Deciding Factor

by planningconquest

Summary

Anakin Skywalker defects to the Separatists and everything changes from there. In fact, everything changed before then.
“Padawan?” Jedi Master Obi-Wan Kenobi paused in his steps while he waited for his padawan learner to answer his summons. “Padawan?” A little alarmed by not particularly worried, the Jedi wandered along the paths of the garden, calling out occasionally.

Halfway through the negotiations his little padawan had gotten tired and unfocused. A side effect of having been sleeping too little since their last mission. In a moment of weakness, he’d sent the newly minted padawan to their shared quarters. He shouldn’t have been so indulgent of the boy’s tiredness. The boy would have to learn how to focus through the exhaustion and sleep deprivation. Obi-Wan couldn’t continue to indulge his padawan.

“Padawan?” He didn’t think the boy would wander off, he’d been well trained, but there was a possibility that he would have been distracted. That was a distinct possibility. “Padawan Luke, where are you?” Obi-Wan turned the corner to find the 14-year-old Jedi padawan sprawled halfway on top of one of the beasts the Queen kept for company, sound asleep. His small blond head was pillowed in the animal’s stomach while the creature curled protectively around his slender form. Luke’s expression was angelic while he slept, looking innocent and beatific in a way he would try to deny while he was awake. “Oh dear.” Luke curled even further in on himself while the animal’s eyes cracked open. Obi-Wan inched away as it growled at him. “That’s fine; I won’t take him.” When he was far enough away, the animal seemed satisfied, closing its eyes and breathing deeply.

“That is your little apprentice?” Kenobi stiffened at the sonorous voice of the Queen. He turned and bowed even as he resented the word ‘apprentice.’ It sounded too much like a Sith phrase.

“Yes, your majesty.”

“He is quite the beautiful creature,” The woman glided closer and stopped beside the famed negotiator. “Tell me, why was he not at the table?”

“I am afraid he was too tired, milady. He has been on several missions in the past few weeks and is too young to manage his energy correctly.”

“You do not think that you have worked the boy too hard? For a child, that many missions are probably dangerous to them.”

“He will be a Jedi, your majesty. A Jedi must be able to function no matter the circumstances. Padawan training is historically difficult.”

“Hmm,” The queen said nothing, bending down to place a wide hand upon Luke’s head. The boy shifted in his sleep but did not wake. Her dark hand patted his head gently before pulling away, “Such a sweet child. Nothing like his father, is he?”

“I’m afraid I do not understand,” the Jedi master felt his heart tighten painfully, and he watched the Queen carefully. Luke was not awake, and he did not want him to hear anything of this conversation.

“Do you think me blind and foolish, Jedi?” Queen Nefri straightened and tucked her hands into her sleeves, “I lived through Clone War as well. I knew you and you first padawan well — the Hero With No Fear and the Negotiator. I can see his father’s spirit in him. Does he even know his own name?”

“Luke is a Jedi Padawan, and that is all he aspires to be.”
“Padawan Luke Skywalker? Does he too know no fear? Does he leap into the jaws of death followed by his faithful master?”

“You majesty,” A little desperate and irritated, Kenobi glanced down at Luke and up to the woman. “Padawan Luke is simply that, a padawan.”

“You raised the son of your former apprentice? I am curious, Kenobi. How did you acquire the boy? Was it before or after the Hero With No Fear defected?” Wordlessly, Obi Wan’s mouth moved up and down as the words drained from his mind.

How had she known? No one outside the Jedi Council knew that Luke was Anakin Skywalker’s son. Just as none of them knew that Leia was Anakin Skywalker’s daughter.

“You wonder how I know?”

“I must admit. I am curious.”

“It is easy to see his father, in him. Just as I can see his mother. Tell me, did you want you to take them away? Did she want her children to be Jedi? Did Skywalker even know that his children existed? Does he know that your apprentice is his flesh and blood? How do you live with it?”

“It is the protocol for the Jedi to obtain any children that test to a high enough midi-chlorian rate,” Kenobi said tonelessly. “It has been a tradition for centuries to do this? I do not find any difficulty in living with my actions because they are for the greater good and upholding tradition.” Queen Nefri looked him up and down, pursing her lips.

“My people have also been given an offer from the Confederacy. Dooku has made a generous offer that is much more appealing to my council than that of the Republic.”

“You Highness, I assure you, the Republic is.”

“Do not advertise your lies and contracts to me again, Jedi Master.” Obi-Wan discreetly placed a hand over his lightsaber and watched the woman carefully. She had not raised her voice, but she still had not stepped away from the sleeping Luke. “I have heard your words and what you have many times. You wish to tell me that my planet should be a part of the Republic. I see little appeal. If I am honest, Master Jedi, I did not want to hear your mindless drivel in the first place.”

“Your highness.”

“Hush,” the Queen’s dark skin was a brilliant contrast to the snow-white gown she wore with ease and grace. Her graying hair curled around her shoulders. “You will wake the boy.” Kenobi stopped to watch Luke snuffle in his sleep and fidget some. Remembering to keep his voice low, he spoke again.

“Your majesty, why did you agree to speak with the Republic in the first place?”

“To ensure that I was making the right decision.”

“Then why?”

“The Confederacy will be here in the morning for negotiations. I expect you to be there, Master Jedi.” With a final wave, the regal queen departed the room, leaving a befuddled Master Jedi and the sleeping padawan. Dark eyes followed the queen out and refocused on the sleeping blond.

It had been 14 years since Anakin Skywalker had defected from the Republic and Jedi Order. On the
mission to rescue the Chancellor while Obi-Wan had been unconscious something had happened. He was not awake when Anakin beheaded Chancellor Palpatine. He did not know that Anakin had agreed to leave with Dooku as a Separatist general. Obi-Wan did know what was happening until someone found him, still unconscious, in an escape pod floating in the debris above Courasant.

News of Anakin’s defection had rocked the Jedi Order to the core of its being. The Republic had teetered beneath the sloth of the Senate and the lack of leadership. Disillusioned and terrified, the Senate devoured itself. Infighting and war had abounded as Republic sector turned their troops on each other. In the killing frenzy, the Jedi had been desperate to take the republic and return it to any flavor of stability.

With political assassinations picking off the only options of a reasonable Chancellor, Bail Organa the first victim who had only just survived. Too injured to do anything to but retreat to Alderann. Senator Chuchi the second and more successful attempt; there had not been enough recovered to send home. Master Yoda and the council had no options left.

For the good of the galaxy they had assumed leadership of the Republic. Just in time for the Confederacy to establish its borders firmly. General Skywalker, this time wearing the tan and brown of a Separatist, told them that any attempt to ‘pacify’ or ‘re-unify’ the Confederacy would be meet with extreme prejudice.

Master Yoda did not attempt to invade any of the Confederate planets. He and the council were consumed with their work in stabilizing the splintering Republic. The transition had not been easy, but Obi-Wan saw no other option and felt that at last, he was fulfilling his duty as a Jedi.

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“Why are we going to see Master Yoda?” Luke straightened his tunic a bit self-consciously and glanced up at him. “Was there something wrong on Nexbuit?”

“You do not need to fidget, padawan.” Obi-Wan guided the shorter human into the turbo lift and nodded to the Senator that was waiting there. The Senator took a glance at Obi-Wan and Luke and fled the turbo lift, muttering that he would walk the rest of the way.

“Sorry, Master.” Luke sighed and dropped his hands to his side. “But did something go wrong? Do they not want to join the Republic?”

“I do not think so, Padawan,” Obi-Wan was too dignified to rub a hand over his face, but he wished, for a brief moment, that he was back on the battlefield where such actions were commonplace.

“Do you think it was because I slept on the fuzzy animal?” Luke’s voice dipped toward despondency.

“No, Padawan. I do not believe that was why.” He remembered the sneering quality to the Queen’s voice as she baited him. “Hush, now. We are going to see Master Yoda. You must be polite and quiet.”

“Yes, Master.” Luke nodded brightly but at the stern glance from Obi-Wan, stilled. “I’ll wait outside if you want.”

“That won’t be necessary,” the turbo lift glided to a halt, and the door slid open. The two initiates on door duty bowed immediately. “Please inform Master Yoda that Master Kenobi and Padawan Luke are here.” They mumbled an agreement and vanished. Obi-Wan tucked his hand into his robes and watched Luke try to imitate the motion. His heart ached a moment at the thought of another short
blond trying to do the same. Luke glanced up at him and placed a hand on his thigh.

“Master?”

“Attachments are forbidden,” he recited, pulling away from the kind comfort from the teenager. Obi-Wan staunchly ignored the flash of hurt in the force that radiated from Luke. “Remember this, Padawan.”

“Yes, Master.” Luke bowed,retreating inward and tucking away his wounded feelings. “I will remember.”

“Master Kenobi,” a zabrak initiate bowed, “Please, Master Yoda will see you.”

The two were lead through a door and into what used to be the Chancellors office. The massive desk had been removed and the furniture replaced with the chairs most favored by the Jedi. In the center, Master Yoda was meditating peacefully. His ears twitched when Luke entered, and he opened his eyes.

“Greeting, Master Kenobi, Padawan Luke.”


“A successful mission you did not have?”

“No, master.” Obi-Wan accepted the seat Yoda offered. Luke stood to his side and waited. “The Queen did not wish to join the Republic and nor did her advisors. The Confederate negotiators joined the meetings on the last day we were there.”

“Hmmm, a pity.”


“Padawan Luke, what think you?”

“I don’t know, master,” Luke sounded quiet and soft, “But people make their decisions, and we have to respect that.”

“Hmmm,” Master Yoda carefully considered the boy before nodding. “Serving sweet milk in the commissary I hear they are. Have some while speaking to your master I do.”

“Yes master,” Luke bowed and left the two Jedi masters alone. Obi-Wan watched the short blond leave the room and shook his head when the door closed.

“What concerns you?”

“The Queen knew about Luke,” Obi-Wan said without preamble. “She knew who his parents were and made some….interesting remarks.”

“Indeed? Hear this did Padawan Luke?”

“No, Master Yoda. He was asleep at the time.”

“Hmmm.”

“Master, I do not think Anakin knew about his children. Senator Amidala told us that she had not had a chance to inform him and she had not made a communication in the last few years to tell him.”
“Continue to monitor her comms we do?”

“Yes, it’s a necessary precaution. She’s still under house arrest, and none of her letters or calls suggest she wants to tell him.”

“Broke the code, Knight Skywalker did,” Yoda chewed thoughtfully on his gimmer stick, “Married he did. Know this; you did not?”

“No.” Obi-Wan had been under intense investigation from both the Jedi and the Senate after Anakin defected. Afraid that, he too, harbored Separatists loyalties, Obi-Wan had spent the next seven months in prison while everything he had ever done was investigated. When Luke and Leia had been born Obi-Wan had known immediately. Their bright sun-like presence in the force had been blinding to all the Jedi on the planet. Their birth screams echoed through the force, and the twins had announced their presence. It took a total of two days to trace the twins to Padme Amidala and then to Anakin Skywalker. Once the Senate discovered her relationship to the Jedi traitor she had been stripped of her title and her children had been passed to the Jedi Order. She had endured two years of investigation before she was sentenced to a life of house arrest.

Her apartment had been taken and her possessions seized. While Obi-Wan had not visited since the day he had gone to take the twins he knew she was living her days out in a police-owned apartment under constant surveillance.

“Hmmm, suspect Padawan Luke to follow his path do you?”

“I do not know.” He wished he hadn’t been given Luke as a padawan, but orders were orders. “Sometimes I think he might and other time I think he would never even consider the option. He is obedient and polite and skilled, but sometimes I think….I think he feels too much. He has problems releasing his feeling into the force and abstaining from attachments.”

“Dangerous things, attachments are,” Yoda agreed, “Observe the boy, continue to report. If like his father, he might become, tell us. If needed, use Revan’s Cure, the council will.”

“Revan’s Cure?” Obi-Wan blinked in real surprise, “That’s a little drastic, Luke’s only 14.”

“Emotional, the boy is.” Yoda tapped his knee with his stick, “too indulgent you have been, Obi-Wan. Like his father, he will become. If needed, Revan’s cure we will use.”

“Yes, Master.” Obi-Wan stood and bowed. “I’ll go find him.”

As he left the former office of the Chancellor he paused to watch a short news segment about the Confederacy. A handsome red Twi-lek was speaking excitedly. Obi-Wan recognized the reporter; they belonged to a neutral news station. The alien was reporting the recent figures of slavery and criminal activity in the Confederacy. According to the reporter, they were at an all-time low thanks to the intervention of General Skywalker.

Obi Wan sighed heavily as he stepped into the turbo-lift. He wondered what Anakin was up to and if he knew the extent of the damage he had done to the galaxy.
Anakin's Reality

Chapter Summary

Anakin finds an anomaly in the force. Obi Wan wonders if the way they've deliberately hurt the twins is hurting the twins. Padme is a badass.

Count Dooku now walked with a cane. It was a finely made cane that had been carved and built for him as a present. The tip was a sturdy metal with a built-in communicator. His handle was a detachable lightsaber that could be used in moments of peril. A dragon, a nexu, and a river were carved into the body even as the gold filigree used to outline the details was highly polished. It was a very handsome cane, and he did truly appreciate it.

He was going to use to beat the brains out of his young senatorial friend.

“Is there,” his grip on the cane tightened as he surveyed the senator, “any reason you have not attended any of the meetings for the last three days?”

“You know my opinion, Yan,” The senator fiddled with a short wire before stripping it, “I’m not needed anymore.”

“You need to go to those meetings. I don’t care how distasteful you think they are. This is far more important than your ego.”

“It's not my ego you need to be concerned with,” Anakin Skywalkers blue eyes shifted toward the Count finally.

“Anakin,” he pleaded, limping over to one of the only chairs in the cluttered office. An insulted loth-cat jumped down when he sat down, hissing at him. “You are needed at the negotiations.”

“You don’t need me there. I know what my presence would do to any of the deals you made with the Republic. I know what they think of me.”

“The negotiators are ridiculous and ham-fisted. They do not listen to me or anyone at the table. We cannot secure Ryloth as a Confederate planet unless you are there to push for it.”

“I can’t!” Anakin slammed a hydro-spanner into the ground. “If they see me they will know why we want Ryloth! They’ll never believe that we’ll keep Orn Free Taa as the Senator. The only way that we could get Syndulla and his freedom fighters and every little Twi’lek growing up there; the freedom they deserve is if we can pin the crimes Taa’s committed on him. He’ll get rid of any of the evidence before we can convict him. He’ll murder who families and tribes just to hide what he’s done. If I show up to those negotiations, the Jedi will never trade Ryloth.”

“Ryloth needs us Anakin,” Dooku leaned down toward the younger man who still glared at his droid. “Cham and his family need us, you know they do. You know how desperately they wish to erase the shame of slavery from their culture. No one born in this galaxy should be born a slave.” Anakin’s head hung down.

“You can’t use my own words against me,” Anakin said softly, a bit grudging, as he tossed his tools to the side. His shoulder slumped, and he didn’t turn around.
“Anakin.” Dooku wavered a moment before setting his hand on the former Jedi's shoulder. “You have been a liberator for over a decade now. You destroyed the Hutt syndicates and Black Sun. You’ve introduced legislation to rebuild Nar Shadda. You’ve housed the homeless and war strewn children. You are at the forefront of change in this government. We need you at those meetings.”

“What if it’s not enough?” His voice softened, slipping toward sadness. “What if what we’re doing isn’t enough, Yan? I’ve got this feeling….like we’re missing something.”

“We’re missing an entire Republic that the Jedi Council has begun suppressing out of terror of the invisible enemy that will one day destroy them.”

“The Sith?” Anakin snorted, “You haven’t been a Sith for over a decade.”

“When the Jedi Council falls.” Dooku leaned away when Anakin stood, tower over his seated figure.

“It’s not going to be because of the Sith or even the Confederacy.” His voice took on a growling edge, shifting his despondency out of the way. “This is not what is going to make Yoda topple off his Jedi Empire. You know who it’s going to be?” His golden mechanical hand clenched with a whirr of gears and mechanics. Yan leaned away, sensing the familiar rise of righteous fury and hatred of injustice that had made the boy defect in the first place. In its zenith, Skywalker’s temper was something that was immortalized in legends and song. The sheer driving force behind Skywalker’s ambitions was enough to make even Hutts cringe in terror. “Yoda will be forced to see the immovable wall that he’s become. He’ll have to face the reality of the Jedi code, and that’s when the entire Republic will become a mass of riots and anger.”

“Riots?”

“That’s what’s going to happen. People can’t live like that.”

“The Jedi do.”

“Indoctrinated into a system that doesn’t care about them. They have child soldier, and…and…they’ve stolen children. They don’t know how normal people live. Yoda can’t decree that music and writing that causes unrest is illegal. He can’t arrest the most popular and famous poet because he doesn’t like her work. Too much too fast.” Anakin shook his head, “That’s what’s going to happen and when it does the Jedi are going to either have to step away for crush the protests.”

“Anakin.”

“Yan, you don’t understand…..we’re missing something. I just know it.”

“You’ve freed the slaves of the Outer Rim, and you know once Ryloth joins the Confederacy that we’ll be able to get rid of Taa no matter what the contract says. The people will want to get rid of him, and we always listen to our people.”

“You sound like a politician.” Anakin snorted, staring at his hands.

“I am talking to one.”

“Hmmm, I’m Senator Tatooine not from Courasant. I actually care about my planet.”

“I know you do, Anakin and I truly don’t see what we could be missing and.”

“You mean aside from all of those planets still under the Jedi Empire.”
“Those aside….Anakin….have you been getting visions?”

“Yes,” Anakin glanced out the window, “Sometimes it feels like the force is screaming. It’s odd. Can you feel it? When the force just vibrates with that strange sort of echo? I can. It’s been happening more and more frequently over the last few years. It’s in the back of my head and like something hidden in a lock box and I can’t reach it.”

“I see,” Yan tilted his head to the side, “Have you considered consulting?”

“I considered it, but I don’t know if it’s going to warrant any attention. It could be just me and not the force.”

“Anakin, I thought you had gotten over thinking that all the problems you face are your fault. Our joint therapy sessions were very useful in proving this.”

“We’ve never had joint therapy sessions,” Anakin snorted, finally almost smiling. “But I get your point. If our legal team can’t find a loophole in the appropriations bill, then I will cut Taa’s head off and send it back to the Republic with a silver platter.”

“You should know, Anakin,” The man stood up and patted the Senator on the shoulder on the shoulder, “That sending something so worthless with a silver platter is a complete waste of money.”

“I think the inhibitor is interfering with Luke’s ability to use the Force.”

“That is generally what a Force inhibitor is supposed to do,” Mace Windu cracked his eyes open, “What do you need?”

“This isn’t supposed to interfere that badly, Master Windu, it’s only supposed to help with his shielding and keep him from going…nova and to keep Anakin from sensing him. His power isn’t what it should be. Have you had similar problems with Leia?”

“I have, actually. I don’t know if the inhibitor is keeping her from releasing her emotions to the Force or if she has that Skywalker gene. She’s been volatile, angry, asking questions about the Jedi Code and asking inappropriate questions about the Force. I’m concerned that Master Yoda would want to use Revan’s Cure on Leia too.”

“That might be needed. Revan’s Cure can wipe the mind of any Jedi that Council decides needs to be re-programmed. If Luke and Leia do not show any signs of improving then that is what may be needed,” Obi-Wan stroked his beard, thinking. “If we had used this on Anakin when he first came to the temple perhaps he might not have Fallen.”

“We don’t know if Revan’s Cure would work on him but…” Mace Windu peered at Obi-Wan, “If the deal on Ryloth goes as planned we will have captured Anakin Skywalker and have brought Count Dooku to justice.”

“If we capture Anakin, then that would invite another war to the Republic. We’re too unstable. We don’t have the advantage of the Corellian academies or even Mandalore solidarity. They’ve pulled all their representatives from the Republic.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Mace nodded at the holoprojection that began to rise from the floor, “If everything goes as plans the use of Revan’s cure will take little time. Once Skywalker is a Jedi he can be used against the Confederacy, and we know how good of a frontline commander Skywalker is.”
“Rumor has it that he’s turned his attention to politics recently. Intelligence tells me he’s the new Senator from Tatooine.”

“Tatooine doesn’t have a senator….wait?”

“Do you remember the messages we got from the Hutts, begging for assistance in exchange for free use of trade routes?”

“And we never got another one, and the Confederacy moved into those routes…yes. I remember.”

“Anakin killed the Hutts, dismantling their criminal Empire and replaced it with his own.”

“And Dooku and their Senate allowed this?”

“Dooku encouraged it; he’s solidified his grip of power on the Separatist planets which Ryloth will soon fall under.”

“That’s why I called you here today. We need Luke.”

“Luke?”

“He’s going to act as bait for Skywalker since the man is fallen there’s no telling what sort of Sith powers he’s using now. We’ll have to take him quickly and quietly without alerting Dooku. When the other masters get here, we’re going to discuss just how we’re going to do that.”

“With using Luke as bait?” Obi-Wan felt, for the first time in 14 years, the stirring up unease at another Jedi Masters words.”

“Even if he figures out that Luke is his son it won’t matter when we’re done.”

“But Luke doesn’t need Revan’s Cure,” Obi-Wan said, thinking about the short blond who had just earlier been asking for more flying tips. “He’s an obedient padawan, and he is learning how to erase his emotions.”

“Are you questioning the Jedi Council, Master Kenobi?” Mace’s expression hardened as he glared at the man, “How many times did you defy us for Skywalker? How many before he Fell and joined the Sith?”

“Master.”

“Kenobi, I don’t think your head is clear enough on the matter of the Skywalkers. You’ve coddled them enough in the past. Surely you see the need for the Revan’s cure.”

“Master, I understand the need to repair Anakin and bring him back to the fold and perhaps Leia if she shows the same tendencies as her father, but Luke is rather young and unsure. He does not question the code or me.”

“Given any opportunity to grow or develop emotions and attachments will destroy the use of a Jedi as it destroyed Anakin Skywalker.”

“Yes, Master Windu.”

“When we send you and Skywalker, do not tell him where you are going or what you are planning. He cannot know what we are planning.”

“Of course, Master,” Obi-Wan stood, “And what do I do with Luke between now and then?”
“I’m sure you can come up with something to do, Kenobi.” Obi-Wan bowed a last time and left the meditation rooms.

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She understood what Anakin had said about slavery all those years ago.

“You can feel it in your bones,” He’d said, “Hating the masters and the universe. So close to freedom but it’s an illusion. It doesn’t exist. You’re bound by a crime that no one cares about…..the freedom isn’t in the movements you can’t do or the words that are never spoken….it’s in your mind.” Anakin had only ever spoken about his time as a slave when it was the witching hour, and Padme was only partly awake. “You can fly in your mind, build cities and destroy them. In your mind, you can give the grandest of speeches and change the galaxy on a whim. But you know you can’t do it because someone owns you. They sink claws and bombs into you, and they set you loose with only the threat of distance from a transmitter to keep you down. But you’re always free in your mind.” Anakin had taught Padme how to hide her thoughts from everyone, how to hide and pretend she wasn’t thinking of sedition. A skill that had become distressingly more useful as the Clone Wars had dragged on.

And necessary when the Jedi took her children away.

Padme Amidala, composed and calm no matter the odds; had snapped. The pressures of her defecting husband and the rumors circulating the Senate that she was also a Separatist, the election of a new Chancellor and then dealing with the Jedi executing a neat coup that left the Senate even more useless, it all pressed down on her.

Nine months of misery and stress revealed themselves in the strangest of ways.

When the Jedi came for her children they had expected the babies to be handed over calmly. To be passed into the protection of the Order as if nothing was odd or out of the ordinary but that was not what had happened.

When Master Windu, flanked by Kenobi and Ti, had presented the usual spiel about force sensitive children needing training Padme had very calmly smashed an antique and irreplaceable vase against his head. What followed in the moments after could not be called a fight.

It had been a brawl. One that had destroyed most of the breakable possessions in her home. Not that throwing a fit had worked.

The children had still been taken; screaming at the top of their lungs and wailing for her when the men carrying them had gotten into separate speeders and flown away. She had been arrested, her handmaidens arrested, her aides and office workers arrested. All of them had been taken, and Padme's political power was dismantled in a few days.

For once she hated Anakin Skywalker. For the first three years of her imprisonment, she was torn between fits of rage at the Jedi and then at Anakin. Wondering if her children were even still alive once the years passed a decade, Jedi children died all the time in the field with no one to mourn them.

She raged against her Jedi prisoner guards and Kenobi whenever he came by. They removed all things breakable and sharp for safety measures after her first few times attempting to escape.

By the time the Jedi’s takeover of the Republic reached 14 years Padme understood perfectly Anakin’s stories, his rage, his hatred and every flash of lightening his eyes whenever he talked to dishonest senators.
She understood slavery now that she felt like little more than a slave herself. She wasn’t allowed anything to write with or even to send holo-calls. The Jedi could not let Anakin Skywalker know he had twins.

Padme looked down at the colorful tapestry that she had been making ever since the Jedi had capitulated on embroidery materials. This was her rebellion, her message to the people.

For the Naboo; every color carried meaning and every shape was a definition. The tapestry in her hands told a story, it told hundreds of stories, and all of them pointed out the crimes the Jedi had committed against her.

Her children, she glanced out the window at the lower city, she hoped they were safe and healthy. Happy was too much of a stretch, but Padme could always dream.

“Be safe, my angels,” she breathed.

“Amidala,” another faceless Jedi stood behind her, “We’re ready for you now.”

“It is a nice day for a public trial,” her face was blank, but her words were not. “Tell me, how many people am I going to be judged with today?”

“That’s not for you to know,” Amidala, the Jedi escorted her out of the apartment and into the armored prison speeder waiting outside, “Get in.”

With the last of her dignity Padme Amidala straightened her orange jumpsuit and stepped into the cage. After today there would be no more protection from her previous position. Her power gone and her wealth seized, her children taken to be trained as child soldiers and her husband a galaxy away.

No one would protect the wife of Anakin Skywalker.

Padme Amidala settled onto the hard metal bench, head high and eyes bright and clear. The six other people in the speeder looked on in despair which grew worse as they approached the Senatorial complex. She recognized them, poets, writers, and musicians who had also been under house arrest.

As she was escorted from the speeder and to the floor of the Senate building, gazing up at her former colleagues and friends while the Jedi stood ready to pass judgement….Padme understood her husband and his decision to leave the Republic the festering mess it had become. They were calling out names now, announcing the defendants of the trial.

“….and Padme Amidala, you stand accused of causing unrest in this Republic. Of sedition and treason against the government. You are brought into this trial today under the suspicion of these crimes. You have aided enemies of the state. Knowingly withholding information from the Jedi Council, Assaulting a Jedi Master.” The judgmental expressions of Mundi bore down on the shuffling and fidgeting thinkers. “How do you plead?”

She was not a cocky woman by nature, but a smirk tilted her pale, chapped lips into a humored grimace. Padme tilted her head back to look the Jedi she used to respect clear in the eyes and spoke.

“Guilty.”

The headlines on the datapad were wide, bolded things that both made perfect sense to Luke and at the same time made his head spin.

“PADME AMIDALA IMPRISONED FOR SEDITION AND TREASON!”

“Luke,” He heard his master approach and debated if he should hide the datapad, “Luke. I sense your discomfort; are you injured?”

“No master.” Luke swallowed and schooled his thoughts into nothing, leaving his mind blank as a piece of stone. “I was reading the latest news. I saw something that surprised me.”

“Oh?” Master Obi-Wan turned the corner, a towel still in his hair and the familiar stern expression on his face. He often wondered if his master had always been this cold. Seeing him in something other than his formal robes and armor was always a bit of a shock. “What was it?”

“Just this,” Luke shifted the pad just enough to jump to a scandalous article that had also caught his attention. “Apparently Governor Tarkin was caught with a handsome.”

“You shouldn’t read those articles, my padawan.” Master Kenobi snagged the datapad, not bothering to look at the article. “They are little more than drivel and a waste of time. As a Jedi, you must always be focused on a higher purpose. None of what they write in those news articles are of any worth. All the truth you need is in the reports the Council distributes.”

“Yes, master.” Luke placed his hands on his lap. Keeping his eyes on the datapad as Kenobi set it on the table and walked into the dining area. “What are we going to do today?”

“It’s not what I’m going to do today, Luke. I have an assignment for you. Your teachers in your Political History have given you an assignment, and I’ve gotten the message that you haven’t completed it.”

“I’m sorry, master. I haven’t been able to find the time. We’ve been so busy with negotiations and work that.”

“That doesn’t matter, Luke.” Obi-Wan emerged with a mug in his hand. “A Jedi must complete the tasks set before him. There are no excuses when you have ignored your duties.”


“Complete your assignment at the public archives today, padawan. I won’t be available by comm today either.”

“Yes, master.” Luke gathered the needed supplies into his pack and filched the taken datapad from the table and stuffed it in with the others. “I’ll return as soon as I have it finished.”

