging with the Council members today after they finished their private mourning rituals. We're told the ceremonies ended on a hopeful note by lifting Skywalker to the status of his lost master," he told the long corridor in a voice empty of emotion. "The Council told us that they have high hopes for the new knight, who has declared his immediate intent to step into his master's place as one of the brave defenders of the Republic and the Galaxy. We wish him luck, and, as the Jedi say, may the Force be with him."

Ahsoka's throat tightened as he spoke until she couldn't herself, her emotions bottlenecks down in her chest in a nasty flare of rage and despair, and they fell back into silence as she followed him, the pair careful to drop back or go a different way any time they heard voices ahead. Is it wrong I want to hurt them?

It doesn't feel wrong.

What felt like a lifetime later, they came to an intersection and he pulled her back out of sight of it, Ahsoka confused because she saw no one in any direction this time. "What is it?"

"We're almost to the edge of the Temple and the path to the hangar bay. This is where we split up, Ahsoka. Do you remember the directions I gave you?"

"Yeah. I should go down this way and turn at the first left and then the second right. And use my saber to open the door back out into the hall if it won't do so when I hit the small black override button."

"Yes." He kept his hand on her arm, squeezing it once and then again as he tried to coax the words out of himself. "I… I wanted to say thank you. For everything."

She frowned, not liking the new, icy brightness in his eyes. "Thank me later. We are going to get Master back."

"I hope so, my dear. If we don't-"

"I don't want to hear that!"

"-this is for you." He held out a small holo recorder, not unlike the one she'd used to record herself talking about the Council what felt like a lifetime before.

"What is this?" she asked, taking it reluctantly and looking back up at him.

"I recorded it on the ship. The first part is for you. I talked about account details, credit stashes, safe houses, everything I inherited from my master. It's all yours, if I don't make it out of this."

"Keep it," she said, pushing it back at him, but he deftly caught her wrist and held it with surprising gentleness. "The second part is for Anakin, if you two get away today. If he remembers me. Or if… if you can free him one day if we don't today."
She swore in Togruta under her breath and pulled her wrist free, tucking the smooth lines of the player into her borrowed robes. "Fine. But it's bad luck to make stuff like this, you know."

His mouth twisted in a hollow grin. "My luck ran out a long time ago, my dear."

She took off her hood and tilted her head, vainly trying to find something to say that would encompass how she felt about him, about Anakin and about everything that had happened. "Thank you. Thank you for fighting for him for all this time."

"I love him."

"I know," she smiled, biting her lip to keep tears from welling up, and then threw herself on him for a tight hug. "You can tell him that yourself when we rescue him."

"Let's hope so," came the muffled words over the top of her head as he hugged her back and closed his eyes. "Thank you, Ahsoka, for everything."

"Comm me when you get up there."

"Yes, when I get off the lift. Good luck, Ahsoka."

"You too, Obi-Wan."

She gave him one last brave grin and walked away without glancing back, her borrowed robe billowing out behind her. He watched her go, heart tight in his chest and resisting the urge to call her back and hug her one more time. You are just as brave as Anakin, my dear.

When she had disappeared, he strode off himself, working his way back deeper into the central part of the Temple, down routes long forgotten but instantly remembered. The faint, sterile scent of harsh cleaners, the dim yellow bulbs overhead: for a moment Obi-Wan was nineteen again, in a mechsuit, the high collar brushing his neck and his pockets laden with small tools, hurrying on toward nothing more than a shift he was late for.

He clenched his jaw and walked onward, attempting to center himself in reality as it stood, on the heavy softness of his brown outer robe on his shoulders and the hood draped over his face, on the incredible irony that here he was, finally in appearances at least, a Jedi in the Jedi Temple.

A Jedi on my way to kill however many of the Council I can before they kill me, he thought with a humorless twitch of his mouth, not quite a smile, before the expression faded to one of dark serenity. Anakin doesn't remember me. He never will. But I will save him.

With the end of his life in sight, memories crowded in thick and heavy around him, not the most important ones but even more bittersweet for the simplicity of them: Anakin erasing and redrawing the landing gear on one of the ship sketches he'd later put up on the ceiling over his bunk. The first time Obi-Wan piloted a ship alone, the engines shoving him back into the chair as it rose into the Coruscanti sky. He and Anakin watching the sun rise from a high roof on Mos Espa, Anakin's head warm on his shoulder and his fine hair tickling Obi-Wan's neck. The tangy sweetness of the citrus fruits Obi-Wan had liked to eat as he lay in his bed, reading about the Force or Jedi history.

Obi-Wan let each memory come and go like mourners in a receiving line at a funeral, let each one come up to him and hug him and murmure sympathy to him. It was not the same as having friends to see him off, on this last journey he would ever take, and he let the sorrow and regret this realization brought wash over him and dye him in their colors. His shields remained firmly in place,
but the Force swirled inside him, agitated and restless.

_I will be the hunter that Master always said we were. The hunter I was when I struck down that bastard Tiin._

_I will have no fear._

_I will have only hatred._

He repeated the Sith code to himself under his breath, whispering the last part as he took another turn further into the Temple: "The Force shall free me."

"How long you think they'll be up there?" CT-2213 asked the other clone standing by the lift doors once they'd commed out the appropriate instructions to their counterparts in the Temple. The only way up to the Council room was at the end of two long, sunlit passages that came at it from opposite directions, a lonely stretch of beige and tan that allowed anyone guarding it a long line of sight in either direction out into the larger halls and constant foot traffic of Jedi and droids, visitors and guests.

"No idea," CT-5997 shrugged. "But from the sound of it we'll get a nice chunk of credits and leave out of this assignment."

Checking both ways first, CT-2213 nodded upward and lowered his voice, his helmet shining in the warm overhead lights. "What do you think they're really doing up there?"

"No idea and don't want to know. Smarter that way." He stood taller at attention, catching movement down the hall over CT-5997's shoulder. "Jedi incoming."

They both straightened as the Jedi swirled toward them in a billow of brown and unbleached linen. He came to a halt in front of them, not removing his hood, the folds of it shifting as he lowered his hidden eyes to study their dirty boots. "Gentlemen," he said in a cool greeting, moving to take a step forward but blocked as they slid in front of him.

"Sorry, sir," CT-2213 responded. "No one's allowed up until we're ordered otherwise."

The man tilted his head, the hood sliding again. "I'm here from the Halls of Healing to assist with the... patient. Forgive my lack of healer robes. It was considered prudent I not stand out."

CT-5997 traded a look with CT-2213. "We can't comm up or let you up, sir. Sorry, sir. The Masters were very clear on this. They are not to be disturbed."

"There must have been some mistake, gentlemen," the Jedi said, voice too cold for the pleasant tones he was using. "It is critical I join them. Shall I, well, shall I prove I am part of this assignment?"

"Well..." CT-2213 began, peering past him both ways to check that the corridors were empty all the way back to where they joined the main ones. "Beg your pardon, sir, but would you?"

"You went to Mustafar to rescue Skywalker and found him... ranting... and his Padawan dead. So you shocked him and continued to do so all the way back. Which is why I am here." He lifted his
chin, and for a moment CC-5997 could have sworn twin flickers of yellow marred his eyes in the colorless shadows of his hood. "Tell me, gentlemen, how many times did you shock him?"

CT-2213 shifted his weight nervously from one foot to the other, glancing at CT-5997. "Four times?"

"No, I think it was five. Yeah, five," he answered before turning back to the Jedi, wanting to make sure the healer had the right information. "Five, sir."

The man remained completely still and expressionless, the only movement on his face his eyebrow lifting. "And so you see the need for a healer, I would hope."

"Well, uh…"

"The Masters… sir…"

"Hmm," the man said almost to himself, ignoring their stuttering as if he were standing alone in the hall. It had a singularly unsettling effect on both of the soldiers. "I have an idea. This is the only way up, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why don't you come with me?" he offered politely, smiling with sharp, white teeth. "We'll ride up together. That way you can receive a reassurance from the Masters themselves and then return with no delay. With this the only way up, no one will be able to accuse you of abandoning your post."