“IMPRISONED FOR TREASON!” The thunderous, offended roar of Anakin Skywalker echoed through the building, startling everyone in it. “WHAT KIND OF NO GOOD, TWO-BIT HACK OF!” What followed a moment later was swearing so inspired that, while most of the staff were hardened soldiers and former slavers, they began to take notes.

“Anakin! Language!” Dooku’s voice wasn’t usually that loud, but for once he seemed content to allow his ire to show. His bellow matched Skywalker’s ire perfectly. As one entity the staff of the parliament building, senators and aides and cleaners alike, leaned in the direction of the shouting. Their thoughtless moves were ignored as both Dooku, and Skywalker stopped shouting.

“How dare they?” Anakin snarled in a hissing voice as he slammed the datapad onto the table. It cracked beneath his fingers. “How dare they? They dare accuse her of sedition and treason. Traitors were condemning the only person in the whole Republic with any idea of what loyalty and democracy!” Anakin stomped to one end of the office and then stomped his way back. “What could have possibly overcome their common sense to do something like this? This Padme we’re talking about.”

“Naboo has requested to join the Confederacy,” Count Dooku said abruptly, watching as his young friend ground to halt and whirled around.

“Naboo has supported the Jedi and Republic for generations.”

“Queen Lindala is…displeased, with Amidala incarceration and seeks to remove her citizens from the influence of ‘those who would seek to eradicate the uniqueness of the Naboo through the devolution of its culture and soul.’ Dooku had picked up more than a few bad habits from his younger generals and companions; a mindless shrug was one of them. He used it whenever he wanted to aggravate whomever he was speaking to, most often Republic ambassadors or his usually infuriating friend Skywalker.

“It took them this long to realize this?” Anakin snorted, derisive and ill-tempered. “The Jedi have the Light Fleet in the Naboo system. A whole contingent of slave troopers and even more Jedi just lusting for Separatist blood, fighting their way out would be impossible. Plus! Padme was not the only person imprisoned that day. Five others sent to prison on the same charges! Poets, writers, and journalists! What sort of sedition could they be accused of?” Anakin threw himself into a chair, fuming.

“With the meeting a Ryltoth coming it will be impossible to take one planet from the Republic and then convince them to secede Naboo. It is a crown jewel of the Republic.”

“It’s also one with claws you can’t see and smiles that promise death. This can work in our favor,” Anakin rubbed at his jawline, thinking. “We need Tang.”

High General Tang, at the close of the Clone War, had shifted her talents of mayhem and ruthless destruction toward another form of conquest. One that took months of careful planning, truly stupid ideas and luck that would bless a star. No longer did she drop into a system and rip it from the grasp of the Republic. Pulling and pummeling it until it slipped from its fingers that were slick with cloned blood neatly into her grasp. Now she pushed and prodded a planet from the Republic so carefully and cleverly that Republic hardly knew that it had handed it to her.
Tang was a master at inciting riots, rebellion, strikes, uprisings, protests and the collapse of planetary governments. “What can I do for you two today?”

“Naboo wants to join the Confederacy.” Anakin Skywalker was brooding in front of the window, arms crossed and shoulder tensed.

“I saw what happened to Amidala.” Tang nodded to Dooku as he poured another cup of tea and pushed it her direction. “Thank you, sir.”

“Of course,” Yan Dooku nodded. “Anakin, I realize you are upset, but we must press forward. Brooding will not engineer a jailbreak for your wife.”

“Wife?” Tang blinked, blowing on her tea, “You married Amidala.”

“Over a decade ago,” Skywalker growled, sinking into the chair opposite of the younger General, “She’s been under house arrest for.”

“Thirteen years and she’s only just been sent to prison. No contact with the outside worlds or with her own family. I’m assuming they discovered your marriage and that’s the reason she’s in prison.”

“One of them.”

“So…a jailbreak?” Tang picked up a cookie as Skywalker stewed.

“We need to get the Naboo from the Republic.”

“No war?”

“No war.” Only Dooku and Skywalker would see that she was pouting. Her expression cleared.

“A jailbreak, liberating a planet and….not fighting. Anything else?”

“We need some guardsmen for Anakin in case the Ryloth conference goes south. I don’t trust the Jedi to simply allow him to go on his way. I would think that they are more concerned with either retrieving the ‘Chosen One’ or kidnapping him to punish him for his crimes.”

“Fools. As if I would permit them to use me again, to chain me down in there.”

“I get it, Skywalker! I don’t need a re-hash of why you hate them. I’d like to remind you I was the one dealing with your unstable ass in the early days of your defection. I know all I really need to know.”

“Tang, Anakin.” Dooku interceded before the argument could escalate. “Please.”

“Fine,” they replied in tandem. Tang swirled the tea in her cup a bit more, thinking. Skywalker fiddled with his highly decorative prosthetic as the silence lengthened. Outside the goings and comings of the Senators and staff of the building echoed into the room.

“If you want to get Naboo in a bloodless coup, then you really need a few things.” Tang rubbed her hand, feeling the scar tissue beneath her fingers. It was from the glancing blow from a Jedi Knight intent on assassinating her four years ago. “A fleet needs to be assembled at Ryloth for the conference. There are ways to sneak it into Republic space. There won’t be any shooting or attacking but looking menacing will do what we need. The closest fleet they have to combat the fleet is currently above Naboo. In their panic, the Jedi will send the Light Fleet in case something does happen. With Naboo almost unprotected we activate the sleeper agents in Theed and the major cities.
From there the ships are sabotaged, and the sedative that sits in every clone’s helmet to protect them if they should go into shock is released. This will drop the clones long enough for the planet to finalize the succession.

“For the planet to succeed there needs to a suitably high enough ranking person there to sign the union agreement.”

“Easily done, Anakin goes,” Tang nudged the brooding man with her foot, “What say you?”

“I am expected at the Ryloth conference.”

“We’ll send a body double. Kitster is the best actor I can think of at the moment and don’t worry about the Jedi telling you two apart because he,” She jabbed a finger at Dooku, “Is going to be… distracting them.”

“You wish for me to play Sith Lord?”

“Of course, don’t you think it’ll be poetic?”

“What about Padme?” Anakin suddenly growled, thumping his feet back onto the carpet. “What do you plan to do about her?”

“What happened to the good old days when you were the one who came up with the crazy schemes, and I was the voice of reason?” Tang shrugged, ignoring Skywalker’s growling. “But I wasn’t finished. Amidala will be easy to break out; the prison she was sent to is one that is absolutely rife with our agents and prisoners of war. They could leave at any minute, but we like to keep a handle on a portion of the Republic Navy. Having a planet full of convicts to guard ties up a good number of Republic ships but I can engineer a jailbreak. There’s just a fee to pay.”

“A fee?” The agents aren’t really ours,” Tang pursed her lips, “Contractors, the most irritating sort but they are perfectionists, and their leader has never failed. She’ll get your wife out of prison.”

Anakin Skywalker paused, thinking a moment and nodded. “This seems too easy.”

“How long have we known each other?”

“Fighting or allies?”

“Doesn’t matter, my point is, sometimes the best plans are the ones that are the most simple. We’ll leave over-complicated cloak and dagger to the contractors.”

“I suppose that’s a way to work.” Dooku poured himself another cup of tea. “Still, if Kitster is assaulted pretending to be Anakin we can’t be sure that he’ll ever be returned.”

“Hmm, plus it means that the Jedi don’t seem to think twice about betraying a perfectly legitimate government. I suppose that only indicates their unwillingness to accept that which makes them uncomfortable.” Skywalker seemed to deflate a moment later, looking every single of his 37 years. He still had an eternally youthful look about him, but new lines were pronounced and his hair just barely blushing gray. In his years as a Confederate he’d accumulated more laugh lines than worry lines, but there was a certain intensity about him that frightened the average citizen. They’d shared a sort of rivalry that mostly stemmed from the amount of attention Dooku, had showered on Anakin after he’d been carried off the emergency transport vehicle by Grievous and followed by Dooku. Also due to the fact that every time they’re troops met, the end had always been a draw. Neither of them would admit it out loud or even in the privacy of their own head; they saw each other as siblings.
“I’m going to need caf if we’re going to be planning all night.” Tang passed her cup to Dooku for a refill. “And I have confidence in Kitster.”

“Know what Sith magic Skywalker can use we do not.” Master Yoda hobbled into the training room. The assembled master and Knights bowed. “Know how skilled he has become we do not know.”

“This mission is to capture. Kill if necessary.” Master Windu stepped to beside Yoda and paused, looking at the others, “Anakin Skywalker is the most dangerous force sensitive in the galaxy. He has Fallen as far as one can Fall. With Dooku as his Master, we must assume that he had picked up the same lightsaber style. Our mission will be to capture Anakin Skywalker and subdue him long enough to transport him to the holding cells in the Temple. This will be a dangerous mission, and I do not doubt that a few of us may perish but to bring justice to a Sith, there is no price that we are not willing to pay.”

“Training we will be, training to fight for the light and the Jedi.” Yoda spoke up, “Dangerous he is, full of hate and fear,” He began circling the group, keeping an eye on Obi-Wan Kenobi, “Betrayed us, he has. Slaughtered our Chancellor he did, no longer worthy of protection of the Jedi name or respect. Train well, my younglings, and we will repair the young traitor and the ways of the Jedi we will show him.”

Prison was so different than anything Padme Amidala had expected. There were no dingy rooms or barred rooms or even walls. She blinked in the bright sunlight, staring a bit at the scene in front of her.

It was definitely a town, but the buildings were built out of wood and stone and obviously primitive. Sentients of all species wandered between the buildings, chatting and laughing. Some people were lounging against the buildings, and others were sitting on top of the local beast of burden.

“This is a prison?” The poet she’d shared transport with, seemed to be gaping. The ithodorian swing their head from side to side.

“It is!” The latest batch of prisoners turned as one to face the unfamiliar form of a twi’lek. He was short, and with a red tinge, a faded scar around his neck made Padme's throat close up. “I am Beau, welcome to Penal Colony 13. Home to escaped slaves, prisoners of war, political prisoners and everyone the Jedi did not want to be heard but also did not want dead.”

“But,” A Professor of astrophysics spoke up, “This doesn’t look like a prison.”

“It doesn’t need to,” a lanky form that Padme pegged as a clone approached, slinging an arm around the red twi’lek, “You saw on your way in there’s only one spaceport on the planet, and it's heavily guarded. No luck trying to get out.” As he said this the clone winked at Beau, a smirk Padme could see miles away. “So we’re all stuck here. Good thing we get the whole planet. So, if you want to go to the processing center we’ll get you chaps settled”

“We’ve already been processed,” A journalist spoke up, “At the compound.”

“I mean for us. We need to know if you’ve got any skills we can use and some that we can’t. We can’t have chaos so all of us just get fixed into a place that we can work. You can make choices or see if you’d like to make a new career, but the basics are…you’ll be useful.”
“And who decides what happens?” Padme pushed her way to the front of the group, frowning. The twi’lek and clone bore identical expressions of calculation.

“Padme Amidala, heard you were getting pushed her.” A Pantorian appeared to her left, a hat tipped to the side of his head. “I’m actually here for you, ma’am. Beau, make sure these poets and such get a safe place tonight. Ma’am,” the man doffed his hat and offered a rough bow, “Follow me, please.”

Padme watched the aliens eyes carefully. She remembered her friend Senator Chuchi and felt a painful rush of emotions that had dulled so long ago.

“I…” there was a hill they’d have to walk down. It was grassy, and a stiff breeze was brushing past them. It was the first time she’d been outside on place like this in over a decade. She wasn’t sure she’d remember how to walk over the uneven ground.

“If it’d make you feel better,” he held out an arm. Actually, it would. This place reminded her of Naboo for the briefest of moments. She paused, pursing her lips as her eyes began to burn.

“Amidala.” She blinked, ignoring the tears that slipped from her eyes. “Ma’am.”

This was somehow worse than house arrest. The transition from almost complete isolation in a dim apartment in the Courasant underworld to a planet with people and sunlight make her chest ache with feelings she tried to bury.

“Ma’am.”

“Oh, Mother!” Her legs gave out; she dropped to the dirt, staring at the bright blue sky. “There’s sunlight here. Real sunlight.”

“Yes?” Beau ushered the crowd away, leaving her alone with the blue-skinned alien.

“And there’s grass and people. A lot of people.” Her gaze unfocused, “I haven’t seen grass in 14 years. I…I’ve been in isolation for so long I’m not sure I can….I don’t know.”

“That’s alright, Amindala.”

“Padme, call me Padme. The Jedi, they called me Amidala and…I don’t want it anymore.”

“Padme then. There are over a dozen psychologists here that can help you. We keep them close to here to help prisoners who need it.”

“Help?” The idea of psychologist hadn’t even occurred. “What?”

“They’ve helped with stuff from PTSD to breaking smoking habits. I’m sure you need the help, and they’re some of the best in their field.”

“They disagreed with the Jedi, didn’t they?”

“Human nature is apparently too dangerous to anything with it except lock it down, and that’s why they’re here.”

“That’s why I’m here I suppose.” The prison jumpsuit slid around her shoulders as she shrugged, still unwilling to stand. “I…I think.”

“If you don’t want to admit it, I understand. There’s a stigma against needing mental aide but I promise you, Padme, we only want to help you.”
“I…what do they want me for?” Her eyes fluttered closed, and she inhaled a deep breath of fresh air.

“I’m not at liberty to say at the moment just in case a Jedi comes back to interrogate you.”

“They put a tracker in me.” Her eyes overflowed. Padme covered her face with her elbow, sobbing.

“A tracker! I’m…I’m no better than a slave here!”

“Padme.” The alien put a careful hand on her shoulder and braced himself as the woman collapsed against his chest. He hugged her carefully, a little unsure.

“I never thought I’d take this for granted,” she sobbed, clutching him closer. Words nearly incoherent from her emotions, “Grass, the wind, sunlight, people….I missed it so much I made myself not I pushed it away and.”

“You’re here now, Padme and this is the next step to getting you free,” Kinch echoed a motion he had seen in a holo-film and patted the matted brown hair on her head. This wasn’t the first time a prisoner had broken down into tears upon seeing the planet. People kept in isolation usually had the same reaction to wide open space and bright sunlight. One of the main reasons he was usually in the welcoming party was because his boss appreciated his calm, understanding demeanor. People could trust him because he cared. “I know you may not believe this, but it will be alright.”

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“Skywalker.” Tang paused at the sight of the man sprawled across the ground. A toddler was running, screaming, in circles around the man as he hovered a ball just out of reach. “I can’t tell which of you are having more fun.”

“I think he is.” He rolled onto his stomach, pulling the ball closer to him and scooping the toddler up in his arms as the child collided with his chest. “Hey there, Juric! Hey there!

“Unca! Unca! Unca! More, More!”

“Your aunt is here too! Say hi to her!”

“Hi! Hi! Hi! Hi!” Juric leaned over Anakin’s shoulder’s waving frantically. “Tang! Up! Up!”

“I guess my debrief can wait till later.” Tang set her datapad to the side and hoisted the youngest member of the Dooku clan into her arms. “So, what did Uncle Anakin do with you today?”
A dozen students were packed into the library when Luke finally made it there. He could have used the Temple Library, but the temple felt stifling on the best of days. Madam Nu had mostly retired but still hovered around the shelves like an avenging beast ready to tear apart anyone who put the chips back incorrectly.

The public library was huge, and if he slipped on a jacket, he could easily pass for just another teenager. Since it was packed with college students trying to study and write thesis statements, high school students cramming for mid-terms Luke fit in. This place was his favorite to study even if the other Padawans sometimes teased him for bothering with it.

“Excuse me.” The librarian help desk was tall, taller than Luke. Like other short people, he had to climb a nearby step-ladder to look the person in the eye. Just barely peeking over the edge, he smiled at the elderly twi’lek male sitting there. “Excuse me, sir.”


“I have a project I’m working on,” Luke pushed his datapad across the counter to the man. “And I wanted to ask if you knew a good place to start with a topic like this.”

“A…politics is a touchy subject, my boy. A very touchy one here.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Hmmmm,” The green eyes considered him carefully, “You seem a nice enough young human, but this is a fairly advanced topic for someone your age.”

“Is it?” Luke blinked, shuffling his hat a bit to hide his padawan braid. “I’m sorry but.”

“Oh no, I can help you.” The twi’lek said. He stood up and made his way to the desk to speak to Luke. “There are some students doing this exact project, but they’re all of university age. This is only their second day of working on this. If you want I can introduce you to them. As of this moment, they have the monopoly on the remaining relevant books on this subject.”

“If you could, sir.” Luke took his datapad back, stuffing it into the non-regulation bag he’d bought a few months ago. He had to hide his civilian clothes in a locker on one of the under-levels to prevent it from being confiscated. As the rules stated, no padawan was to be out of uniform. If he were caught, then Luke would be in infinite amounts of trouble.

“They have one of the think tanks in the back here,” The twi’lek ushered him through the rows of shelves. Luke waved at a haggard group of students pouring over law books. “I think a good initiation process is to bring them all something to eat.”

“To eat? I didn’t…I don’t have.”
“That’s alright, just consider it. They all need to eat, the poor young things, but they’ve been so focused on classes that it is almost impossible to do.”

“I’ll do that, sir. If they let me join.”

“Of course,” the librarian pushed a door open, and four people looked up. “Hello, young’uns. Do you have room for another person on this project?”

“Who?” The tallest person there was a togruta woman with terrifying and impressive montreals and lekku. “Are you?”

“I’m…uh…..” With a flash of inspiration, he remembered the name his master sometimes called for in his sleep. “Anakin.”

“Anakin? That’s an odd name.”

“Yeah,” A twi’lek with blue skin leaned around the partition of stacked snack containers. “I didn’t think anyone would have the audacity to name a kid after that traitor.”

“Oh,” Anakin, Betrayer of the Republic. Luke had forgotten his master had known him. “I was born before he…uh…betrayed anyone.”

“You’re pretty small for someone who claims to be 15,” The only human in the group pointed out. He was tallish with a square face and bright red hair.

“Yeah, I get told that a lot.” It was actually the main reason the other Padawans made fun of him. “So, I’ve got a project I have to do for my Political History class, and I was wondering if you…well….he said you were working on a similar project.”

“If yours on recent political figures and their impact?”

“Yeah!” Luke chirped, smiling. “I did some research on my own but there are too many conflicting accounts, and none of them seem to line up. One report says one thing, and other says another.”

“I got that problem too,” The Rodian waved for Luke to have a seat, “the conflicting image makes it difficult to start because the person you need to start with is Padme Amidala.”

“Amidala,” Luke waved at the retreating librarian as he took the extra seat that the twi’lek had hastily cleared of empty drink cans with a wave of her hand. “Wasn’t she just arrested and imprisoned?”

“The same.” The togruta grunted, looking disgusted. “Pathetic Jedi bastards.”


“Why? So my words can be censored in private. What, do you think the thought police are paying attention to me?”

“What’s the thought police?” Luke felt his stomach churn uneasily.

“That’s what Dilje and a lot of other people call the Jedi.” The rodian answered, passing Luke a cream donut. “Have a snack”

The donut looked ten different shades of disgustingly unhealthy. Luke had never had anything like it before. His diet was controlled by the Temple dieticians. He knew what he was holding, but he’d never had one before.
“Why the thought police?” He asked, throwing his caution to the wind and taking a massive bite.

“Because they censor everything! I had to take a course in school on emotions and the dangers of them! Like it wasn’t already apparent that emotions could be dangerous, but they made us take tests on what’s appropriate to feel! Who does that? I’m not allowed to be angry because it’s dangerous! Love is dangerous and so is every emotion out there. Plus! They’ve started screening all of the psychologists and only the ones that fit into what the Jedi want to get the degree. They’ve emptied half of the museums and the libraries and all of the art galleries because they’re seditious and dangerous.” Dilje slammed her hand onto the table. “I call them the thought police because they try to tell the galaxy what to think and feel.” Luke carefully swallowed his bite to avoid choking, staring with wide eyes at the woman.

“I…” What could he say? “Why would they take art? It’s just art.”

The other three groaned allowed as Dilje turned offended eyes onto Luke. “What did you say?”

“Art is just pictures and paint.” Luke pointed out, echoing his crèche masters lessons. “And libraries are just full of stories. What could be dangerous about art and stories? It’s not like they do anything.”

“Oh my god, we’ve got a brainwashed kid here.” Luke glanced at the others, wondering if he was safe. They were all staring at him with varying degrees of shock. “The education system at its finest. The kid doesn’t even know about art and books. Koko!” Dilje put her hand to her forehead, breathing deeply.

“Anakin,” Koko, the Rodian leaned closer to Luke, “What do you know about music?”

“Only the….” Suddenly ashamed, Luke glanced away. “The stuff that I’m allowed to hear.” Not that they needed to know this, but Luke actually didn’t hear a lot of music. “But I don’t see why they would start taking things out of libraries and stuff. They’re just stories and pictures! What damage could they do to the Jedi.”

“The Jedi believe that all emotions are dangerous.” Koko passed him another donut. “And that to indulge in them would lead you to the ‘Dark Side’ right?”

“Yeah.” This was basic stuff. “Duh.”

“And what if I told you that art, books, and music are things that can…illicit emotions? That looking at them and reading them could make you feel things?”

“I guess that would make them dangerous,” Luke said. Some of the only art he had ever seen were the carved busts of long-dead council members. “Can’t have stuff like that around.”

“Well I thinking.” Koko cast a glare at the togruta.

“Do you want to get started on your project, Anakin?”

“Yes.” Anything to drop this conversation that made him uncomfortable. “Uh, my project is on people who’ve influenced the politics of the galaxy in recent years.”

“Who were you going to go with?” The twi’lek spoke up.

“Uh. Master Yoda and Chancellor Palpatine.”

“Mine is on recent political figures,” Said Koko, “I chose Padme Amidala and Bail Organa.”
“Oh,” Luke sighed, “Gee, you guys sure have a lot of opinions.”

“I do.” Dilje nodded, “So, who wants this book on political theory?” Luke raised his hand. The surprising disrespect to the Jedi or not, he did still have a project to start.

Obi Wan hadn’t bothered to eat before he went back to his rooms to collapse onto a couch. Since there was nothing interesting on the Holo anymore, he didn’t bother to turn it on. Alone, he watched the traffic outside the window.

“Master.” He jolted in his seat as he saw Luke enter the room. The boy was dressed impeccably in his clothes, and his signature was clear and even. “Are you here?”

“I am,” Obi-Wan sat up, “Did you complete your project yet?”

“No yet, master.” Luke hung up his cloak and bent to remove his shoes. “I want to make this project nothing less than perfect as you wanted. There is still a lot of research I have left to do.”

“I see.” That was understandable. Luke had a slavish desire to please him in all things. Luke bent over backward to complete a task to his liking. It reminded him painfully of his father. “Have you eaten?”

“Some. Would you like me to bring you something from the commissary?’

“Yes, that would be preferable.” To standing up and facing the idea that he might not be able to stop Anakin when the time came, “Something light if you please.”

“Yes, master.”

Luke made his way back to the library think tank with a wave to the librarian. He was ready for more work to get done, but that idea was derailed when he found Koko arguing with Dilje.

“It’s not safe. You can’t just show a kid this stuff! The culture shock will probably kill him. He’s too young.”

“He’s not too young.” Luke leaned around the door, afraid suddenly. “He should know how this works.”

“I agree but if he makes a slip up in public and someone decides to investigate then it will be traced back to you, and you’ll go to prison.”

“I’m going to prison anyway,” Dilje growled, “One way or the other and I’d like to do it because I’ve done something to deserve it.”

“And trying to crack the programming on the mind of some brainwashed kid is the way to do it?”

“Yeah! Look, Koko! Anakin doesn’t even know what art is supposed to look like. How can he?”

“I’m not saying you shouldn’t do it, but you should be safer about it. Go a bit at a time, so you don’t overwhelm him and have him report you to the Jedi.”

“Fine.” Luke back away from the door to see Ikme, the twi’lek, watching him.
“What are you doing?”


“About what?”

“I don’t know, but they seemed angry.” Luke wasn’t used to people arguing. Usually, they debated and sensing such passionate emotions like this was terrifying as much as it was fascinating.

They were two hours into their study session, and most everything was quiet. Luke had cornered a bag of spicy fried tubers and was crunching his way through it.

“You need to look at this.” Luke jerked backward when a datapad was dropped onto his.

“What’s this?” Dilje smiled grimly.

“This is art, Luke. I don’t know the artist, but they’re pretty good, and their work is banned. You should look at it.”

“It’s banned.” Luke scrunched his face up and looked away, terrified. If his master heard about this.

“So what if it’s banned. Like you said yesterday, if it’s only pain and paper then how dangerous can it be? Are you afraid of it?”

“No, but it’s against the law.” He whispered, opening his eyes and looking anyway.

“How dangerous can it be?” Hanzo, the only other human, leaned over his shoulder. His long hair tickled Luke’s neck as he glanced down. “If it nothing?”

“I.” Luke’s words died in his throat. The painting displayed was raw, ugly and violent; displaying a battlefield. Standing in the center, surrounded by bodies and broken machines was a man whose face was hooded. He was standing still, a hand holding an extended blue lightsaber over the bloody corpses. “Oh no!” Luke closed his eyes. “This is. This is banned!”


“He was murdered,” Luke whispered. He shouldn’t have been surprised at the painting. He has been responsible for scenes like that himself. He’d fought his way across dozens of battlefields with rebels and terrorists. “I…he did a lot of stuff before he was killed.”

“A lot of shit stuff.” Dilje snapped, going quiet when Koko spoke up.

“He wasn’t as benevolent at those books tell you, Luke. Most of his work escalated the war.”

“But the Separatists were evil! They were run by the Sith! They shouldn’t have tried to become independent.”

“Really? What’s wrong with being independent? If they didn’t like their government then why can’t they have chosen to make their own.”

“The Republic had to stay together. They invited chaos and war and suffering.”

“Into a galaxy that was already plagued by chaos, war, and suffering. They didn’t like how the galaxy was being run, so they built their own.” Koko shrugged, “Don’t you think they had a right to?”
“No!” Luke glanced around; he was alone. “The Battle of Geonosis! They were going to execute the Jedi.”

“So what? That’s not grounds for war. That’s grounds for a political shit-storm. That doesn’t mean bring in a million troopers and a bunch of kids to fight a battle. Emperor Yoda started that war and all the deaths of the Jedi after that were on his tiny little head. It was his fault the war started because he couldn’t comprehend the change. Changes that needed to happen.”

“Master Yoda did not start that war! Dooku did!”

“Dooku, who runs his own government now. Dooku, whose senators go around and destroy the Hutts and free slaves while our own is desperately reinforcing the status quo just so they don’t lose the comfortable feeling of being in control?” Dilje growled, “Anakin Skywalker wasn’t a traitor, he was a hero, and he fights for what he believes him. Because of him, Tatooine doesn’t have any more slavery! Tatooine! Where Jabba’s Palace used to stand.”

Luke hunkered down in his seat, “He killed the chancellor.”

“Some people need to die,” Koko said dismissively. Luke was aghast. “Who has the speech Amidala gaze to the Senate when they wanted to cut domestic funding?”

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If she didn’t have to be inside Padme was not going to be inside. She spent her days helping work the gardens. She ate outside and slept outside in a hammock that someone strung up for her. When the specialist that Beau called up for her wanted to speak, Padme had her sessions outside in a clearing sitting on a stump.

Her shrink said that stepping, voluntarily, into a house would be a huge step for her but not to push herself if she didn’t think she could handle it. Being under house arrest with no contact to the outside world had had more of an effect than she wanted to admit. She wasn’t alone much anymore, but over-stimulation caused a panic attack.

For now, she was fine, though. Content despite the fact she was in prison.

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The force was trembling. It pulled away from Yoda’s grasp almost mockingly. It pushed him away, ignoring his meditation and hiding away.

Nothing.

He had not felt anything like this since Anakin had Fallen.

After hours of fruitless meditation he called for an attending initiate.


“Yes, master.”
Luke and Leia

Chapter Summary

Luke and Leia are connected but they don't know it. Luke wishes he could be as good as Obi Wan.

The sky beyond the window was crowded with speeders, ships and dozens of shuttles; lanes of traffic that sped along at breakneck speeds to get across the planet. Their lights flared in the night, creating near continuous streams of light. Behind them, the bright lights of the skyscrapers and their airspace markers glowed a million different colors. Each of them was bright, unyielding and stern.

Sometimes looking out the window in his small dorm was a lot like looking into the eyes of his master. The light there was hard and constant and while it looked like nothing had changed, but something obviously had.

He sensed his Master approach and sat up, pulling the curtains closed again as he settled into the proper pose for meditation.


“I’m here, Master.” He didn’t get up.

“What are you doing awake?”

“I.” Lying to his master was difficult but not impossible, but in this state of mind, it would be difficult. “I couldn’t sleep, Master. I was trying to meditate to help me.”

“You dream, Padawan.” The sharp tone made him cringe even as he nodded. “Your nightmare is nothing. Do not think of it.”


“Jedi do not dream, Padawan.” The sharp tone made him cringe even as he nodded. “Your nightmare is nothing. Do not think of it.”