"Yes, sir," CT-5997 agreed cautiously he worked through the logic of it, CT-2213 consenting as well when he couldn't see any real issues with the idea. Clearly the healer was a detail the Masters had forgotten to mention in their rush to get started on whatever this was, and the last twenty-four hours had been unsettling, too steeped in unseen currents the clones could barely sense. The sooner they got this latest reminder of such things handled and moved along, the better.

CT-2213 keyed in the lift code and when it arrived they all stepped in together, the door sliding shut behind them.

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When the lift doors slid open again into the hallway Obi-Wan had last passed through in angry tears four years prior, the acrid burn of ozone rolled out past him and into the sterile emptiness of the passage.

The doors to the Council lay at the end, tall and unadorned, and in the oppressive silence that let his rage roar ever higher he threw the dark brown robe off to pile haphazardly over the bodies at his feet and stalked toward them, snapping his saber back on as he did, its red glow dyeing the light linen of his clothes and his skin and the face of the Jedi that never was as he came to bring his vengeance on those who had made it that way.

There was a pulsing, ominous swell in the Force as he drew nearer, a haphazard beat like an avalanche echoing down a canyon, and he sensed Anakin's presence shot through it in black veins of desperation. Have they started already?!

No! Please, no!
He slapped the comm on his wrist to signal Ahsoka and broke into a run the rest of the way, caution burned away in the writhing of the Force around him, and skidded through the open doors with heart pounding and throat tight in shock at what the scene before him.

There in the very middle of the darkened cavern of the Council chamber sat Anakin, tall and proud like an offering on an altar or the religious icon such a sacrifice would be made to. The utter stillness of his body, the graceful way his hands were raised to either side as he looked down one, would be beautiful if it weren’t for the guttural choking sounds coming from the three Masters on their knees all around him and the corpse bent in impossible angles before him on the floor.

Anakin turned slowly toward the sound of Obi-Wan's footsteps and the garish red light of his saber that shone forth like a lantern in this macabre nightmare version of the Council room, his fine profile as lovely as it had ever been, and Obi-Wan saw that his eyes were gold, as bright as molten ore in the shadows of the chamber. Death, the look promised, as the three men struggled at his feet and the wave of pure, primal hatred uncoiled toward him, Anakin too far into the void to see anything more than the clothing Obi-Wan wore. Death to all Jedi.

He is gone. Gone forever. Obi-Wan took a dream-like step forward, powerless but unafraid, and held Anakin's gaze with his own as the ugly, mindless thundercloud of the Force pulled him toward Anakin, nothing left in Obi-Wan's heart but a sorrow deeper than words at his utter failure and a love so strong it somehow cut more viciously than the sorrow.

Anakin tilted his head, one wavy lock falling into his eyes, and the storm front came to a halt even as it climbed up Obi-Wan, barely brushing Obi-Wan's cheek as the worst of it began to dissipate, something forcing its way through Anakin's mindless anger to trigger the faintest conscious thought.

The harsh choking sounds of the Masters dropped to relieved, hoarse gasps for air as the rage around Anakin's relentless attack weakened and his mouth opened, lips barely forming the words through his shock. "Sky… Skybrother?"

Obi-Wan swallowed, mouth dry as a desert, and tried to speak as Anakin blinked at him, true recognition sparking those newly yellow eyes.

Not for Arev.

For Obi-Wan.

"How much do you remember?" Obi-Wan dared to ask in the ghost of a whisper as the weight of the last dark, lonely four years of his life shot up to loom over him, unsteady and dangerous and ready to crush him into nothing depending on Anakin's answer.

Anakin took a moment, lost in the waves of the Force crashing around him, beyond pain, beyond everything. "Everything." He gave him a hesitant, stunned smile as if he was remembering how, the expression unearthly in the midst of the horror around him. "I remember everything."

Obi-Wan let out a choked sob as the Masters fumbled on the floor, trying to regain their feet and staring in disbelief at Obi-Wan through the gloom of the chamber as they tried to understand how such a thing could be possible.
"I want them dead, skybrother," Anakin told him, voice calm and serene, and his beatific smile grew wider and hungrier and as frightening as the one beginning on Obi-Wan's face as sudden, murderous exhilaration coursed through the both of them. "All of them."

"Yes. All of them," Obi-Wan promised, grip tightening on his saber as their love and hatred swirled through the room, and in the stark red glare of his blade they both gazed down as one at the three men stumbling upright.