“Ah,” The wary watchfulness of his master did not settle, but now there was an element of discomfort. “Master Yoda summons you.”

“Oh.” Luke blinked but stood to get changed into his robes. “Do you know why?”

“It is not our place to question the will of Master Yoda,” Obi-Wan reprimanded him. “Only to obey.”

“Yes, Master.” Luke watched him out of the corner of his eye. Obi-Wan looked tired, drawn and miserable. His presence in the force wavered a bit when Luke tried to smile at him. He sensed regret and an undertow of bitter anger that seemed to coat all of his Master’s actions.
“Hurry, Luke. Master Yoda is not to be kept waiting.”

“Yes, Master.” Luke had only taken two minutes but he wasn’t surprised Obi-Wan was going to scold him. It seemed he could never do anything right in the eyes of his master. Always Obi-Wan seemed to be holding him to an impossible standard that Luke just couldn’t manage to reach. He had to wonder who Obi-Wan had trained before him. “I’m ready.”

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“Jedi do not have dreams.” Deep in the Royal Gardens of Alderaan, Padawan Leia was trying to meditate. The pools of water around her were silent, unmoving and glassy and the sky was clear and still. It should have been an ideal night to meditate but Leia was struggling to grasp the force. “Jedi do not have Nightmares.” She clenched her eyes shut, blocking out the distant lights of the Palace. “We do not dream.”

Just ten years ago the Royal Palace of Alderaan had been partly converted into a new Jedi Temple. They shared the enormous living space with both the Royal Family and their various affiliates. It was here the Leia had grown up, surrounded by lush gardens, sweeping palace walls, the chatter of a planetary government, and the beautiful landscape of Alderaan. Master Windu had taken a peculiar interest in her, taking her own when she was only six from the Corellia Temple. She had trained relentlessly, grasping for the approval of her Master and the other Jedi that visited.

Master Windu had never explained why he wanted someone with so little Force sensitivity. Telekinesis was beyond her abilities as were a host of other skills the Jedi used. She could manage Force assisted jumps and attacks but little else. Diving into the Force was impossible to her and meditation was an excuse in frustration. It infuriated her to no end to see the younger initiates and Padawans mastering skills she should have had ages ago.

“Leia?” She jolted, not having sensed the arrival of Bail Organa. “What are you doing up this early.”

“Prince Consort,” Leia whirled around to watch the man approach. “I didn’t sense you.”

“I’m sorry for frightening you, Padawan.” Organa smiled, nodding to the girl. “But I saw you out here, and I thought to see if you were alright.”

“I’m fine,” She replied, tucking her hands into her sleeves, “Jedi are not afraid.” A soft smile that was equal parts sad and understanding.

“Of course,” Bail Organa settled onto a nearby stone bench, “Are you trying to meditate.”

“I can’t seem to manage it.” She sighed, falling back into her meditation pose. “I having more trouble with the Force lately.”

“I see. Leia, is there a reason you were up this late?”

“I am meditating.”

“Hmm. Did you have nightmare.”

“NO!” She barked, “I’m fine.”

“Ah.”

“I’m sorry,” she looked away, “Sometimes I have trouble releasing my emotions into the Force and then I get…testy.”
“Of course, Leia, would you like to sit with me?”

“Sure.” Leia moved to the bench, besides the Prince Consort.

“It’s a chilly night,” Bail draped his cloak over the Jedi Padawan and smiled when the girl pushed into his side. “Alright, so, you had a nightmare?”

“Yes.” Leia pulled the cloak closer, leaning into his side. “Please don’t tell my Master.”

“I won’t.” Bail and Leia had formed a close friendship over the years. He’d sometimes minded her while Windu went on missions off-world. Since he and his wife hadn’t been able to have any children he considered Leia the closest to a daughter he could have. “Do you want to tell me about?”

“I don’t know.” Leia sighed, “It was dark, but then there was this blue light, like a lightsaber.”

“A lightsaber?”

“There was a Jedi holding it and when it shone the I saw this clearing and it was full of all these….bodies.” She whispered the last word. “They were all lying about and they looked and smelled horrible and I…it was so vicious and dark.”

“Hmmm,” A little disturbed, Bail pulled Leia closer.

“Then there was this boy, he was on the other side of the Knight. He was small and blond, and he was just standing there, staring. I couldn’t move, and the Knight turned around and he…well…he cut me in two.”

“Did you wake up then?”

“No, the boy got cut down too. And I could see the whole thing from above, and we were all dead except the Knight who just stood there. I couldn’t see his face, but I think he didn’t even care. Like, he was….dark.”

“Hmmm. Do you think this dream might say something?”

“It wasn’t a vision,” Leia said quickly. “It was just a dream.”

“Dreams still mean things, Leia.” Bail brushed a hand over her hair. “Here, we believe that dreams can reveal something about ourselves we might want to ignore or they might show us a secret we want to be answered.”

“It was just a dream, and I won’t have anymore.”

“You might,” Bail disagreed, “You might.”

“I won’t,” Leia grumbled, “Jedi don’t dream.”

Bail paused before replying, “I think, Leia, that you would be surprised.”

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“Come, come, young Skywalker.” Master Yoda watched the short human edge across the threshold, “Hiding are you?”

“No, Master.” Luke straightened, “I’ve just never been in here before.”

“Hmm, false that is.” Luke settled into a meditative pose on a nearby chair. “When young, did you
“Stay here, very young.”

“Oh.”

“Hmmm, but the history we are not here to discuss.”


“Think of the Ryloth conference, do you?”

“I don’t know much about it,” Luke admitted. “I know that Ryloth has successfully petitioned to join the Confederacy and that a few masters will be going to oversee the treaty signing.”

“Indeed, your Master will be going.”

“I did not know that.”

“Going, will you be as well, young Luke.” Yoda watched the boy blink and nod.

“Yes, Master.”

“Hmm, many things to happen after the treaty,” Yoda chewed idly on his gimmer stick. “Many things.” Luke waited. He had sensed no disruption’s in the Force around Luke. His signature was the same as always, even and a little dim. No taint of the dark or passion, unlike his father. “Prepared, are you, for the future?”


“Hmm.” Yoda did not answer the boy. He had sensed hate, anger, and fear that likes of which that hadn’t been felt since Anakin Skywalker had roamed these halls. Something was amiss, and the Force was not explaining it.

“Tell me, youngling, what danger lays in passion?”

“Passion comes from emotions, such as love, hate, anger, and fear. It is a blinding uncontrollable emotion that makes people unstable, reckless and dangerous.” Luke replied promptly. “If someone is passionate then they will be a liability on the field and to those around them. People with excessive passion, even not Jedi, can be…is there another word for dangerous?”

“Good, young one. What of the dangers of love.”

“Love is an attachment. Attachments are against the code. They can lead to reckless decisions and sometimes passion.”

“Attachments are dangerous,” Yoda affirmed, “lead one to the Darkness, they can.”


“Hmmm.” Yoda closed his eyes, falling into a light meditation. He heard and felt Luke shift and fidget in his seat until the boy seemed to calm. For several hours they sat, Yoda meditating and testing the young padawan.

When he finally opened his eyes Yoda was disappointed to find that Luke was not sitting still and waiting. Luke had acquired, probably from one of his pockets, a length of string and seemed to be braiding it. The color was bright, a deep purple, that was being turned into a patterned bracelet.
“Hmm.” Luke started, flushing guiltily when Yoda stared at him.

“I…uh…I learned how to braid in one of my classes,” Luke babbled, “I thought I’d practice it while I was waiting for you to finish.”

“Is it art?”

“No, Master.” Luke blinked, and there was a split second of guilt that prompted Yoda to pulled the braided string from the human’s hand.

“Meditate, you will, today.” He ordered, tucking the braid into his robes, “Study the code.”

“Yes, Master Yoda.”

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Luke’s legs ached from sitting in one position so long. Usually, a padawan could use the force to lessen the ache and pains of holding still, but for Luke it was impossible. He couldn’t do much with the Force and he didn’t think Yoda would appreciate him trying.

As he hobbled out, trying to stretch his muscles out, Luke felt a burning pain behind his eyes. He hadn’t cried since he’d broken his arm during training but now it felt as if someone had broken something inside him; in his mind. It was difficult to force himself to stay calm until he reached his little room. Master Obi-Wan wasn’t in; he had an early morning session of training.

Luke barely had time to make it into his room before he collapsed against his bed and burst into tears. His hands bunched in the scratchy fabric and his face was pressed into the mattress. Hot tears poured from his eyes, soaking the bed and rolling down his cheeks when he lifted his head enough to take a gulping sob of air.

All alone in his cold, unfeeling room Luke exhausted his tears after a solid twenty minutes. He felt dry, empty, and cold; suddenly aware of every sensation in his body. The starched fabric of his robes to the greasy feeling of his hair plastered to his head, a grumble of hunger, a creak of a joint and the blood pounding in his ears. Luke pulled the pillow against his chest and settled his back against the bed. He hiccupped randomly.

He tried so hard and still, they scolded him! He couldn’t get dressed fast enough. He couldn’t sit still long enough; he couldn’t manage to pay attention to his Katas, or the classes. He kept getting distracted and confused and then he failed his classes. The disappointment and judgment were so clear in the eyes of every Master he tried to please. His classmates already had nicknamed him ‘Null’ since he couldn’t levitate rocks for long. Why was it so impossible to be a Jedi that way Master Kenobi and the others wanted him to be?
Obviously Ignored

Chapter Summary

Dooku sees something that Anakin ignores and is ashamed of.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Anakin could remember countless separate occasions that he had woken in a similar predicament. Drugged, bound, weaponless, unfed, thirsty, and half-dead. Sometimes he had Obi-Wan with him and sometimes he was with Rex. Still, this was the first time he had woken up to find himself bound to an enemy.

“I was wondering when one of you would wake up.” Anakin groaned, closing out the deep rumble of Dooku’s voice. “That is has taken this long is no surprise.” He felt dried out like his lungs were paper thin that threatened to tear at the slightest breeze, his bones a tired old material that had lain in the desert too long, his hands were crumbled twigs that a careless hiker had crushed underfoot. Anakin Skywalker took stock of the new pains from his limbs and surveyed the chronic pain that plagued him. His semi-drugged state through all of his body’s complaints into sharp relief.

He hated it when this happened. It took too long for him to work the pain into a manageable box once it had made its way out.

“Well, Skywalker?”

“Well, what?” He infused his voice with as much insolence as possible, but from the appraising glance, the Count threw his way it must have been a pretty weak infusion. He wasn’t ready to sit up yet.

“You appear to have accomplished your goal.” Anakin huffed his irritation as he began moving his arms to move beneath himself. “You have truly found me.”

“That’s what it looks like.” He was unable to suppress the tired groan that worked its way out when he began maneuvering himself to his hands and feet. The next time he looked at Dooku there seemed to be a confused tilt to his head.

“How long did Hondo keep you and Kenobi in those restraints, Skywalker?”

“What do you care?” When he levered himself up, he glanced back to Obi-Wan. The Jedi Master looked infinitely better than he did. At least Obi-Wan looked peaceful.

“I do not.” Count Dooku nearly smiled when Anakin stumbled into the wall with a breathy sigh of pain. “I wonder, Skywalker, who knows of your chronic pain?”

“What?” His snarl nor did the sudden glower phase the Count. In fact, the man seemed smug, assured in his pose.

“Did you think I could not sense it, boy?” Anakin felt his stomach drop to somewhere near his toes.
He had many secrets and having Dooku know any number of them could be a disaster. “The pain? That constant pain you live with, every moment of your life is pain…suffering. Does your master know?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about?” Anakin snarled, the beast in his chest rumbled, angry. He pushed the animal away, forcing himself to remember all that Obi-Wan had taught him.

“You’re weak,” Dooku drawled, “weak and tired and miserable. I know the Jedi, and no Jedi I know has ever felt like you in the force.”

“Like what?” He drew his prosthetic near his chest, feeling like an animal in a cage. A hunter that had become prey.

“Like a bruise, painful and ignored. Ah, I am not surprised though, you have been like this since Geonosis.”

“You tried to kill me then, and I was just tortured now.” Anakin retorted, a sudden dousing a fear in his chest that drowned out the primitive rage. “What did you expect?”

“Kenobi does not register the same, and I suspect,” Dooku tilted his head to the side, “That he underwent the same treatment.”

“It’s nothing!” The desperation to hide it. To hide his shame. To hide the inadequacy. To hide everything.

“You cannot separate yourself from your pain. You cannot force yourself to ignore it properly, can you?” Dooku didn’t seem to be mocking him, but Anakin retreated further away anyway. “I’ve sensed the same thing from many force user the Order has abandoned, Skywalker.”

“There’s nothing wrong with me.” He snarled, cringing against Obi-Wan, forcibly denying the truth.

“Your pain…emotions…passion. All beyond what the Jedi want you to be I’m sure. Of course, I don’t think any of the Masters would notice even the obvious beneath their nose.”

“I’m fine.” He needed Obi-Wan to wake up. He needed him to get the Count's attention off him. “This is a result of.”

“Are you trying to lie to me, boy?”

“I’m not.”

“I am a Sith.” For just a moment Dooku’s eyes glowed yellow, “I can see your pain.”

“It’s chronic pain,” The words slipped out before he could stop them. “It’s not my fault.”

“I would never imply that it was.” Dooku nodded toward Obi-Wan, “Though I suppose you hide it from him to protect yourself?”

“No.” He frowned, unsure where the conversation was going. “I’m not.”

“Of course you’re hiding it for protection. If I recall Yoda had a particular affinity to say…pain leads to suffering that tired old maxim that means little to anyone, who has experienced life beyond the Jedi constraints. I know something of chronic pain myself, Skywalker. Many people do.”

“It’s not my fault.” Anakin repeated, staring at Dooku with something close to shock. Outside the cell a pirate stumbled into the door, roaring with drunken laughter. His limbs were trembling from the
constant strain of war, the torture, the training….Anakin shook his head. “It’s not my fault.”

“What is it, Skywalker?” He clenched his eyes shut, trying to block the Sith. “Is it your limbs? Do they shake? Are you tired at every moment? Do you rise with such unfathomable anger it frightens you? Angry over the smallest things? The noise of a footstep, the shutting of a door, perhaps even the words of someone you care about?”

“Stop.”

“I have seen this before you know. The refusal to acknowledge the personal pains of a person, pushing them out of the way for the sake of the mission. Demanding the most from your body and steadfastly ignoring the signs of sickness.”

“I’m not sick.” Obi-Wan needed to wake up. He needed the dark attention on someone else. Anakin could feel the force swirling around Dooku with the unfiltered brilliance of a star imploding. It was the Darkness in all of its violent pride and preening plumage. The brush of his uncomfortable clothes, the tightness of the boots around his ankles, the shackles on his wrists. Suddenly every sense on his body and mind magnified itself a thousand fold as the last of his filters and walls collapsed inward.

Anakin collapsed with a wordless scream, huddled against the floor under the onslaught of information that his brain and senses seemed intent of overload him with. A hundred details he noticed and tried to discard. The force hummed in his ear, brighter than twin suns at their zenith and darker than the solstice nights. Every pain and ache in his body, from the phantom pain of losing his hand to the echoes of the humiliating scars on his back and shoulders. The broken fingers, the poorly healed ribs, the constant headache, all of his pains that he locked down hide away and ignored.

“Well,” He gasped out when a hand settled onto his back, “This is interesting.” A set of foreign walls erected themselves a respectful distance from Anakin, holding the information back and keeping the force at a tolerable distance.

“What did you do?”

“I simply reconstructed those filters of yours.” Dooku said, his heavy hand still on Anakin’s back. Anakin couldn’t remember feeling this vulnerable in years. If Dooku really wanted to, he could kill him and. “I couldn’t have Kenobi waking up to find you imploding and deciding to blame me.”

“It is your fault.” The world came back into focus even with the unfamiliar walls he could make sense of the universe again.

“I believe your refusal to care for yourself is what triggered this, actually.” The hand moved away, “I wonder, has the order’s health care deteriorated so much you have not learned to manage your own pain?”

“Pain leads to suffering.” Anakin parroted and reared back when Dooku landed a gentle cuff along the side of his head.

“Do not provide lip service to the Order when there is no one to judge you.” Yan Dooku glanced only briefly at Obi Wan’s inert form. “I am too old to listen to those useless fools babble the lies of their stagnated self again and again through the mouths of their victims.”

The entire conversation had taken a turn for the surreal. This should not have happened. Anakin ought to have woken up and quickly begun insulting the Count. He shouldn’t be relying on him while he got his own senses into line. At any moment the man could use his hold over Anakin to strike, killing or incapacitating him.
“There is a way for you to manage your pain, boy. Without it becoming this debilitating.”

“Really?” The first things he tucked away were the sensations of his clothes, the noise around him, and every minor irritant. “Katas and meditation?”

“What?” Dooku sputtered with a laugh, “Is that the best advice the temple healers could give you?”

“Well…” Anakin wasn’t sure how much he could tell the count so he pushed his filters back into place and the world fell back to a semi-manageable hum in the background. “Yes?”

“Of course.” The Sith rolled his eyes, “Ignore the problem until it goes away or explodes in your face. That is the Jedi way.”

Anakin said nothing.

“Contrary to the limited knowledge of the Order there are ways to deal with your chronic pain and your apparent case of sensory overload.”

“I can manage.”

“I’ve seen how well you managed, Skywalker, and I am less than impressed.”

Obi Wan woke up to relative silence and was immediately alarmed. Separated as far as their restraints would allow, silent, were Anakin and Dooku. He observed the elder, tracking Dooku’s gentle breathing and the peculiar motions of his hands. The count seemed calm, calm and collected even as he was tied to two Jedi Knights.

“Anakin?”

“I’m right here.”

His former padawan seemed calm too, but the familiar restless energy that burned beneath his system was ever present.

“Well, Count, this is a fine mess we’re in.”

“Indeed.” Dooku did not open his eyes. “How do you intend to get us out of it?”

Anakin remembered all of what Dooku told him about managing sensory overload. He remembered and when he went to the Courasant Public Library, located almost thirty levels down; heavily underfunded and falling slowly to pieces, to see if Dooku had been right.

“You want to know what?” The librarian was an old-ish twi’lek with graying green skin and long lekku.

“The most recent book on medical information that talks about something called ‘sensory overload.’”

“Ah,” the librarian nodded, “Of course, young one. Come with me.”

“My library doesn’t have it.” Anakin said awkwardly.

“Oh….which one is that?”
“Uh…the newest one on the upper level.” He lied quickly, as the twi’lek escorted him through the clean but shabby shelves. “The medical section is incomplete.”

“Most can be these days.” Anakin watched the dozens of children all crammed into a circle with a fond smile. The adult reading to them was an elderly rodian woman with growing cataracts. “Ah, I remember the day this library was the grandest on the planet. The largest selection of books and novels until the war.”

“What happened after it started?” Anakin wasn’t dressed like a Jedi; in fact, he looked like a smuggler or a tired mechanic who had had a long day.

“They started censoring the books and things.” The librarian showed him to a new wing, cobwebs and nests cluttered the upper floors and shelves. “All those good books that people wanted and needed just got taken away. They weren’t published or distributed. In fact, I don’t think I’ve gotten a decent update on any of the topics we carry except for mechanics and those trashy romance novels in almost a year now. Kinda said.”

“Why would anyone censor a library?” Anakin followed him down a long pair of shelves; the data chips blinked at him.

“Oh, you know, the usual reasons. What the person wrote is dangerous, treasonous, against galactic security. Sometimes they say they’re Separatists or …..” The Twi-lek sighed deeply, glancing at Anakin. “Do you like poetry?”

“Sometimes….my library doesn’t have any of it.”

“Would you like to take some poetry with you, young human?”

“I guess.”

“I haven’t found anyone to take care of this chip,” the man produced a small square. “If you would take it I would be honored.”

“Take it?” Anakin accepted the chip, glancing down and then up. “But aren’t I just borrowing it?”

“Oh no, I need someone to take it. To protect it. I don’t like the way this war is going.”

“You think the Republic might lose?” He wondered as the wall approached them and the library finally stopped.

“I think that no matter the military outcome everyone will lose.” He pointed to a row of chips, “Those will be the books you need.”

“What do you mean by that?” Anakin only glanced at the chips before questioning his guide. “Sir, why would everyone lose?”

“Oh, everyone’s been losing for a while now.” The Twi-lek said, his shoulders drooping, “There’s been too much emphasis on everything else. No one wants to listen to the classics, read them anymore. They’d rather write about the glories of war, of fire and pain. The Senate keeps restricting the books and the music….you now that the galaxy is doomed with the freedom of expression is taken away bit by bit. So insidious we never even notice it until it’s too late.”

“Is it too late?” Anakin wondered quietly, ashamed. He knew what it was like to have your voice and expression stolen from you. To have your thoughts bound down to make the authority happy. He had suffered it for so long.
“What do you think young human?” The Twi-lek sighed a bit and patted his arm. “I hope you find the answers you are looking for.”

“I…” Anakin Skywalker watched the Twi-lek wander down the shelves again and disappear into the near-silence of the library. “Okay.” Muttering to himself, he tucked the chip away and browsed through the available medical books.

He found that Dooku had been correct. The steps the man had outlined to prevent Anakin from going catatonic, the help he’d offered the Knight even as he’d mocked him, and it was all real. Written out in neat letters on an official textbook, Anakin closed his eyes and sighed.

The holo-net would have conflicting answers. Plus, he knew there were programs and droids in place to monitor the outgoing holo-net traffic of the Jedi temple. Anakin was a little paranoid that someone would discover what he’d been researching. He couldn’t have the Jedi thinking he was anything less than their most effective night.

Having any signs of weakness or failing was intolerable. The Jedi Council would never tolerate even the most basic of weaknesses from their generals. Even knowing that Dooku knew was torturous. The man could use it, bargain with it, and blackmail him with it….except. Except that Dooku had never implied that his weakness was his fault, only that there were better ways of handling it.

Dooku knew his personal weakness. The question was ‘was Dooku the kind of person to use this against him?’

“#$#$#

Several Hours Later

“Well, Anakin. It has certainly been a long time.”

“Chancellor,” he bowed a bit before settling into his usual chair. He noticed, perhaps for the first time, that there was music playing over the speakers. A high keening sort of music that was drilling into his brain and scrambling his thoughts. The lights were a little too bright; the shades were open to allow the dangerous glare of the planet’s weak sun glinting off the constant speeder traffic.

He remembered the advice and closed his eyes, applying more filters around his mind and sinking into forced patience.

“I heard about your mission’s encounter with Count Dooku, you have my apologies.”

“I came out fine, Chancellor.” He replied, cringing when the music picked up a beat. “We managed to keep the ransom from pirate hands even if we weren’t able to capture Dooku.”

“Oh, yes. Dooku, a shame he believes the lies he wants. He could have been great.” There was a sickly sweet grin that Anakin gave a shaky smile in reply.

“Chancellor.” The music reached another high pitch. He clenched his eyes shut. “What can I help you with?”

“Ah, I wanted to discuss with you the merits of building…. And Anakin knew he’d be there for hours.

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Padme returned from a tedious day of Senate work to find her husband in the usual spot. After a bad
mission, he always returned to the same spot or even after a long day.

“Annie?” She leaned down to look at the tired form of her husband. “Do you want me to leave?”

“No.” He sounded more tired than he’d ever sounded. “Could you turn off the lights?”

“Of course.” Once the lights were off, she took his unspoken invitation to join him under the bed. It was here, the most unlikely of places, that he made his comfortable spot. It was cool, dark and with no distractions. “Do you want to talk about it?” She kept her voice low and even. His symptoms usually abated after a certain period of time but returning to working order after a hard shut down was difficult for her husband.

“Padme,” His blue eyes were just barely visible in the low light of their bedroom, “Do you think there’s something wrong with me?”

“Anakin?”

“Like maybe I’m broken or ineffective or….just….not..useful.”

“Anakin, you have problems but so do many other people. Everyone in the galaxy has problems.”

“Yeah,” Anakin snorted, shifting his head on a makeshift pillow, “but other people don’t shut down because the way their clothes feel against them drives them crazy. Or they don’t go nuts because they can’t tolerate the noise and lights of an office.”

“Did he play the music again?”

“Yeah.” He sighed, nodding a bit.

“Anakin, you have a condition, and this does not make you useless. You’re not broken because you’re hurt.”

“I shut down in the middle of a mission, Padme.” He admitted quietly, curling around her proffered hand. “I was in a cell with Dooku.” Her breath caught, “And Obi-Wan and I woke up and a second later I…fell to pieces.”

“What happened?”

“Dooku rebuilt the filters for me while I…recovered.”

“He did?”

“I didn’t believe it at the time either.” Anakin gave a soft snort and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. “And he told there were ways to manage it. He said the chronic pain and sensitivity wouldn’t go away but that I could manage it better than I was. So before my meeting with the chancellor, I went to the library.”

“I thought you said Madam Yu didn’t have anything you needed.”

“She didn’t, but the public library did.”

“We just cut more funding for public libraries,” Padme observed.

“And they had a bunch of books on the topic and they….had advice. I used it today, and it helped.”

“And?”
“I still feel broken.” He sighed, “Other people don’t need a break when they come from a meeting for when they do things. I need one, I know I need one. I can’t be effective when I’m.”

“Anakin,” she snuggled closer to him. He was warm and solid in her arms, gentle in a way that no one would ever expect. “People are not objects; they aren’t tools, they aren’t machines. They are emotional and passionate, and they should never be judged by how useful they are. People with disabilities should never be granted any less respect or kindness than the most able-bodied person.”

“Then why do I feel so…..weak? Why can’t I function like a normal person? Why does every day hurt? Why can’t I focus like everyone else? Why…?”

“Anakin, the problem is not your chronic pain or your hypersensitivity. The problem is the perception of it.”

“You know, there was a reason we put in such a nice carpet.” Anakin muttered, “I keep trying to have it installed in my temple quarters, but they won’t let me. They keep using the laundry detergent that just feels so….blech on my skin, and I can’t walk past the commissary anymore. You know, when I go to war I sometimes have to block out everything. I make myself this sort of…deaf and I numb everything down, so I don’t fall to pieces in but Dooku saw.”

“Do you think he’ll do something because of it?”

“I don’t know.” Anakin admitted. “But I don’t really want to talk about.”

“Okay.” They passed several hours in relative silence before Anakin stirred again. “Do you want to have sex tonight?”

“Not really.”

“Okay.”

“Do you want to take a long bath with those little bubbles?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you want me to run it?”

“If you don’t mind.”

“Anything else?”

“No. Do you want anything?”

“Could you make me some tea and break out that stash of cookies we’ve been hoarding?”

“Anything else?”

“Would you get the bathrobes out?”

“Okay.”

“Do you want to watch a holo-film tonight?”

“Can you read poetry instead?”

“Sure thing.”
I based Anakin's hyper sensitivity on my own somewhat but I figured it would be a lot worse due to the force. Also, I'm going to show Anakin's defection one thing at a time because if I did it all in one chapter this thing would never get updated.
The dozens of people that were swarming around a glowing sign was concerning and a little confusing. Usually, large groups were only found in bars and restaurants, in all his years he didn’t really see people assembling. So whatever had prompted all of these people to throng together meant it had to be important.

Luke shoved his way to the front and frowned when he saw what had been posted there. It was an invitation for people to submit questions and concerns to the Senate and offered upwards of a hundred people a meeting with the Jedi council.

“Even if we went; do you really think that they’d listen to any of us?” He heard someone mutter. “I mean, they did get the economy stabilized and we are safe from the Separatists. Plus, crime has gone way down in the last few years.”

Luke memorized the decree and made for the Public Library and once there, found them already discussing it.

“It’s obviously a trap.” Dilje snapped when Luke appeared, “A way to find dissidents. They’re going to let people think that they get to talk but I bet you ever credit that those who go to the Senate will be arrested one by one.”

“How do you know? They might really want to answer questions.”

“It would be a good PR stunt,” Koko pointed out, “If they don’t actually arrest them.”

“Who wants to meet that green sack of stupidity anyway?” Dilje mused, dropping back into her seat. “I mean, Yoda is damn pretentious. Do you guys remember his speech when they took over? I remember it; I was terrifying. There was this group of glow stick-wielding monks that had no checks and balances that had operated with near impunity during a whole damn war and through galactic history. They just marched onto the Senate floor with their clones, where did they come from by the way, and just said they were taking over.”

Luke squirmed in his seat. He, like the rest of the initiates, had been taught that it had been for the good of the galaxy. Yes, it had been out of the ordinary but the Republic had been falling apart and there was factional splintering and infighting. Though none of it had been done with clones since the clones only obeyed Jedi commanders. However, knowing what he did know about the rest of the galaxy and his slowly expanding vision, it did sound a little sketchy.

“What can we do?” Hans sighed, leaning his head back, “We’re only students, and you know what happened at the last protest when they wanted their textbooks done correctly.”

“What happened?”