Windu seemed more coordinated than the others and Anakin had just enough time to narrow his eyes before Windu shot out at Obi-Wan, blade igniting in a biting snap through the air and startling him into a quick retreat across the room. "Keep him under!" Windu shouted in desperation back at the other two Masters as he feinted at Obi-Wan, his violet strikes wider than usual but just as deadly for their strength.

Anakin lashed out with brute hatred but Koth and Mundi were already rising, just enough strength left to give them the edge as their own Force presences fought back against him, merging and shoving his own power back in desperate gusts. He struck again and again but the pure hatred achieved by empty, perfect instinct was gone, tainted by worry and fear for himself and for Obi-Wan, and Koth and Mundi were growing stronger by the second, their unspoken commands to stop, to calm, to sleep, battering his mind as across the room Windu came at Obi-Wan with his trademark, terrifying precision.

The Masters' attacks scraped along Anakin's mind like sleet, icy and razor-sharp as they came and went, whittling away his resistance bit by bit. Hands trembling in the air just a few inches from theirs, he slumped back onto the gurney, falling onto his side on the cool padding of the gurney and gasping for breath, trying to roll away from their contorted faces and clenched jaws.

"You will submit, Skywalker!" Mundi ordered, voice hoarse and rough as he and Koth hastily worked as one to weave strands of the Force around the three of them, ones that would keep Skywalker's unpredictable flashes of power confined to them and away from interfering with Windu.

"Submit!" Koth barked. "Now!"

"No," he moaned, writhing on the gurney and eyes smoldering like setting suns as he watched Windu and Obi-Wan fight. "No!"

Pressed up against the windows on the far side of the chamber, Obi-Wan dodged a powerful sweep from Windu, the purple line of his saber slicing through the air so close to Obi-Wan's face a lock of his hair curled back in smoke and singed ends.

"I hate you!" Obi-Wan screamed, riding a wave of his hatred past his fear, throwing himself at the Master and bloodlust singing through him to land strikes like sizzling hail against Windu's blade.

Undeterred, Windu strode forward in a bold series of stabbing strikes that almost found their mark as Obi-Wan lost himself in the beautiful terror of mindless battle, of nothing more than his hands and body moving to a song he didn't dare listen too closely to.

There was only light and ozone until a tortured moan and wavering pulse of the Force hit him from behind, a candle flame guttering in the wind: Anakin!

"Skybrother!" Obi-Wan shouted without looking back as he slid under a wide sweep and rolled back up into a defensive stance, slamming his saber down and forcing Windu to dance back out of reach. "Fight! You have to fight!"
Anakin let out a savage growl and strained against the power of the two Masters roughly keeping him in place, their hands clenching in the air as they shifted and pushed the Force everywhere he tried to reach out to Obi-Wan with it, corralling it back into the rough air around the three of them. He lashed out, trying to choke them, but they were ready this time and slid their minds easily through his wild, unfocused attack, pushing aside his attempts with sweat rolling from their brows but successful nonetheless.

Windu kept Obi-Wan away from the others, stalking him with every step he took, the unforgiving strikes of his Vaapad style as brutal and beautiful as Obi-Wan's desperate dance of instinct. "How did you live?" Windu spat in disgust, their sabers crossed and a bloody twilight of red and purple harsh on their faces. "I saw you on Takodana! You were dying! There was no way you could have survived that!"

"You." Ice radiated out from Obi-Wan's soul to freeze in crushing blocks against his heart and he thrust forward, shoving Windu back with a new wave of strangling hate and crimson slashes. "It was you!" he grunted.

"This time you die!" Windu spat back, the two of them hacking away at each other in a brutal whirlwind of light and ozone across the room, Windu's saber dragging on a backspin across one of the long windows and shattering it in a storm of glass outward into the sky.

Wind and light flooded in, blinding all of them for just a second, and Koth felt a twitch in Anakin's Force halo as Anakin forced himself to sit up in an awkward throw of his shoulders.

Not an attack outward: a drop, a reach downward.

To Krell's body on the floor.

Unsure of what was happening, Koth had just enough time to recognize the glinting lines of a saber hilt flying up into Anakin's hands and then there was only pain, bright and ruthless and hard in the middle of his chest as Anakin ignited his saber directly into it.

On the other side of Anakin, Mundi watched Koth's agonized face, contorted by the blue glow of Anakin's saber, drop out of sight and leaped away himself just in time to miss the searing edge of the blade as Anakin yanked it free and swung it around, stumbling down off of the gurney as he did.

Lighting his own saber, hands shaking but heart cold and still from shock, Mundi retreated away, both Masters now in the middle of the room with Anakin and Obi-Wan circling them from opposite sides, feet lost in the windblown dust now blowing through the chamber. Anakin flicked the blade up and snapped his bonds in a sizzle of smoke, shaking the remnants loose from his wrists as he kept his baleful glare on Mundi.

"Give up, Skywalker!" the Master shouted furiously, no longer sure if he could honor his vow to keep and protect the Chosen One no matter what the Prophecy said, unable to comprehend how all of this was happening.

"No!" Anakin pursued him, striking out with thoughtless abandon, so much more powerful than Mundi had ever believed he could be. They fought in their own blue reflection of the same fight happening on the other side of the room, sabers clashing and whining through the air in deadly fans of azure, Anakin's glowing eyes unnatural and frightening through the waves of light. "You took him from me! You took my whole life from me!"

"Your life is ours!" Mundi snarled as they whirled past each other, blades snapping at legs and
arms but finding only the other's weapon darting out just in time. "We gave you everything!"

Anakin howled and charged him just as a shrieking crash echoed out behind them, the backlit silhouette of a small ship grinding against the side of the tower and sending a shudder through the walls.

Startled, Mundi flinched just enough Anakin's blade ground past his defenses and straight through his side. Anakin gave a brutal cry of triumph, of vengeance, no regret in his new, strange eyes as he slashed upward and out, cutting Mundi down where he stood as the ship lurched to a halt and the dust and smoke rolled in around them.

Only when he was sure the body at his feet was still did he look up again to find Ahsoka waving frantically from the cockpit and gesturing back toward the wing slammed roughly down on the window like an impromptu ramp leading up to the door open in the side of the craft. Get in! Hurry!

The real world crashing back in through the roar of the ship engine and the smell of burnt flesh, Anakin spun to shout at Obi-Wan, trapped on the far side of the room with Windu between them and fighting off the Master with blocks that were starting to falter as Windu dove and ducked and kept coming, relentless as a force of nature. "Obi-Wan!"

"Go!" he managed breathlessly, not daring to look away from his opponent and beads of cold sweat glinting on his face. Go! Get out of here!

"No!" Pointing at Ahsoka to stay where she was, Anakin pounded across the floor in a dead run, screaming as he swung his saber at Windu's back. I'm not leaving you!

The Master ducked and rolled, coming up without a scratch and panting as he took in both opponents. He was beyond speech, beyond shock. There was only fury as he took in the fallen bodies of his comrades, of the monster and the monster's maker backed close to each other and their faces too young, too innocent in the light streaming in behind them for all of the horror they had inflicted.

We're almost out of time, you two! Ahsoka begged from the ship as sirens began to sound somewhere outside, distorted and nightmarish as they echoed around the wreckage of the room. Come on!

Anakin took in Windu, the wild anger in his eyes and the hungry edge of his blade, and then darted a thought back to Obi-Wan. Get ready to strike, skybrother!

Obi-Wan had no time to agree or even acknowledge what he said: Anakin was already running to fling himself at Windu in such an open and vulnerable attempt at an attack it took Obi-Wan's breath away. He's trying to get hit!

And Obi-Wan understood in a moment of perfect, horrible clarity what Anakin wanted to do, and ran behind him, no time to argue the sense of it, the awfulness of it, whipping his blade up where Anakin purposefully lowered his to miss blocking Windu's vicious attack and giving him a perfect target for the second half of his strike.

The blade sailed straight for him, blinding and violet, too loud and too close, and he felt Obi-Wan scream inside his mind. **Anakin, no!**

Anakin twisted, contorting himself at the last possible second and mind blank, empty of everything save the horrible purple flaring toward him, and Windu's saber glanced along instead of through his stomach in an angry, searing thrum, all of the Master's momentum committed to the attack.
Nothing was left to block Obi-Wan's own advance and brutal slice downward, slashing deep across Windu's chest and sending him backward in a limp stumble and choked, futile gasp, the man dead before he hit the floor and a smoldering line across his chest.