“It got ugly,” Koko said, “a few years ago. Clone troopers had to break up the protests, and a lot of students were arrested.”
“But why.”
“Because they were showing dissent. The Jedi want to ‘re-unite’ the Republic and that translates to anyone who disagrees with us goes to prison. They don’t care about the truth and stuff; they just want everyone to go along and now get worked up. They said that the war got started because of badly handled tempers. Bullshit, that war was started by Yoda and his little posse of child-soldiers.”

“We’ve already had this discussion Dilje,” Hans sighed, “Can we please get to our project already?”


“Uh…I don’t know. I’m confused, but maybe they really do want to assuage people’s fears.”

“I doubt it.” Dilje muttered but turned to her work and Luke got to his.

#$$#$$#

Queen Lindala hurried through the secret passages beneath the palace, her handmaidens rushing behind her. Through the twisting caverns and into the final cave until she came upon a waiting security team and a few others.

“Show me.” She commanded. The group moved away from the containers sitting in the middle of the room. Two of them lifted a colorful tapestry off the box and held it for her inspection. Lindala took several minutes to read the message and then re-read it. “How long have we had this?”

“Only a few hours, your majesty, we called you as soon as we opened it.”

“This is new?”

“Yes, many of the possessions that Amidala sent were already in her inventory. It’s only been with her imprisonment that we’ve gotten her possessions back since most of them were state-owned anyway.”

“Solo.” The slouching young man near the corner stood and wandered over.

“Your worship?”

She ignored the Corellian’s poorly concealed disrespect.

“This tapestry is to be delivered to Count Dooku immediately. This is a smuggling operation. Make sure that no one else sees this tapestry except Anakin Skywalker.”

“Alright.” The boy nodded, “Anything else?”

“If you manage this promptly your fee will be doubled.”

“Alright!” Solo grinned, “I’ll take it.”

“Whatever you do, Solo, do not lose this tapestry.” Lindala warned the full force of her commanding gaze on the young man. “This is priceless to those who know its significance.”

“I’ll get this thing to Skywalker, your worship. Come on; I’m reliable.”

“We shall see.” Lindala nodded to the other, “prepare this for transport and get Captain Solo the necessary paperwork for him to make it through Republic space.”

“At once, your majesty.”

#$$4
There were a dozen ways for this conversation to go. All of them bad and most of them horrible. Obi-Wan wasn’t sure if any of the possibilities ended well for him.

“You did inform Senator Amidala I was here to speak to her?” He asked, keeping his voice level. The Warden nodded furiously, brushing a cloth along his breading brow.

“Of course, Master Kenobi. Long range communication with prisoners is difficult but not impossible. She received the message two days ago, and she should be here now. Though, it is possible she had been delayed by weather.” The balding man’s eyes were tired when Kenobi finally turned away from the window. His hood was still drawn up, and his lightsaber was tucked away, but he still presented a fairly intimidating image. In the middle of the comfortable office, the Jedi was out of place, an anomaly.

They tended to gloat when they spoke to a prisoner. Rubbing their defeat and humiliation in their face and reducing their identity to a mere number. He wasn’t sure if that’s what Kenobi was planning and he hated to think that it was.

“Track the Senator please,” Kenobi commanded, “This is a matter of urgency.”

“I’m sorry,” the Warden stiffened when the Jedi turned, frowning. “The chips are only to be activated in case of an emergency. A natural disaster or an attack on the planet, not for anything less.”

“This is an emergency, Warden.” Kenobi’s voice tightened.

“I cannot.” He was a consummate coward and a weakling but he was also a consummate bureaucrat and he could throw the book at the Jedi’s face and he would. “There is no president to turn on a chip unless there is a Delta Level emergency. The Senator being late for a meeting hardly even registers on the scale. I’m sorry, Master Jedi, but you will either have to wait or go find Amidala yourself.”

Kenobi took a deep breath and nodded, “I will need a ship.”

“I’m afraid I cannot spare any vessels.” The Warden took secret glee in the way the man’s eyes flashed. “The only ships on-planet are the ones used for riot control and search and rescue, and they are to be on call at all times. These cannot be used for anything less.”

“I’m sure there is hardly any pressing matters to keep those ships grounded at the moment.” Obi-Wan nodded to him, “Surely your ship is capable?”

“My ship is in for repairs,” He reported sourly. It was always in for repairs. The damn thing never seemed to be ready when he needed it. “And there is a hurricane brewing in the Sedna Sea that is threatening the fishing town along the western coast of the Tong Yun continent. Heavy monsoons in the south of the western hemisphere that could become mudslides and a blizzard kicking up in the northern sections of the western hemisphere, so yes, Master Jedi, there are many reasons to keep those ships on standby.”

Warden Erie stiffened under the contemplative stare of the Jedi, unwilling to show he was afraid of his mystic powers. His responsibility was to the prisoners of this planet and he would never endanger their lives so as to make a commanding officer comfortable. His duty was to care for all of them, even ones that had aggravated the Jedi.

“I see.”

“It is possible that Amidala might still be in the local town.” He gestured out the window. “Just a
klick away is a town the Prisoners call Bedrock. It’s a staging area for new arrivals and various other things. If you go down there then the local administrators might help you.”

“Might?”

“They can be difficult when they want to be.” Erie said, rubbing his nose, “Master Jedi. If this is all I have a meeting with the prisoners chose a spokesperson. If you would please take your leave?”

“Of course.” The Jedi looked unruffled but seemed annoyed when he swept from the Warden’s office in a manner most dramatic. Erie shook his head and groaned when the spokesperson came wandering in, grinning.

“I didn’t think you had much of a spine.” Erie forced himself to look stern when the weequay dropped into the chair behind his desk. “I’ve been sterner humans than you get bent over a desk and get screwed by the Jedi. I’m surprised actually; I thought we’d have to start carrying you around in a bucket at this point.”

“What is it now?” He wanted Rondo to move and leave him alone, but the alien took a distinct pleasure in making his days miserable.

“Well, I was going to complain about having a Jedi on the planet, but now that you’ve basically tossed him to the rathtars I’m going to make sure he makes it out….”

“Alive?”

“I guess.” Rondo shrugged, “If I have to. So good job. We’ll have your ship fixed up in no time.”

“Oh thank god.” Erie nodded gratefully when the weequay slinked from the room. Finally, he’d be able to visit his mother.

#$#4

Obi Wan had never been denied transport. Anywhere else he would have gone he’d have gotten a ship for transport. For the first time in a very long time, someone had told him no. He couldn’t have a ship and that he’d just have to figure out a way to solve his problem on his own. Of all the scenarios he could have never imagined this one.

Walking toward a prison town in the early evening in search of Senator Amidala, he was alone in the grassy hills, following a well-trodden path across the plains. He could feel the town, alive and active. As he crested the last hill he saw the buildings sprawled across the sloping downhill and the vague valley that the hill created. A good number of a people were wandering around the buildings and down the streets.

“Hmm.” He was heading into the hub of hardened criminals where any number of them could have killed a Jedi. Since he’d been forced to leave his lightsaber behind, Kenobi was a little concerned.

Still, he needed to speak to Amidala, so he headed down the path and into the town. He almost expected the prisoners there to stop and gawk. Maybe for them to glare or snarl his direction, none of that happened.

Obi Wan was thoroughly ignored. No one looked his direction, no one spoke to him. It was as if he was invisible to the entire town.

“Huh.” He paused and stepped directly into the path of a walking wookie. They didn’t swerve and instead sent him reeling to the ground after slamming directly into him. This happened twice more before Obi-Wan got the message. He wandered in and out of houses and building, finding a hospital
at some point. It was unnerving to be so invisible, to be ignored with such dedication. Which was why he jumped when he heard a voice he could never forget.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Padme Amidala was standing ten feet away, dressed in coarse clothes and heavy boots, hair cut short and eyes blazing. There was nothing senatorial or regal about her anymore. The quiet voice filled with the passion she used to coax others to her side was loud, demanding attention and genuflection. She stood tall and ready. A vision of unbridled fury that reminded him sharply of the last time he had seen her.

Obi Wan remembered the screaming desperate fury of the woman when the Jedi had come for Skywalker’s children. He remembered her shattering countless artifacts over masters and knights heads. She had been a howling demon that had sent several of the extraction team to the hospital. Her curses had heaped on his head and her accusations still clung to his clothes like a bitter burr that wouldn’t leave.

“Senator Amidala,” With nothing more to do, he bowed. “I requested to speak with you.”

“What do you want?” Her snarl was rough and broken, dangerous. She hadn’t moved. Half of him wasn’t surprised that he was so poorly received but the other half was surprised. All of the reports on Amidala of her isolation had said she had been a perfectly behaved prisoner.

“What information you have on Cham Syndulla and.”

“Whatever information I have is out of date by over a decade.” Amidala barked bitterly. “You should check with your intelligence. Though, I suppose whatever I might have would be better than whatever they could manage to dig up. Considering just how useful they were during the Clone War.” Obi-Wan glared when she spat into the dust. “Get out of her, Kenobi.” Even the use of his last name was painful. She had always called him Obi-Wan. She had been so kind and helpful. So loyal to the Republic and always willing to assist the Jedi.

“Senator.”

“I’m not a Senator anymore, Kenobi. Now get off this planet. I’ve got nothing for you and I don’t care what you want. You take your child thieving ass away before I send you down to the seventh level of the Corellian hell.”

“Force sensitives belong with the Order;” He blurted automatically in response to the familiar accusation. “Luke is.” He froze as a horrified expression overcame the former senator.


“Anakin betrayed the Order!” Obi-Wan snapped, “He betrayed the Republic. The order would have taken the twins anyway. There is no point.”

“THERE IS A POINT!” She shrieked, closing the distance between them, eyes full of bloody promises. “YOU DROVE ANAKIN AWAY! YOU IGNORED HIM! YOU HURT HIM! YOU HAVE OUR CHILDREN AS IF YOU HAVE SOME RIGHT TO THEM! HOW DARE YOU?”

“Padme.” He held his hands, well-aware of the people watching them. “There is no need.”

NO NEED?”

“He murdered the Chancellor! He was a traitor!”
Padme continued, too calm for his tastes, “He made a decision. One I did not influence. Whatever his reasons, Kenobi, they are his and considering the absolute mess you’ve made of this galaxy perhaps they were the right ones. You,” she jabbed her hand in his face, “Stole. My. Children.”

Obi Wan had nothing to say. There wasn’t anything for him to say without provoking violence from the woman before. He knew what Padme was capable of. One of the reasons she’d been locked away so long in relative isolation. She was trembling with rage, the barely suppressed urge to strike him.

“Get. Out.”

“Excuse me?”

“Get. Out. Kenobi. Leave this planet. Go home to your temple and your delusions because if you stay here any longer.”

“You’ll what?” He needed to calm down. He needed to release his feelings to the force and find peace. He needed equilibrium. “Senator?”

“You stole my children,” Padme stepped closer, invading his personal space with an ugly snarl. “You left me in darkness. There is nothing I won’t do now to get them back. I will burn the heart out of you. I will burn your Order. I’ll burn Yoda and so help me.” Her eyes closed briefly, as if reveling in the promised violence. “I will burn your Republic to the very foundations. So….GET OUT!”

“You’ve made a foolish decision, Senator Amidala.” Obi-Wan stepped back. “If you had helped me you might have had the opportunity to meet your son. A bright boy, by the way, and perhaps your daughter. She is so much like her father, but now you’ve only ensured that this,” he gestured to the now silent town, “Will be your burying ground. Good day.” He turned on his heel and stalked from the village.

Leaving Padme Amidala behind for the last time.

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Luke was hiding under his bed. An hour ago his Master had returned from whatever mission he’d been sent on. His aura had been frightening with its intensity. Angry and bitter, darker than any of his group study partners. Not for the first time Luke was frightened of his master.

Obi Wan had ignored him. Instead, he’s swept into his meditation chamber and left the Padawan alone for hours while he meditated through his anger.

He was tucked under his bed because he got the frightening sensation that he had been the cause of his temper. Luke stayed quiet when he heard Obi-Wan finally began moving through the kitchen and began banging around pots and pans.

The muttered cursing only prompted Luke to tuck himself further beneath the blanket he’d dragged with him under the bed. He might not have been able to use the force well but he was empathetic and astute. So much so he knew that he should never speak to Master Windu when he visited, never say anything when Adi Gallia escorted him around and never ever contradict Luminara, even if she was wrong. No one had had to explain these things and other padawans never got in trouble for these things. Only Luke ever seemed to be in the hot box for asking questions.

It scared him.

They all were beginning to scare him.
He knew more now. As there was a practically loud clattering noise, Luke drew his knees closer and forced his shields down to keep his anxiety hidden.

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Leia’s recent dreams had been strange. Nothing prophetic or anything like a vision, she didn’t have enough force sensitivity for that. Rather, she was finding herself sitting at the end of a library aisle, looking down the long shelves at the door at the end. Sometimes she could see a figure wandering around in there and sometimes she didn’t. Still, when she’d shared this dream with Mace Windu, her master, he’d just told her it was a result of her many hours in the library. A gut feeling that Leia learned to trust, in lieu of the Force, prompted her to turn for to someone else for a second opinion.

Queen Breha was taking a rare moment to relax in the hot spring at her royal retreat. Her hair was down, uncurled and cascading down her back into the mineral water, fanning out behind her in a great brown sheet. Leia was pretty reluctant about disturbing the woman at one her rare moments of relaxation. The padawan fidgeted at the edge of the water, looking back at the retreating guard and then on the woman still mostly submerged in the water.

“Your majesty?” She ventured and offered a smile when the Queen opened her eyes and beamed.

“Leia! How nice to see you. How are you?”

“I’m doing well, your majesty. Yourself?”

“Wonderful, is your master returned from his meeting with Em…Master Yoda?”

“No, your majesty,” Leia ignored the verbal slip and bowed. “I came to ask for your advice.”

“Yes. Of course, Leia. Would you like to join me?” The woman raised a dripping hand and waved a bit.

“Well, uh….”

“Come, come. It’s perfect right now.”

“Alright.” Leia stripped down to her under-tunic and shorts. It was little bland compared to the Queen’s soft pink bathing gown, but serviceable. She stepped into the water and shivered as it’s warmth seeped into her bones. “This is perfect.”

“I forgot that the young Jedi who live in the other wing only take showers. Forgive my lapse.”

“Well, we don’t want to be indulgent. It’s not a good thing.”

“I wouldn’t consider this indulgent. I would consider it a reward, a present to myself for all my work. Rewarding yourself for personal accomplishments is necessary, in my opinion.”

“I guess.” Leia rubbed her nose and waited for the queen to speak again.

“You said you needed advice?”

“Yes.”
“I cannot promise that I will have an answer, but I will certainly try.”

“Well,” the padawan shuffled a little closer the other woman, “It’s my dreams. Master Windu says they happen because I spend so much time in the library, but I don’t think so. I know that Alderaan has a lot of folklore on dreams and I know you’re…”

“Folklore?” Leia paused for a moment and pursed her lips when Queen Breha turned her sudden frown on the young Jedi. “The religion of Alderaan is not folklore. It is a religion, not a few tall tales that were sewn together by popularity.” Breha seemed offended to her very core and was scowling at the dark sky. “Folk-lore,” her muttering continued into Old Aldera for several minutes. When she’d recovered herself, the queen took a deep breath. “Leia, the religion of Alderaan is pivotal to our planetary identity. It is a common ground even with the distinct variations between of all my people. It is the core of our culture and our way of life, from the most simple of nerf-herders to the royal palace. We share our gods and our angels together and seek guidance in our decisions. It connects us. It is sacred to all of us and even proclaimed agnostics or atheists do not intrude on the sanctity of our shrines. To call our religion ‘folk tales’ is a grave insult to Alderaan.”

“Well religion has a historical president of being the cause of wars and all sorts of social and economic inequality.” Leia stated firmly, “It’s dangerous to the stability of the Republic and the galaxy. People will do anything for their god, even kill and maim. And very few religions even have historical or factual evidence to base their devotion on,” Leia nodded at the offended queen. “That’s why Master Windu says to call them folk tales and legends and myths because it doesn’t do well to indulge people.”

Queen Breha seemed at a loss for words, her mouth opening and closing as utter disbelief was stamped across her face. Leia waited for the woman to regain use of her voice.

“Extremism.” The woman said faintly, “You believe that no religion should hold any sort of precedent because of extremism?”

“Yes.”

“I see.” Queen Breha lapsed into temporary silence. “You claim that religion regardless of origin should have no precedent.”

“Yes.”

“And that the cultural identity of a planet or people or even civilization because of religion is dangerous?”

“Yes.”

“So, drawing a conclusion from this, the Jedi believes that, for the sake of stability and security, all of the various cultural identities and lives are too dangerous?”

“People fight wars for religions like they fight wars for ideas. Look at history. People kill and hurt others just because some non-existent entity told them to. Or they think something so strongly they murder over it. It never ends.”

“Hmm. And you believe erasing history will help?” Breha frowned when the girl paused.

“It’s not erasing history.”

“It is, on Rodia their oldest historical document happens to be their holy book. Their religion shaped Rodia’s history for generations, as it has happened the galaxy over. Or, because history holds so
many dangerous ideas that it should be erased or dulled?"

“Well, history is history, and we can’t improve without knowing it.”

“Yes, which means you must know all of history to understand the present and the future. People must look at the past as a whole, not some edited version. Let’s return to your first point. You called my religion folk-tales.”

“I don’t want to insult you but.”

“You did,” Breha said calmly, cutting over the younger woman, “But let me draw a few conclusions. First, you claim that too many crimes have been attributed to religions. Extremism is dangerous, and it draws upon ‘non-existent’ gods. Secondly, you claim that ideas have too much power. You did not specify what kind of ideas so we’ll simply infer that means causes. This boils down to, in simple terms, that conformity must be the answer to our problems.”

“Alderaan is all the same,” Leia pointed out.

“It is not the same, the different hemispheres and continents all worship with distinct variations. They are similar to only a few bases but enough to make it seem global. Now, if conforming to one single standard is the answer then, from your inferences, the answer is the Jedi way.”

“I…guess. Master Windu doesn’t talk about that sort of stuff much.” Leia began to look nervous. “You don’t think Master Windu is wrong, do you?”

“Do you not believe that extremism can arise from any cause? Including the pursuit of stability and security, in pursuit of these lofty goals that anything could be written off as acceptable collateral? Beginning with the freedom to practice religion and then the freedoms to read and write what you want. These all give rise to different ideas and the differences in sentients, and that could lead to war, correct?”

“Yes?”

“And that eventually you, to stabilize life as you knew it, would leap from the springboard gracefully into extremism simply to maintain comfort? Then, unable to cope with differences of the galaxy and choosing those as the scapegoats instead of acknowledging them as historical precedent, attempt to eradicate them.”

“Well…….”

“Tell me, what was the first war the Jedi ever waged?”

“It was during the first schism.” Leia’s voice dropped, she sank into the water, unable to look at the queen.

“What do you know about it?”

“It was big.”

“Big is putting it mildly, it separated the Jedi and the Sith. It led to the deaths of billions as did the Mandalorian wars. Those began in Mandalore but ended up spreading to the rest of the galaxy after the interference of the Jedi. Or perhaps the Second Sith War or even the last Civil War, again between the Jedi and Sith. If you look at history as you suggested, then you would see that the galactic wars have been a result of the ideological differences of the Jedi and the Sith. Yes?”
“Yes.”

“Planetary wars are planetary wars, waged by the people who live on them and in an interest of continuing to live there they preserve it even as they fight over it. This is not true for galactic wars; whole planets lose viability and life.”

“You’re saying the Jedi are hypocrites?” Leia blurted, “You’re saying that people will fight over anything and to make them stop the masters are doing the same thing they don’t like.”

“Yes.” Queen Breha smiled proudly.

“But I still don’t understand why you’re insulted by me calling it folk tales.”

“Because they are not folk tales,” The queen settled into the water, waving a hand for a tray of refreshments to be brought. “You would not call a twi’lek a human because that is the closest name from the human languages?”

“No.”

“Then you know twi’lek is the name from old Ryl?”

“Yes.”

“You would not label their lekku as a hair?”

“No, because it’s not hair. It’s a lekku.”

“The same principals apply to religions. You cannot choose a word from yours to fit the others when it does not fit and only insults them. This, of course, does not even begin to dive into the various discussions we could have but don’t have time for.” Breha muttered into her glass of wine, watching Leia sip carefully at her juice. “So no, we do not have folk tales about dreams or nightmares.”

“Okay.” Leia seemed to consider something before shaking her head.

“Now, you had a question?”

“Well, I talked to Prince Consort Bail a bit about it, but that was a different dream. I’ve been having this one for about two weeks now.” She described the dream, watching the Queen’s features carefully. Leia liked the queen, more than she probably should. The woman was kind and comfortable to be around. Her status as a planetary leader never seemed to keep her from holding a conversation with Leia. The padawan was concerned with insulting the woman again. Leia didn’t know what she’d do if Breha didn’t like her.

“You’ve never opened the door?”

“No.” Leia shook her head.

“Have you tried to open the door?”

“No.”

“Are you afraid of what you’ll find on the other side?”

“I guess.” Leia leaned against the stone wall to watch queen think. “What do you think?”

“Are you afraid of finding out what is on the other side?”
“No, I…I’m just worried because Master Windu says that Jedi do not dream and I keep having these dreams. I’m not supposed to. I already can’t use the Force so why do I have to keep messing up?”

“Nature will always triumph over the folly of man,” Breha chided gently, “Master Windu can claim that Jedi do not dream, but it is human nature. It is coded into our lives and our minds no matter how much we may not want it.”

“You’re probably right.” Leia acknowledged and lapsed back into silence.

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Luke’s dreams had taken a turn for the bizarre in the last week. Since he had made a habit of running to the Public Library when he had a few hours free all of his dreams were now the same. He would be sitting in the Think Tank where he did most of his studying. Sometimes the art pieces that Dilje and Koko showed him were still there. He wasn’t really afraid of going to sleep. Still, having all that extra time to see the paintings wasn’t doing things for his piece of mind.

In his mind’s eye he was still seeing the picture of two people dancing. They were dressed in bright colors, and heavy fabrics and Luke didn’t know if he’d ever seen happier people.


“I’m…sorry.” Luke yawned and dropped his head to the table. “I can’t sleep.” He glanced up at his master. The man’s eyes were sharp and concerned, “I think I might be coming down with something.” He lied carefully. “My stomach has been acting up, and I feel stuffed up.”

“Really?” Luke relished the gentle hand that pressed against his forehead. He’d been drifting away from his master, from his friend. It was lonely to only have your thoughts to yourself and Luke treasured every moment of contact he was afforded by the aloof man. “You do feel feverish. Have you eaten anything outside of the temple commissary?”

“No, Master. I take meals with me.”

“And who have you run into at the library?”

“A few people that study there but also the twi’lek librarian but I was in training a few days ago with Knight Dume, he was pretty sick.”

“Then that explains it.” Luke nodded into the man’s hand and nearly whined when it was drawn back suddenly.

“You know where the cold medicine is. I suggest you take some and make it an early night. We don’t want this to develop into anything nasty before we leave for the Ryloth Conference.” Luke blinked back a sudden surge of emotion, staring at Master Kenobi with wide eyes for several seconds. Eventually, he nodded and retreated to his own room.

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Obi Wan groaned, pressing the heels of his hand against his forehead. Even if his padawan had gone to his room his betrayed stare, teeming with emotions and passion, lingered. The fervor and passion of his trainee and student were something he’d only ever seen with Anakin. It was frightening to see it again in Luke.

Was it simply his nature or was Obi-Wan not teaching Luke well enough? Was being a Skywalker already damning enough? Was it enough to condemn Luke to the same fate o his father? Could
Luke was no longer just afraid of his master discovering his secret meetings with the college students, Luke was terrified of it. He couldn’t share his secrets. He couldn’t share the art.

Even if the art terrified him he couldn’t tell anyone about it. They made him happy and sad and horrified. He watched the bare illustrations of people of all kinds. Their still images were imprinted in his brain. They spoke to him. Whispering incompressible words all while tugging at his sleeves and pulling him closer and closer until Luke was sure he couldn’t even think right anymore.

Up from down. Left from the right. Just and unjust. Kindness and none. Sound and silence. They blurred together, conflicting ideas from his temple training and the hints of otherness that he saw while at the library. From the rigid structure from everything, he knew to the untamed wildness of the populace.

Luke shivered, curling beneath his blanket a little further. His confusion rose and ebbed like an ocean, pulling his mind in multiple directions. He knew what kind of trouble he’d get in if he were caught consorting with anyone his master didn’t approve of. There would be punishments galore, not to mention the humiliation having disrespected the Jedi tenants and his master. He’d be stuck on midnight cleaning duty, repairing droids (he didn’t mind that one) and a million other tedious tasks.

Still. No matter how much trouble he’d get in Luke had to know. He had to understand why Dilje hated the Jedi. Why Koko was too depressed to ever interject into the conversation when they were brought. He had to know why the poems were dangerous; the real reason. Luke wanted to feel the bright emotions that came from listening to the impassioned voice of Dilje, from the little stories that the old librarian would sometimes drop into his lap. He wanted to understand everything he experienced when he wasn’t following his master around.

As he did every night, Luke carefully locked the secret away in the back of his mind. He buried it deep under old lessons on penmanship and his first katas where no one would bother to look or pry.

When he fell asleep and returned to the dream Think Tank Luke was more than a little surprised to see someone was already there.

“Who are you?” He yelped, leaning away from the intruder. She was short, dressed in white and blue padawan robes. Her brown hair was cut close to her head, and her expression was sour.

“Who am I?” She demanded, stomping up to him. “Who are you? I’ve been having this dream for weeks now, and I want an answer. Who are you and where is this?”

“My name is Luke.” He answered slowly. She was dressed like a Padawan, but he didn’t recognize her. Maybe she was from the Alderaan temple. “And this is the public libraries Think Tank.”

“What’s a Think Tank?” She wrinkled her nose.

“It’s where students come together to talk about stuff. They do projects and things too.”

“What about you?” The stranger pointed at him, “What do you do here?”

“I get advice from the older students on who help me to write my projects.” He admitted, “What are you doing here anyway. I thought this was my dream space.”

“I don’t know,” the girl blew out a deep breath and flopped into a chair. “I just thought I’d see what
was on the other side of the door. I’ve been on the other side for a long time.”

“Who are you though? I thought I knew all of the other Padawans.”

“You’re a padawan? Why aren’t you wearing the uniform?” Luke blinked and looked down to find himself wearing his street clothes.

“Oh… I… don’t know.”

“Liar,” she jumped up, “You know why you’re not wearing your robes. Why aren’t you?”

“I don’t come to the library in it,” Luke admitted, “But you have to keep it a secret. I don’t want them to kick me out because I’m a padawan. I want to be able to come back.”

“Why would they kick you out? You’re a Jedi.”

“They…” Luke ducked his head, “They don’t like Jedi and I… I really think they’re cool so you can’t tell anyone. Not even your master.”

“Alright.” She crossed her arms and wandered around the room. “I’m Leia, by the way.”

“Are you from Alderaan?”

“Yes, my Master and I were the first to live there when they were reconstructing the temple.”

“Okay.” Luke scuffed his toes against the floor and wondered if he should focus on the image that was waiting for his attention.

“What are you doing here?” Leia asked, “What do you do here?”

“I uh… think. I look at things, and I think.”

A scornful eyebrow was raised his direction. Luke blushed but didn’t break. “What kinds of things do you think about?”

“Just stuff.”

“You’re evading me.”

“And you’re interrogating me.” Luke pointed out, “This is my dream-scape.”

“Apparently it’s a shared one,” Leia refuted, “I already promised not to tell, come on, and tell me what you do here. Maybe it will answer what we’re both doing here.”

“I look at art.” He snapped, hoping to shock her. It didn’t work. Leia blinked a few times and nodded.

“You can’t look at art in front of the masters. You can’t do much in front of the masters,” Leia nodded thoughtfully, “I managed to build my own speeder once. It worked, and everything but Master made me get rid of it. He said it was dangerous which was stupid because we had just gotten back from a spice raid. How can going into a fight against armed criminals be less dangerous than flying a speeder?”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Luke said, “What kind of speeder was it?” He leaned away when Leia launched into a technical description of the speeder, adding anecdotes when the moment struck and weaving a story that enchanted until he woke up.
Dilje had only just settled into her usual seat the Public Library to begin drafting her list of questions for her meeting with the Jedi masters when Luke sprinted into the room. He collided with her stomach, nearly sending her sprawling.

“DILJE!” His blue eyes were shining, excited and worried at the same time. “I need your help!”

“Uh…my help?”

“I need to do something, to see something exciting and cool so I can share a story. I need a story to tell, but none of my stories are interesting enough to share. I made a new friend, and I want to tell her a story, but I don’t have one.”

“So make one up,” she said, doing her best to pry the boy off of her. His arms clamped around her waist.

“I can’t!” He cried, “I need a good one, and I don’t know how to do much of anything in the undercity besides that the speeder bus here. I need your help! Please! You know these levels better than anyone.”

“Kid, I’ve got stuff.”

“I’ve got stuff too! But I need your help, please!” Dilje froze, trapped by the beseeching gaze. He was looking desperate, and she was pretty helpless against cute like this.