Anakin dropped to his knees, his saber rolling across the floor as he gasped at the brisk pain shooting across his skin.

_Master!_ Ahsoka shrieked through their bond, and then he was dimly aware of being carried and the sound of a recalled saber smacking into Obi-Wan's hand, of Obi-Wan hurrying with him through the ruins of the Council Room, out into wide open air and then into the small confines of a ship.

Obi-Wan dropped him into a seat, stroking his hair, whispering to him how stupid he was, how stupid that was, but Anakin stilled him with a dazed touch of his fingers to Obi-Wan's lips as the engines roared to life somewhere below them and Ahsoka shouted for them to hold on tight as the floor shifted and the ship began to climb in a fresh pulse of the engines, alarms ringing all around them.

"Skybrother," he murmured as Obi-Wan stood over him, the pain nothing compared to the love he felt, the emotion so intense he could barely speak past it. "Hello," he tried, unable to find the words for anything else as he reveled in the gentle warmth of Obi-Wan's mouth under his fingertips before his hand slipped down Obi-Wan's chest, tangling weakly in his collars to keep him close. _You're here. You saved me. You're here._

"Hello," Obi-Wan managed through the tears beginning to flow, stroking Anakin's face and finding no sadness within himself at Anakin's new eyes and what he had done, only a fierce sense of hard-fought brotherhood. "I've missed you. So much."

They kissed, tenderness growing into a joyous, breathless tangle of lips and tongues, only stopping when Ahsoka shouted back at them to get strapped in for a hyperspace jump.

_No one will ever keep us apart again_, Anakin vowed, hand tight in Obi-Wan's across the seats and trembling from joy and pain, love and exhaustion as the distinct whine of the ship's drive powered up.

_Ever again_, Obi-Wan swore, his weary, loving smile as warm as the suns they'd left behind on Tatooine so long ago.

In the panicked flight away from Coruscant, away from the Core Worlds, once their course was locked in and they were safely lost in hyperspace, a distraught Ahsoka pulled Obi-Wan's holo reader from her robes and erased its data, clicking the buttons as she watched his puzzled face while he worked on Anakin's wound, Anakin stretched out on one of the two bunks in the little vessel. "What are you doing?" He reached out to hug her and stroke her back, trying to soothe her.

"We don't need what you recorded anymore, right?" she half-demanded, trying to keep her voice steady, and Obi-Wan realized she was more furious than upset.

"Right," he said with some hesitation, not sure where she was going with this.

"But we do need to let people know what... what happened. The truth about what happened and why it happened! What the Order did!"
Anakin listened as she spoke, drawing in a sharp hiss of breath as Obi-Wan applied bacta patches to the nasty burn shooting in a straight, unforgiving line across his stomach. Adrenaline was still seething through him, adrenaline and a strange, beautiful feeling of balance and peace he hadn't known for years.

He’d seen his eyes reflected in the metal plating of one of the walls. He knew what they meant and felt no shame in his actions in the Council room, in his vengeance and full embrace of his emotions both good and evil. It was not new. It was a return to who he had always been, a child of both the light and the dark.

The dark had wanted revenge, and it was sated in a way that even Azul’ir, old and primal father of the deserts of his homeworld, would have proud of. But the light… what did the light want?

It wanted to help people. Even after all of this, after the nightmare he had just escaped from and the blackness he'd willingly embraced, it wanted to help. And so did he.

"The Order wanted you to make speeches to the Senate? To the galaxy? Because everyone knows you and trusts you? Ok, let's give them a speech!" Ahsoka told them, waving the holo reader. "We record it, drop it off with a holonews outlet anywhere along the way to the Outer Rim, and they'll spread it for us. Everyone needs to know what those bastards did to you, what they were trying to do to you again."

Understanding dawned on both of their faces at the same time, and a few minutes later Anakin was propped up on pillows and looking directly into the recording lens, his voice strong and angry as he began after taking a long breath and letting it out, trying to find how to start the awful tale.

"People of the Republic, members of the Senate, my name is Anakin Skywalker and today I will tell you the truth about the Jedi Order. About why you should never trust them with your children. I will tell you what they did to me," he said, Obi-Wan sitting out of frame but gripping Anakin's hand tightly in his lap, "and to my family."

There was no written speech, no preparation beforehand, but his words flowed beautifully, spoken from the new still, quiet place inside himself that had clamored for peace all these years. By the end of his story, much as he had once spontaneously declared his desire to kill a Sith Lord to a room full of masters and known it to be what he should do, he found himself turning toward the question of the light, of what it wanted, and felt the answer rise up inside him.

Nodding to himself, he sent it out to Ahsoka and Obi-Wan before he said it aloud, pausing as he did.

*Will you help me do this, skybrother?*

*Yes. To my last breath, yes.*

*Will you stay with us, Ahsoka? Will you help us?*

*Always, Master,* she smiled, tears in her eyes.

Anakin fixed his gaze on the lens and continued, words spilling out passionately. "I am not a wanton murderer, the fallen hero the Order will try to make me out to be. I am free, and I will bring freedom to those like me. I will bring justice to those who dare to do what was done to me, who enslave and subjugate good, innocent people with tricks or with chains."

His eyes glinted gold in the ship lights, bright against his tanned face. "I do not ask for forgiveness, and I do not ask for help. Just know that if you are a slaver, free your slaves now or know that one
day you will find me on your doorstep. And I will bring you only fire and death."

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Epilogue

One year later.

Ahsoka hurried through the rain, drops of water thrumming along her water-proof hood, splashing past tents and ships locked up tight against the afternoon thunderstorm on her way across the sprawling camp. The wind blew in from the ocean, across the beach, up to the tree line, gusts of wind and waves of rain, but as she squinted against it she had to admit it was beautiful here with the wild, towering thunderheads out over the sea on her left and the lush jungle on her right made even more green by the storm. *I wonder how long we'll stay on this planet.*

There was no regret in the thought, only excitement at the possibility of new worlds, and she picked her way between a few ships clustered together to form a narrow path between them. On the other side, in the middle of the encampment, a larger tent sat with two clone troopers seated outside under the awning strung up over the entrance.

She lifted up the edge of her hood with one finger to reveal her face for inspection to the blond one on the left. "Morning, Rex."

"Morning, sir," he smiled.

"They awake?"

"I believe so, sir."

"Thanks."

She took off her dripping cloak and left it hanging on a pole outside, hopping out of her soggy boots before pushing the tent flap aside to walk in. "Good morning!"

"Good morning," Obi-Wan greeted her, pleasantly surprised and not looking up from the mug he drank from as he stood over a large table draped with a local star map. "You're on time."

"Hey, being on time is Master's problem, not mine," she grinned.

The large open space inside was almost given over completely to planning, piles of datapads and folding tables drowning in maps and notes, more pinned to boards propped up against supply boxes around the edges. Only the back corner was blocked off, a sheet hung to mark off Obi-Wan and Anakin's bedroom and currently pinned back to show Anakin dozing to the soft drumming of the rain outside.

Or she thought he was. "I heard that," he called from the bed, sitting up and yawning with a stretch.

Obi-Wan sat his tea down on a shelf out of harm's way and nodded to Ahsoka. "This morning while Anakin and I are on the mission I'd like you to take a look at this map and choose a few targets you think we'd have a chance at."

Ahsoka beamed at him. "Really? I get to start choosing missions?"
"I think you're ready," Obi-Wan said, patting her shoulder as Anakin stood and padded out to join them, rifling his hands through his hair. "And with the new influx of volunteers and equipment, the squads of clones especially, I thought it'd be good to reexamine our list, possibly expand it to include larger targets if we keep growing at the rate we have."

"Thank you, Master," she said happily, chewing her lip as she sat down on one of the camp stools to get to work.

"You're welcome, my dear," he nodded, holding out an arm to slide around Anakin as he joined them at the table.

"Come on, skybrother," he lazily murmured against Anakin's throat as Anakin leaned into him, warm and relaxed. "Let's go free some slaves."

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