“What kind of help did you have in mind?” She said, hating her weakness for cute human children.

“I need to do something or see something that I can make into a story I can share.” Luke said, fairly bouncing in place.

“Anything can be a story.” She pointed out, repacking her backpack. “Even food.”

“How can food be a story?”

“Same as the feeling of fabric,” Dilje said, “It’s how it tastes, how it makes you feel. Where it came from, why is the dish made the way it is? If it’s a question, it’s a story, and even if it isn’t a question, it’s a story. If you want a story then… I have no idea where to go.”

“We can ask the librarian.” Luke seized her hand and began pulling her toward the door, “Come on!”

“What the ruckus,” just as they reached the door it slid open to reveal Han, the quietly depressed twi’lek. “Where are you two going?”

“We’re going to find a story,” Luke exclaimed, “Come on! Let’s go find one!”

“A story?” Han mouthed her direction as Dilje was dragged past him. She offered a weak shrug and followed the blond human.
Anakin has several conversations and it's pretty obvious the Council doesn't trust him at all.

The last place Obi Wan expected to find Anakin was in a meditation room. The engineering deck seemed the more likely candidate. Except that the clones repairing the ships and speeders told him Anakin hadn’t shown up yet. Since the training bond had long since dissolved, Obi Wan was reduced to looking over every inch of the ship. Locating Anakin; slouched over a meditation chair and obviously following a breathing pattern was odd. He looked as if he was actually trying to meditate.

“I’m glad to see my lessons have finally paid off but your posture is all wrong.”

“I’m supposed to be comfortable,” muttered Anakin. Obi Wan caught a flash of ravine deep irritation for a split second. “What do you want?”

“We’re needed for a Council meeting. Master Yoda wants an update.” He crossed his arms carefully and blinked in surprise when Anakin laughed bitterly.

“I’m not needed, Obi Wan. Just tell them I’m meditating.”

“Anakin, this is a direct order.” The older man walked to stand beside Anakin’s head. “You cannot skip a council debriefs.”

“I’m not skipping it when I’m not needed. You know that they’ll listen to you and then tell me to say the exact same thing you did. Who knows, maybe they think if I do that enough, they’ll finally get the Jedi they always wanted.”

“Anakin!”

“I’m meditating. Obi Wan.” Anakin shuffled further into his seat, pressing his face against the soft fabric. “And turn down the lights when you leave.”

“Anakin,” Obi Wan knew the wall of absolute finality that had infuriated him through the many years of training the younger man was up and he could get nothing from him now. “Anakin!”

“I’m meditating,” He said quietly and grinned to himself when Obi Wan left. A moment later he sat up when a Clone knocked on the door and entered.

“General,” Kix said, his bag slung over one shoulder and his expression tight with confusion.

“Leave the lights low.” Anakin muttered, watching the clone take the seat opposite him and settle in. He’d been doing his best to take better care of himself because next time he faced Dooku he didn’t
want to end up in the fetal position because of his own weakness. “I need pain medication for chronic pain.” He said bluntly. Kix nearly toppled off his seat.

“What?”

“I have chronic pain and issues with sensory overload.” Anakin said, keeping his hand folded and in his lap. “It’s been getting worse.” He swallowed, “In the last few months. I need your help.”

“This isn’t in any of your files, General.” Kix said horror and alarm frozen on his face. “Sir, I have… I could have dosed you with the wrong medication. There are at least three meds that would.”

“Make everything worse? Also,” the Jedi shifted, closing his eyes. He’d never come to a medical professional, even one that had been taught everything in one info dump. Anakin had so little experience with the medical professionals; he wasn’t sure what to do. “What do you need to know?”

“How do you manage to keep the pain back?” Kix asked, kneeling in front of Anakin while wrapping a pump around his right arm. “How do you manage it?”

“I use the force to build filters around nerve clusters,” Anakin watched the clone with a sort of detached apathy. “And I use filters to keep my sense receptors numb so I don’t get too easily overwhelmed.”

“What happens if these don’t work?”

“They work, but when they fall, I get catatonic. Too much for me to handle and…I can’t move, and I can’t think and…it’s hard to breathe.”

“That explains why you shake off getting knocked into the side of a tank.” The wrap around his arm began to tighten, and Anakin flinched. “Or not notice when you get dropped a few hundred feet.”

“I need help to manage it,” Anakin said quietly, “I need the pain medication and something to keep me from…feeling.”

“Sir, with these problems you shouldn’t even be on the front lines. I’d put in for a transfer to.” Kix’s voice stuttered off when the shocking gentle hands rested on each side of his face. Calloused fingers settled against his stubbly cheek and hands that he had seen rip apart droids bare and punch anything beneath the sun; tilted his head up carefully. He could see faint worry lines, stressed creases, and purple bruises beneath electric blue eyes.

“Kix.” He shivered when he caught the frightened tremor in his General’s voice. “I can’t ask for a transfer. Get me what I need to get through the war, and we’ll come up with an answer later.”

“Sir.”

“Please, Kix.”

“I…” It went against every instinct he had a medic, but he nodded. “I’ll put in the requisition. They’ll be in doses you’ll have to take regularly, sir. Missing a dose isn’t an option.”

“I’ll handle that.” A warm, blushing glow began to heat his heart and spread outward to his face and ears when Anakin leaned down and pressed an oddly parental kiss to his forehead. “Thank you, Kix. I don’t know what we’d do without you.”

“You could have come to me sooner, sir.” Kix grumbled, looking away and willing away his blush. “I’m you’re medic.”
“I know, Kix.” General Skywalker had never seemed older to the clone. It was almost as if he could see a year and hardships stacked on youthful shoulders. He could see the pain of the war aging the Jedi right before him. “And you won’t tell anyone.”

“Doctor patient confidentiality,” Kix confirmed, pulling out his other tools. “I want to run a full check up on you and I’m going to need you to drop your filters so I can get accurate readings, alright?”

“How long with this take?”

“Just an hour, sir.”

Skywalker had become more effective. Against all logic, against all fairness, against nature, he had become an even more ruthless commander then he had been. Count Dooku cursed the boy as he surveyed the damage to the Separatist front lines. Two commanders captured and hundreds and thousands of droids lost. Devastating effects on the Confederacy. The uptick in Skywalker’s apparent ability was hugely unusual considering he’d been backsliding months before.

“How’s Tambor.” The commander of the Techno Union stirred when the Count finally addressed him. “What is the greatest failing of Clone Troopers?”

“There are many,” Tambor adjusted his vocoder.

“But what makes them less effective by a huge degree? So much so that this one weakness could eventually destroy all of them?”

Tambor waited for a few heartbeats, “They tire.”

“They tire,” Dooku smiled. “They get sleepy, tired, weak, injured. They require supply convoys; they need medics and surgeons. They need evacuation teams, tools to repairs their ships and tanks….And what, Tambor, is the best way to manage this?”

“A war of attrition,” Wat Tambor moved to the opposite side of the holoprojector. Two planets were showing, both of them on different sections of the galaxy. One hovered just within Hutt space and a hyperspace lane, the other above a planet used to mine materials for starships.

“These two are vital points for the Republic, both they cannot live without. Here,” Dooku pointed to the mining planet. “Is where you will launch your next assault. Skywalker is due there in two weeks to oversee the next shipment of materials bound for the Jedi factories on Corellia. I do not want him to make it. Blockade the planet; ensure that the boy only has two choices. One, to defend the planet to the last clone until he is captured or dead or slinking back the Jedi as a failure. Two, to leave the planet and its materials to us in an effort to rescue his troopers and return to the Republic in disgrace.”

“Kenobi is never far behind Skywalker,” Tambor pointed out. “If Kenobi comes to his rescue there is no guarantee that we will keep the planet. Our intelligence is working on it, but we believe that the presence of both Kenobi and Skywalker bend probability in their favor to a much greater degree than normal human ability.”

“They are both human, Tambor.” Dooku said, “I will take another fleet and attack here. This space lane is vital to the movement of troops and supplies. Kenobi cannot make it to Skywalker if there is no way for him to reach him.”
“The purpose of this endeavor?”

“I want to break the team that the Jedi rely on too much. To separate them from their abilities and their skills and ensure that the Republic and Jedi learn the folly of putting their investments in one company.” If this worked, the way he wanted it so he would have the distinct pleasure of rubbing it directly into Yoda’s face.

“Skywalker has not reported in two weeks.” The assembled council, present or hologram all turned to Obi Wan Kenobi at Mace Windu’s pronouncement. “Master Kenobi.” Obi Wan didn’t respond while he dug for an answer. Anakin had not shown up for a Council debrief except once in the last two months. They had accepted the explanation that the Knight was beginning to make a habit of meditating and since they still had his reports, they didn’t need his appearance. Still, most of the Masters questioned why Skywalker would continually turn down summons of the council.

“I have not spoken to Anakin in two weeks either,” He began, “We have received the usual messages from his contingent on 2452 but nothing more.”

“Isolating himself, Skywalker is.” Yoda pronounced. Kenobi winced.

“He has performed better in the recent months than in the first year of the war,” Obi Wan said, “He is focusing his energy better. He may not even be isolating himself; there is a good possibility that Anakin is occupied with the loading and transporting of the shipbuilding goods. We all know how he endears himself to the average citizen. He is easily distracted.” His voice trailed off when Master Yoda began to shake his head.

“Isolation this is,” Yoda said, “Find young Skywalker. Bring him to the Council you must, prepared for an evaluation.”

“Master Yoda, Anakin beginning to use meditation regularly is good news,” Obi Wan rubbed his forehead. “I believe that an evaluation might be extreme in Anakin’s case.”

“Skywalker is subject to the same rules as the rest of the Order, Kenobi.” Windu interjected, “The marks against him have been ignored too long.”

“To evaluate Anakin in the middle of this war would be a disaster.” Obi Wan dropped his head into his hands. “The media would have a field day and not only that; it would present a weakness to the Confederacy. Dooku knows what an evaluation means and he would happily inform the rest of the Separatist organization. Not to mention the morale of the troopers would fall, the confidence of the Chancellor in the Order would also fall. We are standing on too shaky of ground to evaluate Anakin right now.”

“I dislike allowing Skywalker to use the rules of the Order for his own good and to flaunt them whenever he wishes but Master Kenobi speaks correctly.”

“Evaluated, Skywalker must be.” Yoda reiterated. “Dangerous to allow this, it has become. The fallen Master Krell a danger it points to. Recalled Skywalker will be, evaluated he will be. Final this is.”

“Cody!” Obi Wan clicked the last piece of armor into place. His robes were freshly cleaned and armor polished. If he closed his eyes and pretended then, he might be able to pretend he was not headed to another battle. He could pretend that he was fresh and hopeful and ready for the rest of the
war. Not that he was going to be delivering the most humiliating that a Knight could get.

“General.”

“How long until we reach the transfer point?”

“An hour, sir. Eta to 2452 is fifteen hours once we refuel and jump.” Obi Wan held the edge of the formal letter of summons from the Council and tucked it into his extra pocket. He’d have to present this to Anakin when he arrived and hopefully explain the whole mess wasn’t his idea. “General, is everything alright?”

“It’s all fine, Cody.” Obi Wan said tiredly, “Make sure the ships are ready to refuel so we can’t get fueled and leave as soon as possible.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Obi Wan turned to hand his Commander the next set of instructions when the entire ship jolted. Commander and General went elbows over heels into a wall as the klaxon alarms began to scream.

“All hands to battle stations! All hands to battle stations!” The cool, collected voice of Admiral Yularen rang out over the speakers. “Ships incoming, fifty degrees on the starboard side. All hands to battle stations.”

“Cody!” Obi Wan untangled himself from the clone, “get the pilots to their ships!”

“Aye, sir!” Cody sprinted down a hallway just as Obi Wan turned the other direction and headed for the bridge.

“What the situation?” He demanded, skidding to a halt next to his Admiral.

“Separatists, sir,” Dooku’s fleet.” Obi Wan felt a wash of terror and dark –side fury lashing through the Force. It was Dooku alright; no one he had ever known had felt like the Force was bleeding. “We’re being hailed.” Outside the viewport, hundreds of small fighters streamed from the dorsal hanger and met with battle fueled hatred with the vulture droids.

“Accept the call.” He ordered and stepped onto the receiving platform just as Count Dooku’s familiar form appeared in flickering blue.

“Ah, General Kenobi.” Dooku offered him the barest of nods. “A pleasure.”

“Count Dooku.” The Jedi clasped his hands behind his back. “What an unexpected surprise.”

“Of course,” Dooku’s gaze both real and incorporeal swept over the bridge, “Where is your beloved companion. I would have thought that Anakin would have been here to make a foolish threat. Ah…” Dooku’s mouth twitched in a smile. Obi Wan’s heart sank. Dooku knew exactly where Anakin was. He knew that his friend wasn’t here and was choosing to attack them just when the Chosen was occupied elsewhere. Anakin did have a history of managing to defend necessary territory from Dooku’s grasping fingers. “I suppose he is…otherwise occupied.” Dooku vanished, and Obi Wan glanced to the viewport just in time to see a neat, dangerous line of proton torpedoes aimed for their bridge.

“SHIELDS UP!” Yularen screamed

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Anakin Skywalker stumbled into his makeshift command center, brushing charred bits of metal and grass off his robes.

“Situation,” he barked, sending the few clones in the tent snapping upright. “Where are we?”

“Still holding steady sir. The power generators should keep out everything except the heaviest artillery but not for long. We’ve got about twenty minutes of solid bombardments before it blows.” Rex said.

“And the injured?”

“They have been moved back, sir. We found a network of caves in the hills. They’ve been fully explored and mapped. The medics are running low on thread and bandages.”

“Alright,” Anakin rubbed his face as he surveyed the flickering, dying blue map projected in front of him. The usual routine shipment of materials had gone south as soon as they had been ready to take off. Wat Tambor and his fleet had appeared above the mining planet an hour before they had scheduled to leave. It wouldn’t have been such a problem is it hadn’t been Tambor’s Techno Union Fleet. A highly advanced collection of ships with technology the Republic could only eye with envy. The ensuing battle had thrown Anakin and his troopers, only a part of a battalion, away from the spaceports and mining towns and into the hills to avoid death and capture. “What else?”

“Foods low as well, sir. Water purification systems are down again.”

“Bring them to me.” Anakin said, “I’ll take another look. Do we at least have the communicators going yet?”

“Comms are jammed still. No signals going in or out of the planet except the ones that the Seppies want.”

“Alright.” Anakin thanked the force that Ahsoka was not there. It wasn’t just a matter of superior firepower. The Republic didn’t have supplies to last as long as they needed to. Unless relief was coming in the next few days, then he knew that his troopers were in grave danger of capture and death. He wasn’t sure if he would be able to pick up a magical escape and victory from this battle. Every turn he made, Wat Tambor seemed to have considered it. The artillery came down in random and sudden intervals; sometimes they lasted for hours; sometimes it was only a single shell. He’d been in plenty of hopeless situations before, but this one seemed to take the cake. “We need to get communications out,” he said as Kix entered the room. The medic gave him a significant glance which Anakin returned with a nod. “How do we get to it?”

“We need to get to their command center that’s on the planet, but they’ll be waiting for us.” Rex said, rubbing his bruised arm.

“They might not be.”

“Sir, we’ve been high and dry for two and a half weeks now. We’re down troops and supplies and cut off from our own fleet above. We don’t even know if they’re captured or not. At this point, we’re desperate for relief, and that means that we’re going to try and send out a communication. They’ll be waiting for us.”

“Which makes it impossible to get the message out.” Anakin surmised. “We’ll never make it.” He said, pacing up and down the length of the tent. “We couldn’t make it past the guards. We couldn’t get past anybody.”

“Are you going to tell us what you’ve thought of, sir?” Rex asked tiredly as sighed when Anakin
nodded seriously.

“There’s only a slim chance that this would work.” Anakin rolled his lightsaber between in hands, trying to silence the jittery, numbing feeling growing in his legs and chest. “When I finalize the details I’ll call you all back. Right now, go get some sleep and then meet me back here in about five hours.”

As the men cleared out, Kix lingered. Approaching when Anakin finally settled on top of a nearly empty supply container. “Sir.”

“How many doses do I have left?” He asked warily, leaning his head back and closing his eyes. “How much trouble am I in?”

“Serious trouble, sir, backing off the medications to make them last longer could have serious consequences. People are supposed to get on these and stay on them.”

“We have to ration them, Kix.” Anakin muttered when Kix approached to begin doing another check-up. “We’re between a Sarlacc pit and a nexu.”

“What do you want to do, sir?”

“If my plan fails every single one of your brothers on the planet will be slaughtered.” Kix paused for a moment, his pale eyes meeting Anakin’s. “If I surrender there is a possibility that Tambor might only capture them.”

“What would happen to you?”

“I don’t know but…”

“Sir,” Kix said firmly, “We were raised to fight. We’ll fight no matter what.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“Sir?” Kix paused in his work, glancing back up at his general.

“Kix, I….we’re in a hopeless situation. We don’t have the manpower, the supplies or anything to mount any sort of defense and,” he held up a hand, “This is not bleeding over from any of my issues. I’m looking at this as objectively as I can. Tambor’s pushed us back into a war of attrition, and you know as well as I do he has the supplies to outlast us.”

“If the relief comes.”

“IF…IF it comes,” Anakin shook his head, “Whatever he’s doing to keep us here he’s doing a good job. I think he’s held up any help at the jump point. He’s got a partner….Kix, how well do you and your brothers know about…blending?”

“Blending, sir?”

“To leave the planet, without the materials, I want the men to get rid of their armor and act as non-military as they can so they’ll get off the planet and hopefully out of Separatist held space. Kix, I’m not willing to risk this man people for a few dozen pounds of ship material.” He said seriously.

“The Council would string you up,” Kix breathed, “You know, they’d never allow it.”

“I don’t care what they allow and don’t allow. There’s no reason for a blood bath if we can find a way off. There are ways, but this is an absolute last resort.”
"The mission."

"The mission will have to be abandoned." The young General said, "It’s the fastest and best way to keep the men alive."

"But to abandon the mission? Sir, you’ve never."

"Kix," The clone paused when the Jedi settled a hand over his, "Do you want your brothers to end up in prisons, do you want them to end up murdered where they kneel and do you want to see them get executed because I wanted to fight and fight and fight and never stop for a lump of metal? Kix, I cannot condemn them to that and you know I can’t."

"Sir, you know that even if we’re saved we can’t….sir, the Senate would have your head. You’ve already done too much against the code and the law to help us brothers out but."

"Kix," Anakin’s expression broke, raw and open as he held tightly onto his medic. "I can’t let it keep happening. I can’t; there are too many children dying already. Please don’t make me condemn more."

"We were made to fight this war." Kix said, "The war! This one! We can’t abandon our duty because your guilt and feelings got in the way!"

"Then when will we stop?" Anakin demanded, his voice rising along with Kixes. "When do we stop? When do I get to say that the loss of men is not enough to justify this?" He waved his unbound arm to the rest of the tent and the camp. "This is abandoning my duty, Kix; this is upholding it. I have a duty to my men and not just to finish this mission but to keep them safe as well."

"We’re soldiers."

"I know," Anakin sighed again when the medic finally packed up and left. When he was alone, Anakin dropped his head into his hand and groaned miserably. His mind raced for an answer to the problems before him.

He jerked his head from side to side sharply, trying to quiet his racing, incomplete thoughts. It was difficult to focus past the vibrating in his limbs, the random twitches of his fingers and the shifting of his heartbeat. The answer wouldn’t come. It couldn’t come. Anakin, shifted again, gritting his teeth beneath the uncomfortable fabric he wore.

The Jedi paused. Something was wrong. This wasn’t his usual reaction. "KIX!" He roared, trying to stand, falling flat on his face and gasping into the mud beneath him. "Kix!"

"SIR!" Anakin’s vision spun when the tent flap was shoved back, and the worried clone sprinted in.

"What did you give me?" He gasped, scrabbling to grip the cold armor smeared with dirt. The clone levered him up to rest his head on his lap.

"What…what…was it?" His whole person shivered as unfamiliar shouting erupted outside the tent. Kix only glanced a moment toward the flap before running his hands over Anakin’s shoulders and then his neck lymph nodes.

"It was a local anesthetic!" Kix said hurriedly, grabbing his bag. "You want a mild pain medication and the only thing left it the issued stuff. We picked up the local stuff from a pharmacy we raided two weeks ago." There was more shouting outside the tent, Anakin’s eyes rolled back in his head, he sagged into a boneless heap on his medic just as the tent was ripped open and a host of Separatist organic troopers stormed in.
Checked out as he was, Anakin didn’t hear Kix’s desperate pleading for no one to touch the Jedi and for him to allowed to continue working on him. The shouting exchanged only worsened as a droid bodyguard yanked Kix away from his Jedi and pulled him into the air. Trained though he was, in combat and medicine, Kix had not been sleeping or eating properly in the last few weeks, so his reaction was wildly out of character.

He thrashed and kicked against the droids immovable grip, “He’s having a reaction!” He bellowed. “I’m his medic! He needs to be checked on!” On the ground, Anakin did not resist when a soldier knelt and slapped a pair of stasis cuff on him. “GET OFF!” There were accompanying screaming and shouting outside the tent and sounds of blasters and stun weapons. “LET ME DOWN!”

“Contain him.” A thick rodian voice said. The commander emerged from the crowd and moved to kneel beside the fallen Jedi. “What’s wrong with him, clone?”

“He’s having a reaction,” Kix said desperately, still hanging from the droids grip. His toes barely brushed the floor and the arm around his chest was almost too tight. “I need to help him, he’s going to go into shock if I don’t.”

The rodian pulled one of Anakin’s eyelids back and bit back a curse, “Get the medic in here!” “I’m his medic!”

“You did this.” The commander turned around to move when the medic bustled a moment later. “Cuff him.”

“GET OFF!” Kix lashed out as the soldiers closed in on him, wriggling in the droids grip pointlessly. “GET OFF!”

“Clone, if you don’t calm down you will be stunned!” The rodian shouted as a trooper maneuvered just fast enough past his thrashing to slip cuffs on his wrists. They whined and lit up and pulled his hands together in an uncomfortable motion that made him wince. Kix shrieked a bit when the commander motioned, and the droid tossed the clone over his shoulder.

“What the?”

“Throw him in with the others.” Kix kicked the solid metal chassis beneath his knees as he was hauled from the former command center. The last sight he got of Anakin Skywalker was the man lying between a Separatist medic while a plastic breathing mask was slipped over his face. “Make sure he behaves.”

Not long after Kix joined his remaining brothers in the prison transports, seething and bruised. Rex was separate from the group, still outside the transport with most of his armor missing and his cuffs tightened the most. Two guard droids were standing beside his kneeling figure. The rest of their cobbled together base was in flames and rubble. Kix winced as another tent went up in flames.

“Where’s the General?” A brother muttered as Kix tried to yank his wrists apart.

“A medic grabbed him; he’s…having a bad reaction.” Kix reported, “And was.” The clones, to a person, paused as they watched Anakin Skywalker being carried from the former command tent on a stretcher. Another medic had joined the first, both leaning over his chest and speaking rapidly into communicators. Rex tried to stand but was harshly shoved back into the dirt. Separatist droids joined the organic soldiers in the controlled chaos of the suddenly and rapidly conquered base. “What happened? One second I was thinking about getting some lunch and the next the Generals’ screaming and then everyone was just…I don’t know what happened?” Kix shook his head again as
Rex was hauled roughly to his feet and dragged from their sight.

“I think we were sold out by one of the locals.” A brother said. Kix nodded; it made sense. They hadn’t been happy with the Republic’s presence on the planet. “How’s the general?” They both snarled when a guard slammed the butt of his weapon against the bars.

“Quiet in there. Silence!”

The clones obeyed with ugly glared directed at their captors. “What do we do now?” The brother asked softly, and Kix glanced from side to side.

“Don’t get yourself shot.” Kix ordered.

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“In capturing the Republic camp,” Dooku watched Tambor’s flickering blue form shift, “We also succeeded in capturing Anakin Skywalker and his Captain. General Skywalker was taken immediately to the med bay of the CSS Domain to be treated for shock along with various other injuries. His Captain is being detained in the brig and is being uncooperative.’

“And of the other clone troopers?”

“They are behaving,” Tambor adjusted his vocoder again, “But demand information regarding their General. I have utilized the medic’s skills to care for his own soldiers. As ordered we are evacuating the planet.”

“Obi Wan Kenobi has been preoccupied with me.” Dooku said, “There have been frantic communications between the ships and then to the Republic. I estimate that their reinforcements will be arriving in a day.” Dooku perked up and shifted in his seat as the familiar sound of blaster fire and a lightsaber. “It seems my grand-padawan is here. I must attend to his demands for attention.” The Sith cut the comm line, turning to his attending technicians and attendants he said, “Leave immediately, man the secondary bridge and ensure that this ship leaves for Serenno at its allotted time. Do not fail.” To a person, they saluted and escaped just as Obi Wan Kenobi, followed by his ever faithful commander, smashed in the door.

“Dooku.” Kenobi said curly, his eyes were focused intently on the Sith as his men spread out around him.

“Kenobi, I was wondering what was keeping you.” Taking in the clones and his carefully advancing lineage son Dooku unhooked his cape with one hand to drop it to the ground. “Occupied with my Captain?”

“This ends here, Dooku.” Kenobi announced, dropping into his preferred pose, his lightsaber at the ready. His saber trembled minutely, almost invisible to the untrained eye.

“Does it? I would not have expected you to show up without Skywalker.”

“You know where Anakin is, don’t pretend you don’t.” Obi Wan gave an almost imperceptible flinch when the Count’s blood red blade flared into existence. “I have come for him.”

“You are mistaken, Master Jedi. Skywalker is not here and nor do I know where he is currently residing.” His smile was a grim one. “However, you will have to survive this encounter to begin locating the boy.”

“Very well,” Kenobi charged and the red and blue blades met with a furious clash.
Dooku kept his amusement down, tamping down his laughter as Kenobi, weakened from sleeplessness and hunger; fought like a mad man. His saber play was vicious, dangerous, and elegant. Yan nearly lost his life several times over in the first few minutes. Still, he was not a Master Jedi and a Sith for nothing. He was no longer bound by the laws of the Jedi or even the laws of the Sith. Count Dooku did not have to play nice.

He kept Kenobi occupied with his saber, slashing and cutting, he began to throw the various items around the room in a furious, deadly whirlwind. Clones ducked and dodged, unable to dodge all of them computers, datapads, and half empty calf mugs that flew at their faces. Cody was nearly knocked out cold by a well-placed mouse droid. As it was he staggered back and fell onto his rear with a solid plop while trying to keep his vision from swimming.

Meanwhile, Dooku pressed his experience and skill into work and sent Obi Wan flying into the viewport a moment later. The Jedi collapsed to his hands and knees, breathing deeply. Now that the man was no longer in the way, the remaining clones began to open fire. Their shots were deflected, stopped, or redirected back into their shoulders or chests.

“I had expected better, Kenobi.” Dooku calmly force threw Cody into the viewport. The clone clattered on top of the databanks and consoles beneath with a heavy groan. “This would have been a much more interesting fight if poor Skywalker was no currently indisposed.”

“What did you do to him?” Obi Wan snarled, rising to his feet and searching for his lightsaber. Dooku allowed it to soar back into his hand. “What have you done to him?”

“Only what an enemy does to another,” Dooku sidestepped the near frantic thrust that could have gutted him. “You should know, Kenobi. Considering the likely fate of my crew.”

“What is necessary in war is not always pleasant.” Obi Wan recovered admirably to duck an oncoming caf mug (now empty) and the swing to his left.

“Then you will forgive my actions on your precious mining planet. Or,” His lips curled into an unpleasant smile when he tossed another clone against another and delivered a hefty kick to his grandpadwans chest. “Is the ugliness of war only convenient for you, Master Jedi?” Kenobi collapsed onto the burnt metal and rolled away from the next swing of his lightsaber. “If I must then I will educate you on the true chaos of war, Kenobi!” With a backward slice, he took a clones arm and then another’s head. “It is not for glory!” Another clone was cut in two. Cody scrambled out of the way just in time to avoid losing his legs. “It is not for peace! It is not for honor!” Obi Wan snarled when his lightsaber was nearly twisted from his grip; the ensuing battle began to further dismantle the command center.

“This war is to protect the Republic.” The Jedi retorted, finding a measure of stability in the usual argument between himself and the Sith. “Bring stability back to the galaxy.”

“Of course,” Dooku executed a neat twisting motion while snagging Cody’s shoulder armor and throwing him toward the Jedi. There was a minor, inelegant motion as they both staggered to avoid skewing the clone. “Simply bomb those that disagree with your plan and ensure that there are none left to disagree.”

“That is the way of the Sith.” Kenobi retorted, “I have seen it in action, Count. Do not claim the moral high ground.”

“I would never presume.” The lightsabers sparked as they locked blades. Dooku’s eyes glowed orange even as Obi Wan’s shone with the deep energy of fever. “I only say this to point out,” darkness laced his words as he used his superior height to leverage Obi Wan into a graceless spin to
the side, lightsaber flying into his spare hand. “That neither do you.”

The Sith paused while Obi Wan panted desperately for breath against the floor. He held up a hand to keep the clone from advancing on him, “Reconsider your next actions, clone. Move, and I kill your General here.” Cody froze, eyes flickering between Obi Wan and Dooku.

“You won’t succeed, Count Dooku.” Obi Wan levered himself to his hands and knees, glowering at his Grand-Master. He was shaking, the feverish sheen to his eyes and skin made him look like he was glowing beneath the remaining lights of the command center.

“Won’t I?” He reached out with the force and snuffed Commander Cody’s consciousness with a swift thought. To assuage the sudden indignation burning in Obi Wan’s eyes, Dooku caught the clone in an invisible grip and lowered him carefully to the ground. “It seems my war of attrition has been successful in more ways than one.”

“You won’t win, Dooku.”

“Do not play foolish, Master Jedi. You may carry your favored commander to the brig. Any foolish action on your part will be the death of him. Clear?” The ultimatum was punctuated by the appearance of droidkas, Rogers, and a furious and bruised Captain Nikl.

“Sir, the ship is secured. All members of the boarding party have been secured.” The human of indeterminate sex glowered at Obi Wan. The Jedi glared back. “What of the General?”

“Master Kenobi does have an unfortunate habit of committing perjury when surrender is in play. Do not take anything he says to be truthful, Captain,” Obi Wan was hauled to his feet by two assassin droids and shoved over to his commander. Carefully he checked Cody over, running his hands over his face and chest to check for injuries. When he deemed his commander well enough to be carried Obi Wan crouched down and hoisted the man onto his shoulders. “Escort him to the brig, Captain. Keep him contained.”

“A little overreaction, don’t you think? Count?” Obi Wan nearly staggered under the weight of his unconscious commander, his breathing deepened.

“Considering that this is the most optimal moment for you indulge in your favorite war crime.” Dooku shut off his saber and stepped back as droidekas rolled forward to form a guard. “This is perhaps an understatement.”

Kenobi’s grim smile is the last thing Dooku sees of him.

“A rather successful mission.” He said, adjusting his sleeves as his favorite attendant dissolved from the shadows. The human, almost as old as Dooku was, dressed in soft gray robes and covered in a heavy scarf nodded.

“An admirable fight, sir.”

“I see your mission was successful.” The few remaining Rogers fell into line behind Dooku and his manservant.

“A concentrated dose, even a small one, to their water and food supply was enough to weaken their immune systems, sir. Once the boarding crews aboard this one and the Republic ships exposed the troopers to the bacteria necessary to render them ill. Not ill enough to kill them but enough to weaken them substantially, including Kenobi.”

“It is a good day when we have managed to take a page from the Jedi’s own book. How long will
their recovery take?”

“As long as you need, sir.”

“Hmmm. Tenner, when we reach Serrano, leave. Find Skywalker in whatever prison Tambor
decides to dump him in. Give me a complete psychological and medical evaluation, as unbiased as
you are able, my old friend. Given your history with the Jedi, I understand this is much to accept.”

They strode down the halls of the CSS Baltic in silence as Tenner considered his orders.

“Skywalker was neither a perpetrator nor a cause of my pain. I will be fair for the boy.”

“Thank you, my friend. And of his Master?”

“I will remove myself from the situation, Sir. I am a capable agent but I do not trust myself to be
impartial in regards to Obi-Wan Kenobi.”

“Nor would I expect you to, Tenner. I will deal with Kenobi.”

“And what do you want me to do with Skywalker?”

“Observe him, watch him in prison. Nothing else.”

“Yes, sir.” The human nodded. Both of them stepped over the abandoned corpse of a clone and
continued onward.

“The rest of Kenobi’s fleet will be dismantled or flee. Either way, the Republic will now learn their
vaunted heroes are not untouchable. The fear will be sown and spread.”

“Yes, sir.” The ship beneath their boots shuddered at the ship launched into hyperspace. “Do you
believe Wat Tambor would injure Skywalker needlessly?”

“Tambor is ruthless and serves his purpose as a dangerous general and a backer to the CIS but he
would not. His rules and personal ethics prevent him from harming any prisoners, though I am sure
that any troublemakers will be punished harshly. Skywalker is safe where he is.”

“And Kenobi?”

“Less so. We are en-route to Serrano now, Tenner.”

“I will go prepare.” The aged human bowed and retreated into the side hallways of the ship.

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“Well.” Obi Wan watched four droids, and four organics take up the guard positions outside his cell.
They were all well-armed, dangerous and obviously irritated. “That didn’t work.” The plan had been
to sneak aboard the Count’s vessels to try and send a message to the Republic. Teams had been
deployed to every Separatist ship in the hopes of getting at least a single message out. Instead there
had been a rather impressive amount of foul play and, of course, Dooku’s lightsaber skills to stop
them.

He waited in silence, his limbs trembling. He didn’t feel well and wasn’t sure if he was going faint in
a moment or not.

“Cody?” The clones head was cradled in his lap; a fine sheen of sweat was beading on his brow.
“Cody?” His commander was unresponsive. It made little sense to him; most of the clones had been
given broad spectrum vaccines to prevent them from becoming ill. To have his own commander, the ceaselessly loyal, dangerous, and trustworthy clone to have fallen prey to something so common was worrisome.

Dooku had to be involved with his man’s illness somehow. He was probably involved in whatever bug had been bothering Obi Wan since they had boarded. Whatever bug had weakened him so considerably.

“Cody.” He tried again, gently brushing dirt and flecks of metal off the younger man’s face. He’d been thrown around quite a bit in the last battle, too much to be healthy. It worried him greatly Cody stirred with a groan but did not wake. “Is a medic unavailable or should my commander suffer needlessly.” None of the guards replied. His grip on Cody tightened when the trooper moaned again.

Anakin woke up surprisingly comfortable. Surrounded by soft lights, a few patterns of beeping that could only mean he was in a medical suite. The blankets were too soft for it to be a Republic ship and the lights were set too low and comfortable for this to be a Republic ship.

All in all, someone had taken care to make sure he was comfortable. This could not be a Republic ship.

His last memory had been of collapsing into an ungainly heap in the mud while Kix worried and then the whole camp being stormed by Separatists. It hadn’t been a pleasant memory and reliving it as he slowly woke up was not helping. His medic’s frantic shouting and pleading were frightening to hear and unpleasant to think on.

He guessed that he and his men had been taken prisoner. That would explain why a heavy strap was laying across his chest, holding him down.

“Good morning.” The voice sounded human but when he opened his eyes Anakin drank in the sight of a portly alien that he wasn’t quite able to identify. “I am your Doctor. Call me Gamph as my name is not able to be spoken with your crude human tongue. I am here to tell you that you are stable, whatever acid in your veins is gone now.”

“Acid?”

“Sedative, a poor one that reacted badly with your previous medicine and your condition. Medic Kix could have killed you. Good that you were brought here. I am not human but I know how your poorly constructed body works. You will recover well.”

“Where…where are my men?” Anakin demanded, wiggling a little under the strap across his chest. He discovered, dismayed, that his wrists and ankles were similarly enchained.

“I do not know.” The doctor stepped beside his bed and blinked his many eyes at him. “Do I have permission to touch your body?”

“I…what?”

“It is a common courtesy, prisoner. That I allow you to accept or deny further treatment. You must give your consent to be treated.”

“What do you…what do you need to do?” Anakin blinked.

“To palpate your chest and neck to check for any further swelling or inflammation.”

“Can’t you use a scanner?”
“Due to my biology it is much easier to use my appendages but yes, a scanner will suffice.”

“Then use that.” Anakin squirmed uneasily at the thought of anyone else touching him. He was grateful for the fact that the doctor had bothered to ask his permission to do so.

“Very well.” The peculiar alien turned around to grab a scanner. Anakin reached out with the Force and found himself countered by, he could not extend his ability far beyond himself. Confused and a little frightened, he looked for whatever could be stopping him.

“Are you in pain?” Doctor Gamph blinked its many eyes at him. “Is that why you are squirming?”

“I can’t. I can’t use the Force.”

“Can you still sense it?”

“What?” Anakin’s desperate glance to his doctor was met with a shrug.

“Can you still touch the Force?”

“I...yes.”

“Then you will find the cause of your trouble stitched into your bonds.” Doctor Gamph held the scanner over his body and began to move it down and across. He was also right; an impressive amount of intricate embroidery was stitched into the leather and fabric holding him down. It was mostly unrecognizable but he knew enough Sith lore to be able to at least identify the presence of their magic. He also knew that this brand of magic didn’t work unless it was done by hand.

The thought of Count Dooku, in all of his sithly glory, sitting down to embroider leather was a lot more entertaining than Anakin thought. With a bitter curse, he also recognized the same designs on his tunic and pants.

Doctor Gamph frowned when his scanner beeped. “There is an irregular item in your body. It is not your prosthetic. I will inform my surgical team.”

“NO!” Anakin surged upwards only to have the straps tighten on their own accord. “If you try to take it out then you’ll set it off.”

“What is it?”

“What do you think it is, you half-trained idiot?” He snarled. The familiar burn of shame in his chest, the familiar fear of people knowing, of people using it against him. Dooku could and would gain control over him if he knew. “It’s a transmitter.” His voice dropped low. “You can’t… doctor/patient confidentiality.”

“This is an explosive, dangerous material. It cannot be allowed to continue here. I will be contacting the proper authorities to have it removed.”

“There are no proper authorities!” Anakin yelped, twisting his wrists about. There were a million possibilities that this could take. Most of them were terrible, horrible and totally wretched. “Just leave it in, there’s nothing you can do.”

“Your healing schedule will be re-evaluated, Skywalker. Do not fear,” Doctor Gamph patted the side of his bed. Anakin hissed his terror, in and out, in and out until he felt like his lungs were going to burst. “Do not worry; I am a doctor. I have taken an oath to do no harm. I will not harm you. You are my patient.”
“There aren’t proper authorities! There isn’t anyone in this Force damned galaxy to ask to fix this. There isn’t, just leave it and toss me into whatever hell hole they already dirtied up for me.” He only glared harder when Doctor Gamph blinked his many eyes at him.

“The proper authorities will be contacted.” The doctor repeated calmly and retreated from the room as two guard droids marched their way in.

Doctor Gamph did report the abnormality of Skywalker’s transmitter to the necessary people. An intelligence officer handed him off to a police captain from one of the occupied planets that had been putting actual effort into eradicating the slave trade. The captain told the doctor that for it to be removed safely (though they were removed with a guess and prayer all the time) he needed to find Skywalker’s last master and what had happened to the command chip that coincided with the Jedi’s chip.

When Gamph asked the police captain to investigate, he did.

“A slave transmitter?” Count Dooku tucked his hands into his robes, staring in disbelief at the two sentients waiting. “In Skywalker.”

“Yes,” Doctor Gamph brandished his datapad, “Muscle growth around it indicates it has been there since birth.”

“In our investigation,” The twi’lek captain glanced to the side and then up. “We tracked a series of his…owners. The first was Gardulla the Hutt, then a being named Watto from Tatooine. When Skywalker was nine, he was bet and won in a pod race, the Boonta Eve Classic. Which he won. His ownership passed into the possession of Qui Gon Jinn, a Jedi, who might have had the intention of freeing him but did not. Which we know because Skywalker’s transmitter is still active. What happened to the command chip is unknown at this point.”

“It is possible for the chip to be among Qui Gon Jinn’s possessions, which were placed in storage after his death.” Dooku muttered, “But we have no way of knowing.”

“Even if they were, how would we get a hold of them?”

“The right of parental inheritance,” Dooku scratched his beard. The doctor and the police officer exchanged a look. “Doctor, have Skywalker transferred to the ready facilities. I will have the command chip for his transmitter as soon as I am able. Captain, thank you for your service to the Confederacy.” The twi’lek bowed awkwardly. His hologram shut off a moment later, the doctors followed a moment later.

Thinking, Dooku returned to his embroidery. Skywalker was officially a Separatist, the Holo net had carried the new far and wide, and the Jedi were in a state of chaos. Since Dooku had turned his attention to a new avenue to Sith magic, he’d managed to keep the boy contained well enough. Though, even without the Force, Skywalker was dangerous. He’d nearly made it off planet when they’d transferred him. Unlike the other Jedi, he did not rely on the Force as heavily. He could pick locks, sweet talk, outsmart and evade police just as well as any criminal that wasn’t force sensitive. Thankfully Dooku had begun adding his magic to whatever clothes the Jedi was going to wear as soon as he’d been airlifted off of the mining planet.

Since he well knew Skywalker’s particular sensory weakness he’d chosen some rather expensive fabrics and thread to contain him with. When the automatic locking cuffs were finally added to the wrists (Ones that would tighten and combine if Anakin made trouble) they’d be complete.

“Who was that?” Yan Dooku turned his head slightly to see his sister standing at the door.
“A doctor and a police captain,” He said.

“What was it?” He frowned and set down his materials and tucked his needle back into the little pillow.

“Would you like to sue the Jedi Order?”

“I would love to.” Yen Dooku stepped into the room and claimed the seat across the caf table. “What do you need done?”

“I need to gain access to my old padawan’s things. There is an item among that is of great interest to myself and a prisoner I have taken.”

“What could Jinn have that could be of interest to Skywalker.” Yan took up the free leg of the pants and ran her long, thin fingers over the neat stitches. “Dressing him in your colors? That is a little tacky.”

“Skywalker is ill-suited for the baggy Jedi robes. He is my great-grand padawan. He will uphold my lines dignity by dressing well. Even if it prison scrubs.”

“How is he handling prison?”

“Rather well, he seems far more confused than anything.”

“And what of the information he has.” Dooku produced the paper envelope that Obi Wan had dropped during their latest duel. “What’s this?”

“An ordered evaluation of Skywalker. They do not trust their own General beyond a few weeks. Any information he has or had is now outdated and useless. His doctor needs whatever information that Jinn may have had. I need it now. Since, during a mission on Corellia, I legally adopted Qui Gon, his possessions should have passed to me. This was the not case, not to mention the dozens of attempted assassinations. How much money do you think I can sue from them as well?”

“The dirt they’re over, the entire district and their fleets.” Yen said, dropping the pant leg. “I’ll assemble a team.”

“That would be excellent.”

“And I’ll alert the media as soon as we’ve delivered the notice of our intentions.”

“Thank you, Yen.”

“Don’t think you won’t have to pay me, you are not short of cash.”

“Money is no issue, sister dearest. I’ll pay you and your interns and your aides and all of the people you will hire to rain a legal war on the Jedi.”

“Good,” Yen stood, “I’ll get started. You should give Skywalker a nice blue.”

“Blue?” Dooku frowned.

“It will seem less angry than red, tan, and black.”

“Skywalker is a prisoner. He is a Jedi. I am a Sith. I will not allow him to be coddled.”

“Of course,” his sister agreed in a tone that meant she thought he was being stupid.
“Disrespectful,” Dooku muttered to himself as his sister waltzed from the room. With nothing else pressing on him, not even Obi Wan's attempted escapes or even an update from his Master, he could finally relax and get the batch of clothes done. He would trust his sister to rain absolute hell on his former master.

“It’s morning, Skywalker.” Anakin Skywalker rubbed his eyes.

“Go away, Meeder.”

“Skywalker, you will miss breakfast.”

“I can’t believe I’ve been in prison long enough to get a routine.” He rolled onto his back and opened his eyes to see his much older human cellmate leaning over him. “Good morning.” He cocked an eyebrow, “Invasive much.”

“Get up, Skywalker.” The older man ordered kindly. “The guards will not appreciate your tardiness.”

“Right, right. They don’t have a sense of humor though.”

“You are not funny, Skywalker.” Meeder sat back down on his own bunk as Anakin Skywalker sat up and pushed the blanket off of him. In a few motions, the Jedi had changed from his sleep clothes into his day clothes. The same patterns were still there, stitched into the fabric.

“Gotta love Dooku for this.”

“They are attractive patterns.”

“They’re Sith magic to keep me from using the Force.” Anakin grunted as he stretched out and dropped to the floor to begin doing pushups. “I don’t care for them.”

“Is there a way to keep you from using the Force?” Meeder asked.

“There are some but if you do it the person usually goes crazy. Makes a real mess of them.”

“Hmmm.” Meeder crossed his legs and settled his head against the wall. “How do you feel?”

“Fine.”

“Skywalker.”

“I feel fine,” Anakin snapped. “I’m fine.”

“All right.” Meeder ran a hand through his short, graying hair. “What do you want to do today?”

“They won’t let me in the motor pool anymore.” Anakin grumbled. “It’ll have to be the gardens.”

“Goodness, what did you do?”

“They didn’t like my modifications.” Meeder grinned. “I spent three days on them, and they hauled the speeder away because they thought I’d tampered with it. Of course, I tampered with it, that’s the point of modifications. No! They had to get all snippy with me. I was just fixing stuff; I feel like I’m going crazy.”

“Are you going crazy?” The separatist spy watched the Jedi carefully. Anakin Skywalker rubbed his head a bit, glancing up at the iron gray ceiling and then out the bars to the walkway.
“My head has never been clearer. Which is stupid because I’m in prison.”

“You’ve tried five escapes, Skywalker. I’m not surprised you’ve been so restricted.”

“Yeah, yeah.” The Jedi prisoner grumbled as he settled back onto his own bed. “I’m surprised I didn’t end up in the Citadel. I would have thought that was where they’d stick me.”

“I don’t know if you’d survive the Citadel.” The spy said. Obi-Wan, the famed master, was finding surviving the Citadel difficult. At least he had none of the problems Skywalker suffered.

“You have no faith in me, Meeder.”

“I have faith in you, Skywalker.” Meeder laughed as four guards marched up to their door. “I just don’t trust the guards at the Citadel. Besides, why imprison you in a place you’ve already broken in and out of?”

“Who knows?” Anakin and Meeder stood at the same time as the ray shielded door buzzed open. “Hey, fellas!” He grinned with false humor.

“Hands.” The largest guard ordered. Anakin’s face settled into a firm expression as he held out his hand to be cuffed. “Don’t even think of making trouble.”

“Make trouble? Me?”

Obi-Wan Kenobi was not having a nice day. He hadn’t been having a nice week or even two weeks. Since his capture by Count Dooku he had been separated from his men, seemingly abandoned by the Jedi order, and thrown into the darkest prison cell the Citadel had to offer. He might have been left to rot.

He rubbed his face. His beard was thickening; he hadn’t been given anything sharp enough to shave with. Even his cutlery was basic plastics that couldn’t cut him and if he got meat it was already cut up.

“I’m surprised, Count Dooku.” Carefully, he peeled an eye open to see the Sith standing just outside his prison bars. “That you hadn’t come to gloat earlier.”

“I would have,” Dooku clasped his hands, “If I were not occupied with containing your young padawan. He has proven to be the more difficult prisoner.”

“Anakin does leave a mess and he doesn’t take kindly to soldiers.”

“Except his own.”

“Except his own.” Obi-Wan agreed. He didn’t shift from his meditation pose. “What do you want, Count?”

“You are fortunate to be alive,” Dooku said mildly. “We decrypted the codes on your ship and found a rather impressive amount of information stored on them. It will be quite useful in the future.”

“You underestimate the Jedi, Count.” Obi Wan warned, “We are far better suited for this conflict than you thought.”

“No, you aren’t.” His mouth twisted into a cruel smile. “You and Skywalker and perhaps a few others are somewhat admirable enemies. The rest of your compatriots are simpering fools, soft
children in your lofty palace walls.”

“Hypocrisy is not a good look, Count.”

“Is it hypocrisy?”

“Lofty palace walls?” A single eyebrow rose. “If I remember, Count.” A pointed look was aimed at his finery. “You inherited quite a fortune.”

“I did,” Dooku nodded, “And yet you will find me half as deluded as you. However, I did not come here to engage in a great amount of witty banter. I came for information on my son.”

Obi-Wan blinked. “Excuse me?”

“My son, Qui Gon Jinn.”

“You trained Master Jinn.” Obi Wan said firmly, “You were never his father.”

“Under the laws of Corellia, which are recognized by both the Republic and the Confederacy, I was. During a rather exciting mission involving the now-deposed king, a dozen or so police officers, and a bottle of Rum. I was legally Qui Gon Jinn’s father.”

“That has little relevance as Master Jinn is dead.”

“He is,” The Sith paused for a moment as if he was grieving privately. “My question concerns his possessions and do not spout the drivel that the Jedi had no possessions. You and I both know that my son collected many trinkets. What happened to his things after his death? And before you consider no answering do remember that refusal to answer will lead to a rather unfortunate legal battle. I would not wish this on your Jedi Order considering the most recent notice they had received.”

“Notice?”

“Tell me, Obi-Wan.”

The Jedi blinked a few moments before nodding. “His things were sent into storage.”

“Did you keep anything of his as a memento?”

“No.” Qui Gon’s death had been difficult enough as it was. He had packed everything into a box and set it out for the droids to pick it up.

“Nothing!”

“Very well.” Dooku nearly smiled at him. “Good day, Obi-Wan. Hopefully, you will meditate on the failings of the Republic. I will always hold out the hope you might join me, grandson.” Obi-Wan blanched but couldn’t manage another word as the Sith vanished from his door and left him in semi-darkness.

Once Dooku had reached his ship and contacted his sister; he relayed the good news. “Nothing has been moved from Qui Gon’s possessions. If the command chip and proof of ownership are anywhere it is in storage.”

“That’s good news.” Yen mused, “And Obi Wan.”

“And foolish as ever.” Yan reported, “Still blinded and determined to be stupid. I will work him
around.”

“You might as well work on Skywalker. He seems more receptive, considering his past and his life I would imagine that he would have little trouble listening to you. He has been failed by the Republic countless time and forced onto a battlefront and made to suffer what appears to be a rather severe mental illness all in the name of peace. He was a slave, still is, and if any of the Jedi order would see their flaws it would be him.”

“Skywalker is impulsive and foolish.” Dooku waved, “I would have no use for him.”

“Skywalker has trounced your generals more than once, brother. Plus, he has survived in battle against you.”

“I took his hand. I witnessed his most obvious weakness.”

“He was a slave. Speak to him. He is not the Jedi you knew and know; he is one from the gutter. I have seen men like him, and I assure you that even under the Jedi wrappings that he wants nothing more than to burn down those who have failed him. I know what I’ve seen, Yan. Speak to Skywalker and forget Kenobi. No matter how attached you are to him you need to be practical; he will never betray the Republic.”

“And Skywalker will.”

“The Republic betrayed him.” Yen stared firmly at him. “Speak to him. I will prepare for our opening arguments before the Corellian judge.”

“I will take your words into consideration,” Yan promised, “I will see you when I return to Serrano.”

“Alright, Yan. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.” He said and the connection was cut off.

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“How does it look?” Master Yoda opened his eyes slowly as Master Windu settled into the meditation chair beside him.

“Concerned, I am. Legal actions Dooku has taken against us. Speak of another plot this could.”

“Our lawyers are already working on a rebuttal but we’ve been summoned to the Corellian High Court. It’s too late to ignore this. As soon as the missive came through to use it was released by the press.”

“Against the Jedi, public opinion has turned.”

“Not just that, Dooku released the prisoner holos of both Skywalker and Kenobi. Morale has sunk and the Senate is in fits.”

“Show me the prisoner holos.” Yoda asked and watched as Windu produced a holoprojector and began flickering through the images. Most of them were clones with the final two being Anakin and Obi Wan.

The Council master was staring wearily at the camera with a semi-bitter expression. His prisoner scrubs were so new the creases were still obvious.

Skywalker seemed unusually calm, his eyes focused as if he could see the two masters through time
and space. His own scrubs were much more worn than his partners with intricate embroidery along the collar and presumably elsewhere.

“We don’t know where they’re being kept. It’s surprising they haven’t been executed yet but apparently, Dooku just wants to hold them over us and mock us. Senator Amidala is demanding to be spoken to and the Chancellor wants an update on their rescue as soon as possible. Can we even rescue them?”

“The force moves as it sees fit,” Yoda said, ears drooping. “Solve our problems we shall. Inquire with the lawyers on a solution, you must.”

“Yes, Master.” Mace nodded. “But what about Skywalker and Kenobi?”

“Rescue them, we will.” Yoda promised. “From prison as need be.”

“Troop morale is down, sunk. We need them yesterday.”

Master Yoda turned to the skyline of the city, pensive and concerned. “Rescued, they will be.”

Palpatine had seen his fair share of shocking things. He had instigated a war that spanned the galaxy, he had engineered the fall of the Republic and the Jedi. He had been carefully suctioning all of the power of the Republic for himself in the effort to form an Empire. In fact, he’d managed to do what no Sith had done before. He had won.

Nearly.

“What purpose do you have for imprisoning Skywalker and Kenobi?” he asked, both genuinely curious and enraged. Dooku had derailed his plans by snagging his future apprentice and holding him, legally. He didn’t even know how Skywalker was coping with prison. He assumed it was poorly.

“The blow to Republic morale has resulted in the taking of two systems, master. We have captured over a hundred thousand clones as prisoners and three dozen Republic ships to use as our own. Keeping Skywalker and Kenobi and broadcasting their capture is a political and military move that myself and my Generals have all agreed on.”

“Release them.” Sidious ordered shortly. “They are vital to our plan as they are. Containing them as prisoners will set them back.”

Count Dooku kept his eyes down but the shock was palpable along the holo connection.

“Master.”

“Engineer their escape, my apprentice. Skywalker and Kenobi are needed where they are.”

The Count waited for a long moment, almost verging on disrespect before he finally nodded.

“Yes, master.” Dooku waited for the connection to die before he stood up and began swearing furiously. After twenty minutes he composed himself and straightened his cape. “Poda!”

“Sir.” A small human woman with dark eyes and even dark skin poked her head through the door.

“My dear, please engineer the escape of both Kenobi and Skywalker. Kenobi first, preferably in the next week. Skywalker only after I have spoken to him.”

“You want it desperate or with bodies or do you want to make these the miracle rescues the Jedi are
always discussing.”

“A miracle one, none of their crew dies.”

“I’ll get in touch with my people at the temple and set it the ball rolling. Anything else?”

“Yes, please tell my staff to get my headache medicine and a strong cup of tea.”

“I’m an intelligence officer,” Poda muttered, “Not your freaking maid.”

“Thank you, Corporal.” He said pointedly. The woman shot him an unpleasant look and retreated. With a sigh, he began to rub his temples. “Poda!”

“Sir?” As if she had not moved from the door her head reappeared.

“Please have my shuttle prepared to leave for Onyx Prime.”

“Aye.” Poda disappeared from view, leaving the Sith alone again. Once he’d take a few deep breath and relished in his fury over his master proclamation, he forced himself to analyze the entire situation.

Sidious wanted Skywalker and Kenobi active in the war. He wanted Skywalker alive and fighting his apprentice. Skywalker to be destroying with Jedi zeal all that they had created. He wanted Kenobi to be run ragged as the Jedi’s first war general in generations.

Why? Why would he want the two most dangerous Jedi alive to be actively destroying him? More to the point, what did Skywalker and Kenobi do to serve him?

He knew that Skywalker had a personal relationship with the Sith Master. That the man had had a hand in raising him outside of Jedi influence and that Skywalker was peculiarly attached to Palpatine. There were several unpleasant conclusions that could be drawn from that thought, all of them Dooku blanched from. If Palpatine spent an extended period of time with Anakin, then he must know and operate around Skywalker’s disability. Did the Sith work around Anakin’s disability or did he do his best to worsen the sensory overload that the boy suffered from? When Dooku had cradled the Jedi’s head on his knees and done his best to reproduce the tattered shields, he found that Skywalker was more vulnerable than he’d ever considered.

He knew of the boy’s impatience, anger, and tendency to lash out and had never considered why had caused this to happen. By all accounts, Skywalker had been a rather pleasant nine-year-old all things considered. What he had seen in Anakin was vastly different and must more concerning. Beneath the bluster and the anger and the sarcasm were weakness, fear, tenderness that had been smashed and discarded but was still clinging to life. Skywalker was afraid and in pain and alone. His confusion and desperation were rampant; he needed to be useful. He needed to be needed. Beneath the Skywalker he knew he found the young man clutching to the last remnants of light he had. There was light no doubt, but it was so tattered and tired that it was rather a miracle that Skywalker had not succumbed to the Dark side yet.

A comm line blinked and beeped until he activated the switch. Tenner was standing ready, still in his prison scrubs.

“My friend, what news of Skywalker do you have for me?”

“Conflicting readings, sir. None of them good. As you stated he suffers from sensory overload, worsened by his force ability. This is minimal when he is either alone or comfortable and not overwhelmed by people and noise. Considering the nature of the prisoners here is it not surprising he has not had a shut down yet.”
“He is well?” Dooku frowned. He thought Skywalker would handle prisoner much worse.

“He…” Tenner paused. His aging eyes shifting about as he searched for an answer, “Seems to be improving. His color has returned, his eyes are bright and I have heard him laugh. None of this matches his previous profile. In our conversations I have heard many implications; faint ones, that he does not trust nor appreciate the Jedi. There is evidence of abuse, physical and emotional and verbal. If this stems from the Jedi I am not sure but it has made an obvious impact in the way he speaks and moves.”

“How?”

“He is defensive when he is being spoken to by an older man. His hands or arms crossed as he leans toward the door. If in large clothes he does his best to drown himself in the clothes to make himself seem smaller. He rarely makes eye contact, a peculiar habit for a Jedi and a front liner. His words move between being exceedingly formal and informal. As if he is wobbling between how he speaks to his fellow Jedi anyone else.”

“But the abuse?”

“Is obvious to anyone looking for the signs both from the Jedi and his slavery. I recommend that he be assigned a psychiatrist to help him.”

“Tenner.”

“We are not coddling him by aiding him, sir.”

“Perhaps not.” Dooku released a slow breath as he considered his latest wrinkle. His son has raised a stickler for the rules and Jedi doctrine and in turn, Obi Wan had attempted to raise a young, scarred slave boy that had turned out to be only the bare façade he needed to not be imprisoned. Anakin Skywalker was not a normal Jedi If his sister was right then perhaps he would be amenable to abandoning the Republic and the Jedi.

“I will be arriving in a day to speak to Skywalker. He will be expecting me. Continue your work and monitor him.”

“Yes, sir.”

“May the force be with you,” Dooku said and cut the line. Alone with his thoughts and considerations he wondered just how Anakin Skywalker was coping.

Padme paced the length of her office her hand clenching and unclenching as she moved. Her hair bounced with every step and flared out with every turn.

“There is still no news, Senator.” Captain Panaka said consolingly. “Since the news release of his capture.”

“What could they be doing to him?” Padme demanded. “He is a General and a Jedi, and they haven’t broadcasted his execution for the galaxy to see? They do not even seem to be bragging that they or torturing the Hero With No Fear! What do they hope to accomplish by acting as if Anakin is simply another soldier?” She slapped her hands together, frowning thunderously. “But if that is the motivation then they want to reduce Anakin in the eyes of the Confederacy. By not rubbing this victory in our faces they remind their people he is just another person, capable of being destroyed or captured. And by giving us no news, we fall into a blind panic and begin to doubt ourselves and the Jedi.”
“Milady.”

“He could be in prison, alone and the mercy of his enemies. He could be stuck in the Citadel’s lowest chambers, chained and alone. He could be anywhere. Intelligence has received no news, nothing. No chatter about Skywalker. How could Dooku have suddenly managed to keep a secret? There is nothing that our men have not been able to find out before, and suddenly all of the Confederacy chatter goes silent. Unless we have been deliberately leaked information but that would make no sense because none of the victories gained or lost have ever seemed to benefit the Separatists….“ Her paced sped up and then she ground to a halt as a handmaiden stepped into her office.

“Milady, Master Plo Koon has come to speak to you on behalf of the Jedi.”

“Send him in.” Padme ordered adjusting her hair and making sure she was presenting the best view of herself as the Jedi came in. “Master Plo, it is good to see you.” She held out her hands to take his. “I am pleased to see you during this difficult time.”

“Your words are kind, Senator.” Plo Koon rumbled. Padme brightened when she noticed the quiet form of Ahoska lurking the background. “You are acquainted with Ahsoka Tano.”

“Ahsoka!” Padme took her hands as well, noting how they trembled. “How are you?”

“Just missing Skyguy.” The togruta replied with a sad smile.

“I’m sure. I miss Anakin as well.” Padme turned to the kel-dor. “What can you tell me of Anakin’s and Obi Wan’s capture? Are there plans to rescue him…them?”

“I cannot share such information with you, Senator. However, I have confidence that they are being treated in accordance with the Alderann convention.”

“Have you received information on this?”

“In our recent legal bout with Count Dooku we have been assured they have been. I must trust the force in this matter and hope it is true.”

“So must I.” She released a heavy breath. Anakin had been captured before but never for so long and never after just a nasty defeat. He had never failed so spectacularly. “Please, will you give me updates as they come in? Anakin is a dear friend of mine and Friend of Naboo, we must know if he is alright.”

“I will do my best, Senator.” Plo Koon promised.

“The Queen has been requesting updates as well.” Padme belatedly realized just how desperate she must have sounded. It wasn’t as if it was a complete lie, the Queen did want Anakin to be safe. He did hold the rare and honored position of Friend of Naboo.

“We’ll let you know as soon as we find something out.” Ahsoka said with a smile and thumbs up.

“Do you at least know where Artoo is? He should have been with Anakin but.”

“He was in the temple getting repaired from his last foray with an outlet. He’s nervous and waiting too.” Ahsoka shrugged a bit. “He’s okay.”

“Oh.” Padme sat down. “Is it possible for Artoo to stay with me until Anakin return? He is a friend of mine.”
“Uh. Senator.”

“Please, Ahsoka?” She smiled at the togruta who shrugged.

“I guess. Master?”

“I see no issue with the senator’s request.” Plo Koon set a hand on Ahsoka’s shoulder. “Perhaps you could use the protection of young Ahsoka here? There are many dangers out there for you, my lady.”

“I would appreciate your assistance, Master.” Padme watched as Ahsoka carefully made her way across the room. “Would you care for some tea?”

“I am afraid not, my lady. I must be back at the temple.”

“Of course.” Padme’s hand tremble as she holds onto Ahsoka’s arm and watched the Jedi Master being shown out. When the Kel-dor was gone, Ahsoka whirled around and buried her face into her chest.

“They got him!” She cried, holding tight to the Senator. “They actually captured him! I can’t even feel him anymore!” Ahsoka wasn’t crying yet, but there was a watery feel to her words. “Padme!”

“Oh, Ahsoka.” Despite her own precarious position, Padme could not help for the padawan that was essentially Anakin’s daughter. The snippy child was something he clung to keep him grounded. “He’ll be alright. He’ll escape, or he’ll be released, or he’ll be rescued. I know he’ll be alright.” Her arms trembled as she held Ahsoka. She sought the comfort of her own lies because she just couldn’t believe that any of those options were possible.

“Do you really think so?” Ahsoka asked, tilting her head upward just enough to peek over her own headdress and montrals.

“Of course,” she lied and knows Ahsoka catches it when her deep blue eyes narrow and he eyes sink to the floor again.

“Padme…I don’t know what to do. They’ve had him for two months, and now Dooku is suing the order. It feels like the galaxy has gone topsy turvy and I can’t figure out which way is up anymore.”

“I know.” Carefully, she cradled Ahsoka close. “I know.”

The legal battle between the Jedi Order and Count Dooku escalated. First, the order denied that Dooku was legally Qui Gon’s father and secondly, that he had any right to the things the Jedi had left behind. Yen Dooku, a consummate Separatist, and hater of all things Jedi, proved with the legal and notarized adoption documents. Then, she gleefully pointed out that the Jedi has agreed, 490 years ago, that they would agree and uphold the law of Corellia in agreement with building the temple there. After relishing the Jedi’s astounded faces, she then listed a number of encounters and time when the Jedi had failed to do just that. The list took four hours to complete and was, apparently, heavily abridged. It included over 400 counts of speeder and vehicle thefts, breaking and entering, murder, arrest without a warrant, detaining without a warrant, public indecently (difficult to achieve on Corellia) political assassination, underage weapons handling, underage drinking, driving under the influence of toxins, and disorderly conduct.

When Jedi Master Yensin managed to pick his jaw off the floor and offer a rebuttal he stated that as the Jedi were actively in a war against the Count, it was against military procedure.

Yen Dooku looked calm and collected and utterly uninfluenced by the proceedings; was having the time of her life. For her next argument, she stated that the Jedi had agreed to adhere to the Alderann
convention which meant that even as they fought their wars, they had an obligation the families to return their possessions across enemy lines. Then she pointed out that not only and the Jedi failed to do that so far, they had also held onto the possessions of fallen Separatists soldiers. Furthermore, the Jedi Council had no claim to any of Qui Gon possessions as they were neither his parent or legal guardian.

Yan watched the proceedings along with the rest of the galaxy on the holo. Along with the guards of the Citadel. Along with the rest of the Jedi. Along with the Senate and Palpatine. Along with Anakin and his fellow inmates (Anakin did not laugh. No, he definitely did not laugh.) Along with anyone tuned into the public spectacle. As the Jedi were sued for the first time in over 400 years billions of sentients tuned in to watch and marvel at the sight.

“I wasn’t even sure this was possible.” Anakin admitted, his arms crossed over his chest as he leaned against the wall of the exercise yard. To his right, Meeder seemed occupied with his knitting. The older man grunted a bit.

“More things are possible than anyone may believe.”

“I guess.” Anakin laughed a bit and rubbed his head. He glanced at the screen where the camera was zoomed in on the Master’s faces. Yoda and Shaak seemed tense and irritated. Something only another Jedi would be able to notice. “But Dooku has sued the Jedi, and his sister is running the operation. Come on; I don’t think anyone thought this was possible.”

“Once upon a time Dooku might have never imagined having a sister was possible.” Meeder pointed out. He only frowned at Anakin’s confused brow. “Yes?”

“How did you know Dooku was a Jedi before he was a Count?”

“I’m an old man,” Meeder said kindly, glancing pointedly at the holo-screen that now showed a rather complex diagram. Anakin had stopped paying attention to what the lawyers were saying, so he wasn’t sure what it meant. I remember when Naboo was blockaded, I remember when Dooku left the Order and inherited his family fortune. When he returned, he actually took his from his sister who stood to inherit. She was happy enough, I heard. It gave her more a chance to focus on her career. Now look at it; she’s humiliating the Jedi Order.”

“You don’t like the Jedi Order.” Anakin guessed and was a little insulted when his older cell-mate looked faintly surprised. “I can’t use the force right now, but that doesn’t mean I can’t sense stuff.”

“Hmmm.”

“Not that using the force makes me any more dangerous.” Anakin glanced sideways a huddle of prisoners that had tried to take advantage of his sudden disability. They were all still wearing braces and bandages and splints from their encounter with the front-line general. “But I know you don’t like me.”

“I like you fine, young Skywalker.” Meeder paused only slightly when he noticed the boy give an almost imperceptible shudder. He wondered if Skywalker even knew that he was momentarily unnerved. “Anakin, I just don’t like the Jedi Order.”

“Why not?” Anakin glowered, “If you got to know the others then you might like them too. You’ve just met me.”

“I’ve met more Jedi than just you, Anakin.” Meeder said quietly. His wrinkled hands drew an aimless image in the dirt beneath them. “Far more and enough to know that I don’t like them.”
“But if it’s just the people.”

“It is not.” Meeder said sharply, and Anakin fell back, insulted. “Anakin, do you believe I would hate someone before even meeting them?”

“You’re here.” Anakin said flatly. “You’re in prison. I don’t know what kind of person you are.”

“The same kind you are except less repressed.” Meeder replied calmly even as Anakin’s expression flattened. “Do not assume that I have no feelings over this matter that I have not already considered or thought upon. It is selfish and cruel to look upon another opinion and assume it is of lesser importance because it makes you uncomfortable.”

“I wasn’t.”

“You were.” The sudden anger in Meeder’s voice made Anakin leaned away. He shifted in the dust and met the older man’s glower with one of his own. “Are you uncomfortable with the fact I despise the Jedi? Why?”

“I….the Jedi do a lot of good.”

“Do they?” Anakin withdrew, pulling his cloak further around himself. He pulled the hood over his head and hunched his shoulders. Passing inmates and guards recognized this as a sign that the lump of tan fabric wanted to be left alone. He had been in here too long if people could recognize his moods. That; or he was just fitting in a little too well. “My reason for disliking the Jedi is well founded, my young cellmate. I have lived with it for a long time and I know better than you do of how I feel.”

“Why do you like me if you hate the rest of the Jedi?” Anakin asked quietly. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

“I like you.” The disguised separatist spy said with genuine warmth, “Because you are like me.”

“I don’t.”

“You feel things, you hurt and you cry. You look at the galaxy with eyes both old and new like a child and a warrior. You laugh and you feel love for others and compassion that is buried deep but still obvious. Anakin Skywalker, you remind me of me and that is why I cannot hate you. I know what it was like to be so young and confused but with rock solid convictions.”

“I am not confused.” Anakin protested.

“You aren’t? Hmm, perhaps in my old age I do not see you clearly.”

“You are old.” Anakin said and hardly minded the sharp smack across his knee.

“Be respectful to your elders. I have survived worse places than this and not by being kind to half-witted Jedi.”

“So have I.” Anakin shot an ugly glower at a familiar bully who was obviously itching for a fight. “What do you want?”

“I want to teach a pretty faced Jedi a lesson about prison. Since you can’t know much about what normal people feel I thought I’d help.”

“What would you know about the Jedi?” Anakin moved to stand but subsided when Meeder
grabbed his wrist.

“Enough to know that you can’t see past your own lightsaber.”

“You’re here because of multiple accounts of assault with a deadly weapon.” Anakin snarled, “I’m not taking morality lessons from the likes of you.”

“And you’re a want to be general that got spanked by a guy from the techno union. What do they know?” The bully smashed his hands together and pretended to swoon with great drama. “Look at you! Kinda pathetic if you ask me.”

“I didn’t ask you,” Anakin reached for the Force and found it beside him but not along with him. Growling in frustration, he dodged the oncoming attack and slid out the way of the next one.

“Can’t win against an alien cyborg freak! You can’t beat me Jedi scum!”

“Anakin.” The Jedi was back to back with his attacker, dodging each attack with growing frustration.

“What?”

“Do not kill him.” Meeder said mildly, observing the fight. “Or maim him.”

“What’s that supposed to mean, old man?”

“THIS!” Anakin had spent the better part of his life fighting and training to fight. Weapons improvisation, hand to hand, lightsaber forms, a dozen different dirty tricks, and every bit of skill had come from a lifetime of danger. It took him less than a second to maneuver around just enough to get in a perfect position. In moments the man was down, collapsing into the dirt of the exercise room yard amid the laughter and jeers of many.

“SKYWALKER!” Anakin felt a visceral, nearly unreal hatred overcome him as the cuffs in his clothes buzzed and his wrists were yanked together. “Don’t even think about it!”

“I was defending myself!” He shouted even as two droid guards pushed through the growing crowds to seize him.

“Don’t care; you’re not supposed to attack each other.”

“What about him?” The other human shrugged as other guards grabbed him.

“He’ll be taken care of. Boys, drop him in the cooler for the night.”

“Oh come on!” Anakin knew better than protest much or squirm. These droids were on a hair trigger as it was and since he knew now what they’d do if he got too mouthy, he was going to keep quiet. Mostly. He muttered a bunch of uncomplimentary words about their processors as they escorted him down the now familiar route to the coolers.

“Hey there, Anakin.” The usual guard said, pulling out his command codes and buzzing open a cell. “Scuffle in the yard?”

“I didn’t even bruise him.”

“Hey! That’s a step up from breaking their bones and trying to break their neck.”

“I think so too but here I am.” Anakin Skywalker couldn’t be too mad though. He’d started a good
number of fights in his first few days here and hadn’t been at all tolerable.

“I’ll see you in the morning, Skywalker.” The Jedi didn’t stumble as he was pushed into the cell and the various locking mechanisms fell into place. Shrugging at him, the security guard typed in the command to make sure his cuffs were undone. Anakin rubbed his wrists and cursed Dooku heartedly. He was the only prisoner here who had been given any of these cuffs sewn into his clothes.

“Are these really necessary?” Anakin demanded, holding up his hands and glowering at the guard. The twi’lek shrugged.

“Kid, you put five of the meanest guys here in the hospital wing. We’re not taking chances.”

“Hey,” he pointed an emphatic hand at him, “I was attacked.”

“You started it.” The sergeant said blandly.

“Yeah?”

“Good night, Skywalker. Your dinner will be down at the usual time.”

“Thanks for that.” Anakin plopped into the stone bench and sulked.

“At least you’re not on half rations!” Someone down the hall shouted.

“That’s ‘cause the kids still messed up!” Another prisoner shouted. The guard rolled his eyes and stalked off, leaving the two droids. “Didn’t you see him when they brought him in? All skin and bones!”

“All feverish too! Guess the war wasn’t a place for a kid.”

“I’M TWENTY ONE!” His thunderous reply was met with laughter and a few jeers. He would have shouted more except the droids slammed their pikes into his bars.

“Quiet on the block!” They ordered. Most of the prisoners fell silent and Anakin shot them an ugly glower before yanking his hood back up and settling down to sulk properly.

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“A possible rescue for Skywalker and Kenobi we have.” Yoda pronounced solemnly to the assembled council. Ahsoka sat up straighter and stared about. “An informant, come forward, has.”

“They’ve been checked out by intelligence and we’ve already confirmed what they’ve told us. Master Kenobi is being held in the lowest levels of the Citadel.” Mace continued. “He’s alive and mostly well aside from a few bruises from his interrogations. We’ve also located Skywalker.” The holo projection in the middle of the chamber’s lit up. It showed a gigantic prison compound that seemed to be built half in and half out of a mountain. “He’s being contained by Dooku’s Sith magic and a few other devices that the informant couldn’t figure out. We’ll want to rescue them both at the same time because if we spring one, they’ll only secure the other one until rescue is impossible.”

“Consider we’ve already angered Dooku with the drawn-out legal battle,” Gallia said, “I am not sure that this would endear us to him anymore. However, morale has dropped to an all-time low and we have lost two systems to High General Tang. We need them both back.”

“A matter of grave importance, this is.” Yoda agreed. Ahsoka felt like she was vibrating in place,
staring at the masters with an intense frown. She needed to be assigned to rescue her master. She needed to get him out. She had to be the one; she had to prove herself to Anakin so he’d know she was worthy of being his padawan.

“Ahsoka.” Master Plo Koon rested his hand on her shoulder, “Calm yourself, little one.” His voice was soft enough that the other masters did not hear or at least they pretended not to.

“What if they hurt him?” Ahsoka said. Sometimes she could sense Anakin’s pain during and after a battle. It wasn’t the force but rather the unique abilities of her montrals. She wasn’t sure what it meant but she knew Anakin was almost always hurt. Even little skirmishes sent his electrical imbalance skyrocketing and her montrals almost always ached. “He gets hurt a lot.”

“Have faith, little one.”

“Yes, master.” Ahsoka subsided and listened further to the others.

“This informant claims that Dooku will be visiting Skywalker soon to ensure that he is being contained properly. To get him out with minimal effort we need to make sure we get there right before Count Dooku does and rescue him. After Dooku’s visit, there will be too much security that he will insist be improved upon.”

“When will Dooku visit the prison?” Master Billaba asked, leaning forward to set her head on her chin.

“Unsure, we are.” Master Yoda frowned thoughtfully.

“Why would Dooku visit Skywalker and not Kenobi? He’s expressed nothing but disdain for Skywalker since they first met. Not to mention he only really views Kenobi as his lineage. He excluded Skywalker completely.”

“Perhaps he has already spoken to Kenobi. We know he’d tried to convince Obi-Wan to abandon the Republic before. In many of Master Kenobi’s reports, he says that Dooku tries to entice him over.”

“We’re well aware of this.” Mace Windu said, “But if he has already spoken to Obi Want to ask him to join him then the only reason he’d go to Skywalker would be to enjoy his status as a POW.”

“That doesn’t sound like Dooku.” Ahsoka blurted before she could stop herself. She cringed when the assembled masters and padawans turned to her. She heard Master Koon sighed deeply before Windu prompted her to speak. “Respectfully, Masters. I’ve been captured by Dooku before. He makes a lot of snide comments and stuff but he doesn’t seem the kind of person to kick you while you’re down. I don’t think he’s going to visit my master to gloat.”

“A Sith, Dooku is, ignorant of his motivations you may be.” Yoda chided. “A child he may not degrade. A child Skywalker is not.”

“We think.” Windu muttered. “Still, we’ve got a chance to get your Generals back. Tano, you’ll be with Plo Koon and his Wolfpack to get Skywalker. Yoda and his men will be accompanied by Master Ti. When we receive more intelligence, we’ll meet again. For the moment, dismissed.”

“I leaked the information the Jedi needed, boss.” Poda inched into his office where Count Dooku was furiously working his way through paperwork.
“When are they planning their attack?”

“Before you get to the Skywalker. They know if you get there before them, then there’ll only be the security measures they can’t get past. Do you want me to schedule your visit a day before them and keep it off the books?”

“I want to have my conversation with Skywalker over and done with before the Jedi even arrive.” Dooku said.

“And Kenobi.”

“Reduce the guards on patrol, send weak signals through the lines and make sure it the Citadel is an easy nut to crack. Not too easy; they will get suspicious if it is too simple. Also, ensure that Kenobi is properly…prepared for his return to the Republic.”

“Aye, boss.” Poda shrugged as she wandered in the rest of the way. “Whatcha working on?”

“A letter of termination for my insolent chief of intelligence.” Dooku replied, not bothering to look up. “How goes our other project?”

“You were right, boss. His initials are airtight for a seedy politician. A gross oversized budget that’s enormous even for a war chest and I’m pretty sick just looking at who his private fortune is going to keep in power. We aren’t finding anything incriminating yet but we’ll find it soon. Hold tight.”

“I see. Send a missive to Tang, have her begin her next assault on Vanbane.”

“Aye.”

“And send me Tenner’s report as soon as it comes in.”

“Aye.”

“And get out.”

“Aye.” Poda disappeared behind the door and the Sith finally paused in his paperwork. Sidious wanted Skywalker and Kenobi out of prison but why? At this point, his master’s motivations felt insincere as well as revealed prematurely. There was something Dooku was missing as well.

“Boss,” he sighed sharply to avoid getting irritated with the woman. “I’ve got Tenner’s report here.”

“My thanks, future to be fired, officer.” Dooku replied, summoning the datapad to his hand. He ignored Poda’s necessary grumbling and continued about his business. Apparently, Skywalker had gotten into another fight. Unsurprising given his erratic temper but apparently Tenner had managed to make a bit of an impact on the boy. His other observations about Skywalker raised his eyebrows and his curiosity. Either his man was inconsistent in his diagnosis or Skywalker was a bundle of anxiety and chronic pain wrapped in his usual Jedi self-denial. “Curious. Ni’da!” A lanky human male entered and bowed.

“Sir?”

“Find and summon a psychiatrist here at once. A discreet one who will not speak.”

“Anything else, sir?”

“Yes, have some tea made if you would.”
“As you wish sir.” The man bowed and scurried out. Dooku was left with his musings and mounting curiosity. He was, by no means, a fool or stupid but there were many things in this galaxy he did not understand. Chief among these things were sentient minds. Humans had to top the list of confusing and Jedi humans were easily the most frustrating to deal with. He knew, in this instance, that he needed help to solve this problem. Why Anakin ticked and how he thought and what possible outcomes there could be. “Sir.”

“I am astounded by your speed,” Dooku observed dryly. It had only been five minutes. “Have you brought me a name?”

“Yes, sir, cross-referenced and already checked out. A person going by the name of Helgina, very good and they come highly recommended and sir… they are your second cousin twice removed.”

“I see.” Upon leaving the Jedi order, Dooku had not only inherited a fortune worth several planets but also became the returned brother to five sisters, younger than he, and discovered a massive extended family that was spread across the galaxy. He had been greeted with more welcoming parties than he knew how to deal with and was constantly meeting some of them every month. “And where is Helgina based?”

“Naboo.”

“I see.” Dooku rubbed his beard and sighed. “Contact Helgina, write the usual flowing greeting for my family and include the message I wish to convey.”

“What do you want to say, sir?”

“I would like to speak to my extended relatives and invite them and whomsoever they are attached to; visit me. If they would accept I would be deeply honored excreta excreta.”

“Is that all, sir?”

“Ensure that is worded strongly enough that refusal is impossible but politely enough for them to not be intimidated.”

“Yes, sir.”

“That will be all.” The count waved the man out of his office and returned to his paperwork.

Anakin Skywalker didn’t mind the cooler. True, it was supposed to be a punishment and it was pretty humiliating to be getting dragged here at least twice a week but Anakin enjoyed the relative silence. In his usual cell, he could feel the on-press of hundred nearby minds and here it was lessened. There were only a few and none of them were Force-sensitive. As if was no longer swimming in a pool of dangerous Naboo sea creatures and was instead wading in a pond on Alderaan. He might not have been able to use the force but he was still attached to its warm grip. It held him, cradling him and rocked him gently in the long nights of the prison. At these times, the force burned and sometimes it was so cold it felt as if every bone in his body was becoming a pillar of ice. Other times, Anakin felt the eternal weight of the cosmos pressed in. Anakin reveled in the freedom of the Force, admiring it and watching it move around him. Grateful that it was not as close as it usually was, Anakin wasn’t sure if the Force could ever really be taken from him when it felt like this.

One time Obi-Wan had accidentally caught the tail end of one of these moments. They only ever happened when Anakin was well and truly alone. Anakin, unaware and hyper-focused on a rock,
didn’t know what he looked like. He didn’t know how it frightened his Master. He didn’t know that he had been encased in a soft, burning, gray light and how he’d been nearly empty of life. What he did know was that he’d been yanked painfully from the soft embrace of a someone whose face he could not see and who spoke words he could not hear; to meet Obi Wan’s wide eyes.

The ensuing panic in the Jedi council and his master had been embarrassing enough considering that he couldn’t remember doing anything wrong.

“Skywalker.” He blinked and gasped as the crushing weight on his chest (he hadn’t noticed) vanished. Doused in freezing wakefulness, Anakin took a minute to regain his sense. When the world came back into view, he was staring at the irritated guard on the other side of the bars and shields. “Get up. You’re spending the night in your cell.”

“Why?”

“Now!” Anakin Skywalker grumbled and stood, brushing down his clothes and glowering at the mocking stitching and followed orders. Once he’d been escorted into the yard, now dark and empty, Anakin cast an eye toward the sky. Something in him yearned, ached, and needed to be up there, rolling around in the starlight. A beast in his chest the pawed for the freedom of flight. “Come on.” The man looked like he wanted to be anywhere else right now. Like he was coming off the end of a long shift, Anakin could relate.

“What’s the big deal?” Anakin asked, he could spot the guards and did a mental rundown of their security. It was impressive work and it would difficult to break out of here. It had been difficult to try and break out of here.

“Don’t ask questions!” The man grunted, “Let’s get this over with.”

When Anakin dropped finally onto his usual cot he noted his cell-mates sleeping form and the dim sliver of one of the four moons before he passed out. He did not notice that his cell-mates eyes cracked open and observe him before falling asleep.

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Helgina had been warned by both her Queen, Senator, and Chancellor about accepting the invitation to visit her distant relative. All of them had stated what a bad idea it was and how potentially dangerous it could be and just what was she thinking accepting that invitation when he was on the other side of the war. Still, she had defied her queen to come and hoped she would make it out alive.

“Cousin.” The not- exactly human looked to see the handsome aged Count enter the room. He carried a datapad in one hand was with the other gestured to a server behind him. “Thank you for coming on such short notice; I realize how difficult the journey must have been for you.”

“Not so difficult that I could not make it.” Her breath hissed past the respirator secured over her mouth. The various chemicals she needed to breathe to survive infusing into her bloodstream. He smiled at her and passed her the now open datapad. Unlike many of the other humans, he did not seem put off by her unusual appearance. Indeed, he did not gape at her alien features or cringe at the obvious deformities of her person. She could appreciate his unflinching acceptance. “I have my various planetary leaders and Galactic leader telling me that visiting was political suicide.”

“My cousin, you are not a politician. You are a doctor and in this case, I have a peculiar patient for you that has otherwise escaped diagnosis.”

“You might have scheduled an appointment.” Helgina wrapped her hands around the mug he offered
her and raised one to detach her respirator.

“I could have, however, this patient is…important to the Jedi and the Republic. This is a matter of utmost discretion.”

“Doctor-patient confidentiality laws apply if I take this patient. However, if you ask for me to simply overlook these files, then I will be forced to tell others of my visit and diagnosis.”

“I see.” Count Dooku nodded. “The patient is Anakin Skywalker. It is not only a matter of intelligence. Anything he carries is either outdated or of little interest to me. I have him under observation.”

“Why do you want a Jedi under observation?”

“He is…peculiar, even for a Jedi. In my reading of the reports, I have noticed several unnerving and contradictory paragraphs. These, I believe, lend toward a danger for and from Skywalker. I would like you to please read the reports and perhaps from there; you can form a diagnosis for Skywalker. If not a diagnosis then at least you could grant some insight into his mind.”

“Aside from the prisoner value of Skywalker, what do you want from him?”

“I have a vested interest in all of my lineage children. He is my great-grand padawan and thus is of interest to me.”

“Hmmm.” Helgina frowned as much as she could frown. “You’re lying.”

“Only partially.”

“You want me to diagnose a patient I do not meet.”

“You cannot meet him, in case something happens I do not want you to be under any suspicion.”

“Such concern for the family you have never taken an interest in before today.” Helgina held her respirator back to her mouth for a moment and took a deep breath. “I have brought contract forms and I will sign them if you will as well.”

“My thanks, cousin,” Dooku nodded to the older being and settled back into his chair while his cousin produced the necessary papers. “How are your siblings?”

“Dead when the Trade Federation attacked Naboo.”

“Ah.” Unsurprised and a little embarrassed, Dooku took another sip of tea. “If medication is necessary then would you prescribe some?”

“Medication may not be a wise choice for a Jedi deep in a Separatist prison cell. There is a good chance that it will not be taken and even if it is then there is no guarantee that Skywalker would be able to procure some in Republic held space.”

“The Jedi would also not allow him the use of medication. I know the pain medication his clone medic has been giving him has been…on the side…. Not officially prescribed.”

“That can be dangerous.”

“Skywalker deals with chronic pain that much I can see. Furthermore, during our encounters, I can see that he is hypersensitivity to many things. I believe this may be worsened by his Force sensitivity.”
“What does he do for his chronic pain and hypersensitivity?”

“The use of the Force. He constructs several layers of filters around different joints and nerve clusters and some around just a section of his brain — these filter out unwanted signals or anything else that might hinder him. I noticed more layers on his eyes and hands than anywhere else. He expands a not-insignificant amount of energy to hold them up and if he is sufficiently injured or distracted enough, then they fall and render him catatonic. I have seen it once before and it was…unpleasant for him to say the least.”

“His medication is taken to manage pain but nothing else.”

“Yes. Due to his injuries and current occupation, I am not surprised.”

“These are not sanctioned by the Order?”

“No.”

“I see.” The psychiatrist continued to read the datapad with obvious interest. “This will take some time, cousin.”

“Take as much time as you need. I will be waiting.”

“Hmmmmm.” Helgina waved him off and focused on her work.

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Padme paced nervously around her office. Her hands were calm and steady as she held carefully onto a cup of tea. To her left, Ahsoka was perched on her desk.

“We don’t have that much information right now,” Ahsoka said, “But we do know where he is and that we’re going to get him. I thought I’d let you know just so you know…you could stop panicking.”

“I’m not panicked,” Padme said, “Is there anything else? Did they say how he was doing? Or what the Separatists wanted with him? Is he injured?”

“I don’t know” Ahsoka shrugged helplessly. “Just that we’re going to get him out after whatever legal battle is over. We’re in a bind here because the PR is looking pretty bad and the media’s just watching up like a…”

“Has Master Plo Koon told you what they’re going to do about it? Keeping Qui-Gon’s things from his legally appointed father looks bad.”

“Yeah,” Ahsoka rolled her eyes, “We figured that part out and I think they’re just going to give him whatever he wanted because it’s making us look so bad.”

“I detest the count but I agree; it might be the wisest path.” Padme’s hand went to the japort snippet still hanging around her neck. She carefully handled the memento of her husband and pondered his potential fate. Even beside herself with fear for his life she despised the fact she could make no mention of their marriage.

“Padme, we’re going to get him back. Don’t worry; we’ll save him. No matter what they’re doing to him. He’ll be okay.”

Padme made no reply and continued pacing.
The pitched legal battle between the Jedi Order and Yen Dooku ended with the sudden and embarrassing capitulation of the Order. Most of the news outlets that covered the trial and debate had muttered a few words to mock the order before being silenced. A few of the neutral ones wrote fascinating introspective pieces that were quickly drawn from circulation by the Jedi and also published like crazy in the underground papers. Those pieces also became increasingly popular in the Confederacy.

Dooku did not care about these things. He was contemplating the command chip in his hand and thinking of what he could do with it. There were a number of things that he could do, most of them terrible and all of them dangerous. The single alternative that he could consider would bring Anakin Skywalker considerable temper down on his head and his sanity. If he irritated the Jedi enough to try and kill him where he sat it would be considered an awful meeting. Dooku wasn’t sure what to do with Anakin Skywalker’s command ship. On the one hand, he could keep it and then expose it to the galaxy and take Skywalker as to how property. This would catch the attention of Sidious and considering the man’s unknown intentions toward Skywalker it would probably end poorly. Not to mention his sister would try and knock him around the head with one of her heavy books. Also, there was the probability of Skywalker’s eternal, frothing hatred for anything else that even resembled Dooku. He would never accept Dooku’s attention and he would never take Dooku’s words for truth and everything that he had tried to do, even unknowingly so far, to forge something of peace between them; would be ruined. The only other alternative would be to give Anakin Skywalker his command chip and make sure the deed and bill of sale were back in Anakin’s name and possessions. The alternative manipulations were ugly and he considered himself too much of an honorable man to even entertain them for a longer than a moment.

“Poda.”

“Sir?” The attentive woman leaned around his chair and stared him directly in his face, doing her best to unnerve him.

“How goes the Jedi rescue of the Skywalker and Kenobi?”

“Well enough and they plan to make it to their prisons at the same time and do their best to break them out at once. Skywalker by Plo Koon and Ahsoka Tano and Kenobi by Windu. All of this hinges on getting to them before you.”

“They are a paranoid bunch,” Dooku agreed to Poda’s unspoken condemnation. “Before Kenobi is rescued there is a delicate matter I want you to attend to.”

“Sir?”

“My sister now will need other entertainments to keep her from antagonizing her siblings and me for work. Tell her to have Kenobi be charged with war crimes. Flashy or secretive enough only the dedicated journalists will find it I don’t care. I only want for Kenobi to be under enough dangerous discrediting fire so that the Jedi will withdraw their censure of Anakin Skywalker.”

“Bad for public image,” Poda said carefully, staring at him, “What else?”

“And the other matter we were discussing?”

“So far everything he’s done is legal, disgustingly so.”

“What can your intelligence crew tell me about his relationship with Anakin Skywalker?”
“Only that it goes back to Skywalker first being brought to their temple.”

“Find out more, speak to Kenobi if you must. There is something about Skywalker that sets him the path of a very dangerous man.”

“A very dangerous man you don’t want me to know about but I do and I disagree with you about?”

“Yes” Dooku could have smacked his younger, though not by much self, for allowing a former private investigator to become his chief of intelligence. Her entire career had been snooping and sneaking and she’d gotten good enough to identify his Master. He knew she had already implemented a few plans to make sure the man never survived the war and was loathe to stop such a keen mind from such dangerous pursuits.

“Very well.” Poda disappeared.

“Is your letter of resignation written?” He demanded, “I want you to prepare properly for the inevitable.”

“My letter of resignation will be your concession speech when you formally surrender to the Jedi.”

“Indeed.’ Dooku replied mildly as the woman vanished into the background. He glanced after her form and sighed. “Is my ship ready?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Thank you, Poda. I will be…elsewhere and back in a few days. I trust you will not run the Confederacy into the ground while I am gone?”

“No, sir. Tang is asking to be unleashed on Windu when he gets back.”

“Allow it, make the preparations and send her my thanks for her timely intervention at Kenobi’s capture.”

“Yes, sir.” Dooku did not look after her this time. He moved along the manor until he reached his own ship and boarded, finding that every detail had been dealt with. His usual entourage was waiting for him.

“Depart when we are ready, Captain.” He ordered and secured himself away in his small but comfortable meditation chamber.

According to his sister, this was going to be a very delicate conversation, a dangerous one too. If he tipped Anakin too far, the boy would shut himself off from Dooku and his words. If not enough he would never begin to question the order along the lines of leaving it. Carefully, Dooku began to plan the conversation ahead of him.

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Anakin had been pacing up and down the yard, followed by a horde of tiny little yellow things that he couldn’t identify. Apparently, someone thought it was hilarious to dump a box of them in his cell while he cell-mate was engaged with the guards and leave them. They’d begun to imprint on him.

“An interesting choice of companions, Anakin.” Meeder said, emerging from the shadows of the prison and into the brightly lit yard. Anakin waved at the other prisoners who were openly laughing at him. “Their idea of a joke, I guess.” He would be angry but they were cute and he was feeling down and lonely. Still, the others had discovered he couldn’t be beaten into the ground and had decided on humiliating him instead. With a huff, he dropped to the ground and accepted the horde of many-footed creatures that began to
“Nothing much. The war, as usual, the Jedi gave up in their legal battle. Rumors of a few political marriages and such, nothing else,” Meeder sat across from Anakin and picked up a few of the furry animals and pressed one close to his face. “What happened here?”

“Just a dumb joke,” Anakin muttered, patting a furry animal on its head and sending the little thing stumbling on six legs to the side. It hissed at him and made a swipe for his hand. “Nothing else, just wasting away like an idiot while I’m needed.”

“War goes on, Skywalker. If you are on the front lines or not. So don’t worry, one way or another this war is going to end.”

“Fine.” Anakin grumbled and untangled the little animal from his shirt where it was attempting to scale. “Stop that; you’re poking me. What did they want from you?”

“Something odd,” Meeder said quietly, dropping his voice. “They were asking about you.”

“Me?”

“You.”

Anakin blinked a few times. “What about me?”

“Just wondering how you were holding up and managing the prison. Apparently, you going a bit crazy is something they were worried about. That and the fact that you’re the Jedi in jail and there have been multiple attacks on you plus your delicate health.” Anakin blushed a deep red, glaring at his older friend.

“Delicate health?” He sputtered, offense in every line of his body. “What the hell does that mean?”

“You have delicate health.” Meeder said bluntly.

“That doesn’t mean that I’m some fainting fellow?” Anakin’s blush deepened, “I don’t need looking after.”

“Apparently everyone else disagrees, you were brought in pretty beat up.”

“I’d been defeated!” Anakin buried his face in his hands. “And drugged by accident. I’m not delicate.”

“I suppose the warden is doing his job looking after you.” Meeder said carefully, “You were messed up pretty badly and you are his responsibility.”

“No thanks.” Anakin grumbled, “I’m fine right now.”

Meeder shrugged and eyed a pair of guards and the approaching warden. “What did you do?”

“I’m trying to pet these things,” Anakin said and followed his friend's gaze. “What do they want?”

As soon as the Warden was within earshot the man snapped. “Come with me, Skywalker.” Anakin, not wanting to anger the twitchy droids on the alien’s heels, stood.

“What now?” He passed a six-legged animal back to Meeder in a slow, deliberate motion. “I haven’t done anything in days.”
“You have,” The alien snapped, “A visitor.”

“Uh huh.” Anakin shrugged to displace his sudden uneasiness. He managed to look calm and unconcerned in front of the Warden and followed him out of the yard. Only Meeder could have noticed his nervousness. They moved out of the yard and into the building and toward the private guest quarters. Anakin wasn’t sure who could be visiting him or why. There was a vague hope it was Padme but she could never be allowed back in Confederate space close to him.

The person waiting for him in the well-furnished living room of the guest quarters was actually the last person he wanted to see. He stood by the window and didn’t bother to speak other than the terse order for the guards and the warden to leave. For several minutes Count Dooku loitered at the window before finally turning around.

“My late son, Qui Gon Jinn, made many mistakes in his life.” Anakin frowned but said nothing. “Many of them were forgivable and I might forgive this one if…I did not think that it had been deliberately overlooked.”

“You’re not making any sense. Not that you usually do but now I’m only getting about every other word.” Anakin snarled, looking for some clue of what was going on. Dooku seemed to pause and finally shook his head.

“Would you like some tea?”

“Is that your answer to everything?” Anakin demanded, “Tea. What do you want?”

“Tea it is,” Dooku turned and waved toward a table set for two. Tea was already waiting for them along with a plate of cookies and slices of bread. “Don’t tell me you prefer prison food to tea.”

“I don’t.” Anakin had had enough lessons on etiquette that he took the seat opposite Dooku with no more fuss. “I don’t trust you not to drug this.”

“It is not drugged.”

“I can’t tell if you’re lying or not.” Anakin pointed out, “Because I’m currently wearing…special clothes.”

“Do you like them? I chose the fabric so as to avoid antagonizing your hypersensitivity. I thought it might help.” Dooku looked up in time from pouring tea to see the astonished blush that swamped Skywalker’s face. “The Sith magic they are imbued with,” He ignored the blush as graciously as he could manage, “Ought to help as well. I had to think of a clever way to keep you contained as you have proven difficult before.”

“Right.” Skywalker sounded strangled and took a drink of tea to cover his embarrassment.

“Given Kenobi’s fondness for breaking prisoner parole I had feared you would do that same.” The count watched the Jedi carefully. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“What question?” Anakin asked, face burning.

“If you liked your clothes.”

“They’re fine.” Anakin managed, “I just can’t use the Force.”

“We went to great length to capture you. I don’t want you to escape now.”
“What do you want?” Anakin’s eyes were flashing angry lightning, “You know you’re avoiding why you’re really here.”


“He was tall.”

“Skywalker.” Dooku pinched the bridge of his nose. “I read the report he wrote a few days before his death about him finding you. I read between the lines and I discovered a few weeks ago the mistake I mentioned.” Anakin paused, feeling as if they were on the verge of something bigger than he knew. “When you won the Boonta Eve Classic you…were then his.” The teacup in Skywalker’s hand cracked and shattered but he otherwise did not move. Blue eyes were focused wholly on him. “He had your command chip and your deed and you.” Anakin hadn’t moved but now there was blood trickling down his hand and down into his lap with the tea. “Skywalker, you may have guessed this but you were never actually…freed.” The word tasted bitter and he nearly wilted beneath the dark, murderous glare directed at him. The Jedi didn’t seem to be breathing. “You were passed into his possessions and the chip was never deactivated or removed and the command chip never dealt with.” Anakin’s glower vanished suddenly leaving his young face disturbingly blank. Dooku watched him carefully and without another word produced the command chip in question and set in Skywalker’s other hand. “This should never have existed. It is a shame and a humiliation to the Order I left and to my son that this was never dealt with.” The metal fist closed over the chip. Anakin still did not speak. “No one had the right to do this to you and I do not consider this a matter of political power or of any sort of compassion to do my duty as an honorable man. This is not between us as a Sith and as a Jedi or as political opponents. This is my attempt to repair my son’s failure in helping you.”

“I don’t.” Anakin breathed softly, his words almost too soft. “You…why? You know what you could do with this.”

“I know what your Order would do with this as well. If you chose to leave this would keep you with them and I…could not allow that.”

“Why?”

“Because I only want a decent conversation with you where you will listen without bias and speak without reservation or fear.”

“I.”

“I will not ask about military matters.” Dooku promised. Anakin shook his head a bit and began to brush damaged teacup off his lap and onto the floor below. “I will be as transparent and honest as I may be. This is a personal conversation, off the record.”

“Because you have some sick sense of obligation to me?” Anakin laughed bitterly, “Your son kept me a slave and your grandson has done the same. You want me to sit here and listen to your pathetic attempts to rationalize what they did.”

“What they did was cruel and inhumane!” Dooku snapped. “They bet your life in the most dangerous race in the galaxy and won you as if you were a pile of credits. That is inexcusable. I will not make any attempts to lessen their crimes, even those of my son. I am ashamed of his actions and those of my Grand-padawan. I know the two you are as close as the order may allow.” Anakin remained silent. He might have been close to Obi-Wan but there was always that seed of bitterness in his heart that held desperately onto his past.
“Don’t be a hypocrite,” Anakin’s voice was soft and dangerous. He hadn’t lunged at Dooku yet but it was a pretty close thing. “You have condoned this and worse.”

“In a war.” Dooku’s expression could have been carved from duracreet. “I have obeyed the rules of engagement, unlike your former master. The rules of High War to the best of my abilities and those of my officers, you weren’t tortured for information nor were your men. You will find them in excellent health in a prisoner of war camp.” He tossed a datapad to Anakin. “You were tended to and brought here to keep you out of trouble in prison designed for troublemakers. This is by the laws of High War. Not that any or your Order would know that because none of them were trained or educated in the art of war. None of your order knows anything of war save for maybe you, and then it is a basic grasp of Low War.”

“You tortured the master you captured and took to the Citadel. What if you are hurting Obi-Wan!”

“He is as comfortable as one can be in a cell meant to hold a perjury with immense power. I will not have even my grand-padawan running amok in the Confederacy.”

Anakin kept his gaze on the transmitter chip. “And the Master?”

“I don’t believe there is a difference between physically torturing him or the mind-bending of many of my officers that are captured.” Dooku said with great dignity. “There is no difference when the after effects are the same.”

Anakin did not reply. His eyes were still on the transmitter chip. “I want it removed.”

“I have a surgeon here who will do it.”

“I want it deactivated and destroyed. I want it gone.” Anakin swallowed heavily. “Get rid of it.”

“I will be gotten rid of.” The sith promised and he watched Anakin bow his head. “Are you comfortable here?”

“It’s fine.” The boy seemed almost despondent, quiet and still.

“Have you been getting your proper medications?”

“Yes.”

“I have heard you’ve been getting into a number of fights.”

“Yes.”

“The warden tells me you have been spending a number of nights in the cooler.”

“Yes.” Dooku wondered if he’d accidentally broken the boy. He wasn’t responding normally, his eyes were downcast and he looked blank and empty. Trying a different approach, he leaned away and began to drink his tea. “My sister wants to meet you. Actually, all of them do. They are curious and most of them are ready to break down the doors to get the chance.”

“Sister?” It had the desired effect, Anakin looked up with bright blue eyes lighting with slow curiosity. “Sisters?”

“Five of them,” he confirmed. “All of them more irritating than the last. On you saw on the holonews. She is the one beneath me. She dearly loves to give me a hard time about it too. The others are all equally accomplished. One is our accountant; she has five children of her own; all of them sons.
Then the others are all happy to wreak their particular havoc across the galaxy. I do not pity their enemies.

“Why…” Anakin struggled to find the words. “Would they visit me?”

“Curiosity.” Dooku said, “They might still come to visit you. If you should happen to run across one of them in your travels, do avoid them to your best abilities. There will be a lot of cheek pinching and cooing if you don’t.” Anakin blanched. “They are under the impression you are my grandson.”

“Obi-Wan is your grandson,” Anakin blurted and blushed. “He is if you want to get technical about it.”

“Obi-Wan has rebuffed me at every turn. If I do wish to claim any of my lineage children, then you would perhaps be more aptly described as my grandson.” Anakin flushed.

“What does that make Ahsoka?”

“My very independent granddaughter. At my age, I do not see you as three separate generations but rather one, you may as well be siblings when you’re this old.”

“Ahsoka is a great padawan.” Anakin said, “She knows what she’s doing and she can keep up where others can’t.”

“I’m sure you’re proud.” There was a moment of silence as Anakin tucked his command chip back into his pocket and watched the Count. “She certainly is skilled enough.”

“Can I get another cup?”

“Certainly.” When Anakin had been furnished with a new teacup and some fresh tea and Dooku had taken care of his bleeding hand they fell back into silence.

“Is Obi Wan alright?”

“He is fine, unharmed and recovered from his injuries during his capture. Uncooperative but that is unsurprising.”

“Do you like having a family?”

“Come again?”

“Your family, do you like having them? You said you had sisters and stuff and nephews and nieces then do you like it?”

“I do.” Dooku smiled, “When I left the Order I finally regained what was mine. Not just my inheritance but my family as well, my parents and my siblings. As I was the first and only one of us taken, they grew around my absence.” He paused, “I believe my being taken by the Order always grieved my parents. They celebrated wildly when I came home.” His eyes grew distant. “My sisters came for an extended visit with their families. The entire manor was full of guests and family for almost a month. It was like nothing else I’d ever seen except for when my parents died.”

“Oh.” There wasn’t much you could say to that.

“Their wake lasted two days. My sisters drained the liquor cabinet.”

“That seems like a waste.”
“You do many things to celebrate or mourn your parent’s lives.” Dooku said, watching Anakin through narrowly lidded eyes. Anakin brushed a hand over the transmitter in his pocket.

“I remember my mother.” In a voice that could have easily been mistaken for a brush of the wind in the air.

“Ah.” Dooku wondered if he’d overstepped an invisible line.

“She died right before Geonosis.” The Jedi gestured with his metal hand for a moment with his face contorted in a frown. “Right before this.”

“Ah.”

“How long did you get to know your mother?”

“Four years, she was well-aged when she passed away a few days after my father died. They had a love unlike any other I have ever seen.” His shoulders hunched, Skywalker ducked his head and contemplated the floor. “I was fortunate to have been with them enough as it was.”

“Hmmmm.” The new tea-cup in his hand was turned around and upside down when he finished draining it.

“When I was with the Order, I was urged to never have attachments, to never allow myself to love and hate. I found, when I left, that they were far more rewarding and life-giving than anything I had ever done with the Order. My nephews and nieces were delights. I love them, with bright eyes and boundless energy. Once I might have looked upon them with an empty gaze.” Dooku pursed his lips and shook his head, “I would have never seen their potential. I would have never seen them and all of their perfect flaws. I would have looked at them the same way I stared at all the initiates and younglings, as unfinished tools.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“You were older when Qui Gon brought you to the temple, much older. You knew pain and death and humiliation the likes of which the others could never know. I could never know. Despite the Order’s best efforts to remove this from you, to erase the foundation of your youth and to tell you that it matter not you have not forgotten it. Your cell-mate tells me that you are more…awake than any other Jedi he’s ever met.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Anakin demanded, his irritation came roaring back to life and he straightened.

“Hmmm, Meeder sees the Jedi as more of a living dead, commanded by the blind and dumb. He despises the Jedi as I’m sure you’ve figured out.”

“Hard to miss.”

“Then for him to say that you are certainly more human than anyone else is quite the compliment.”

“I think he’s trying to tell you that I’m a bad Jedi.”

“Exactly!” Dooku beamed, “You are a terrible Jedi. You lead with a ruthlessness and ferocity that no Jedi ought to show. You care deeply about your padawan, about your former Master. Even now you remember your mother. You lie, certainly. If our encounter on Florrum told me anything, you lie convincingly well and hide many secrets.” Anakin’s glower deepened, an ugly gleam of fury began to reappear in his eyes. “Be assured I will not reveal this to anyone who could use it against you.”
“You saw!”

“I did see your disability and the absolute pain you must suffer to work past it every day for those who would criminalize any negative reaction you would have because of it.”

“Obi Wan.”

“Does not know that you suffer chronic pain does he? I wouldn’t imagine he would, how many secrets do you hide from him?” Anakin swallowed and said nothing. “I thought so. More tea?”

“Sure.” The Jedi sipped the tea and watched his opponent carefully. “Why aren’t I at the citadel?”

“I did not think you could manage it.”

“I!”

“Injured, sick, delirious. You woke up in a medical wing of a prison that would and could handle you. Not in a pit designed for those who perjure themselves with ease. I noticed you have not yet tried to escape here yet.”

“Guard rotations are too tight,” Anakin muttered, head in his hands, “half organic half droids with new sensors. Motions, temperature, pressure sensors in the halls organic can’t get to past lights out. No wood cover outside the fence, electrified fence, searchlights, trackers, beasts, the cooler; not exactly an easy place to get out of.”

“You clearly have thought about what you want to do when you escape.”

“If I have, I wouldn’t tell you.” Anakin snorted and he looked up. “I want to see my men, Kix, Fives, Rex and the others. I want to know that they are alright.”

“You do not trust me?”

Giving Dooku the affirmation he was looking for would be an insult. Dooku had kept his secret, except the doctors that had been pestering him over the last few weeks. He had been helpful in the pirate den when he was vulnerable. Plus, he was technically a gentleman of high standing. Insulting his honesty would be a risky mistake.

“I don’t trust your men. They might take insult to their existence, as in, why are they still alive insult. I want to make sure they’re alright. People don’t like clones.”

“Can you blame them?”

“Yes.”

“Very well.” Dooku summoned, in a gross violation of the rules the Order set down, another data chip from across the room. “These are the recent holos of them. I asked a few of them to give you a few words of assurance. You will find that they were dated two days ago. All of them have been processed but I will not give you their location.”

“Right.” Anakin took a good while to make sure he examined all of his men. Their faces and expression and the way they spoke to glean any clues as to how they were. It took him almost an hour and when he was satisfied Anakin handed it back. “They look okay, what are you planning on doing with them?”

“Leaving them where they are. They are prisoners of war and the War Office tells me that there is
nothing else we can do. I have considered using them as paid labor but my citizens are more than irritated with that idea.”

“They wouldn’t like that. They’re soldiers, not factory workers.” Anakin pushed down his irritation and ran a hand through his hair.

“They may turn out to be excellent farmers as well. There is little entertainment in their prison but plenty of lands for them to work on.” Dooku accepted Anakin’s glower. “Now, I told the warden I would not keep you here long. I understand you’re needed for your own meal. This evening you will be escorted to the hospital wing and admitted for surgery. Your transmitter and chip will be deactivated and removed and then.”

“What will you do with it?”

“What do you wish?”

“Incinerate them, I want evidence that they’re gone.” Anakin demanded. “No one will ever have this hold over me again.”

“As you wish. And the….bill of sale?”

“Put it back in Qui Gon’s things. You’re the only person who looked for it and you’ll be the only person who’ll know it’s there.”

“As you wish.” Dooku inclined his head.

#$$#$

Anakin watched the surgery room with a practiced and mistrusting gaze. The technicians were working carefully around his uneasy form. A surgeon was talking quietly with a different man that was soon revealed as the anesthesiologist.

“We’ll have to put you under, Prisoner 24601.” The nervous human inched closer and held a plastic mask aloft. “We have taken your physiology into account and four deep breaths should work just fine.”

“It might not.” Anakin warned and caught Dooku’s gaze in the observation window. “But go ahead.” He held still, eyes not wavering from the Sith’s as the mask was fitted over his face and he was gently pushed back onto the operating table.

“Deep breaths,” The technician reminded the Jedi. The last thing Anakin Skywalker saw was the pale, intense gaze of his great-grandmaster before his eyes slipped shut.

#$$#$$

“I have never been so insulted in my life.” Poda miserably adjusted the ill-fitting uniform of a Separatist prison guard and then pouted at the mirror. “Look at me; I’m going to just give this Jedi Skywalker? We could capture all of them and then have them executed. We don’t need to let them have Skywalker.”

“Lead the way for them. Is your blood packet ready?”

“Ready and waiting.” With a deft motion, she fixed the small pack of material to her chest and concealed it. “I love death scenes but why does it have to be like this?”
“You will be freeing Skywalker with Jedi. I want your death to seem perfectly real.” Count Dooku said, “At the same time I want it to mean something to Skywalker. Are the Jedi in place?”

“They landed on the planet five hours ago and are ready for me to smuggle them into the prison. In laundry baskets. Honestly, do they think we don’t scan these things? Furthermore, why would a high-security prison only have droids? Why would we even bother with?”

“I realize your professional pride has taken a hit, my dear soon-to-be-retired friend, but you must bear this insult.” Count Dooku adjusted his sinister-looking cape with a firm nod. “I will be in place to move within their viewpoint and then out of sight.”

“Try to be a dramatic as possible, sir.”

“I will manage, thank you.”

“And is Skywalker ready to move?”

“His surgery was a day and a half ago. He ought not to move much but if anything happens during the escape, I’m sure you can manage. I have full confidence in your ability to just manage.”

“Thank you.” Poda glowered at her sniggering assistant. “Are the droids re-programmed?”

“Everything is your specifications, sir.” The assistant bowed to the other woman and handed over a blaster. “We are ready to fabricate the prison break. The press release for General’s Kenobi’s trial is beginning to take off. We’re ready when you are.”

“Very good,” Poda glanced back at the mirror with a firm nod and pushed her way out of the room. “Let’s go.”

“Hold steady, little ‘soka.” Master Plo Koon set a hand on his young friend's shoulder and pressed it down. “Hold steady.”

“I’m worried about my master.” The togruta looked back at the kel-dor, “He’s in there and he’s.” Her voice trailed off as the entire contingent of Republic troopers noticed Count Dooku sweep his way onto the landing platform to a nondescript ship. He was followed closely by a squad of droid guards.

“Are you idiots ready?” The Republic soldiers all turned to stare at the woman who had helped them so far. Her small, pinched face was screwed up with nerves. “He’s gone and we need to go get your little friend.”

“What about Dooku?” Snarled Ahsoka, “you said he wasn’t supposed to be here.”

“Operative word being supposed!” The woman hissed, “come on; we’re only using droids tonight in case of a riot from his visit. Your window is closing while you sit here and complain!”

“Very well, lead the way,” Plo Koon produced his lightsaber with a nod to the Separatist. She shrugged and began to inch her way along the wall, beckoning the Jedi as she went.

Anakin Skywalker declined the pain medication that would help him sleep. He wanted to feel the pain of the repaired flesh, the burn of where the scalpel had removed his transmitter. Every sensation
of the aftermath of his delivery to freedom was his to savor. Carefully he ran a hand over his bandage and sighed.

He knew; he could sense that his transmitter had finally been destroyed. Surrounded by guards, bars, escape-proof cells and soldiers ready to hunt him down Anakin had never felt as free as he did now.

Meeder was watching him through half-lidded eyes but said nothing. Anakin stretched his arms over his head and relished the burn of the repaired surgery scar on his torso. He considered the beyond meanings of just having the transmitter removed. Having been unknowingly owned by Count Dooku for so long and finding himself freed by the very person he would have never expected to be responsible for him.

“Skywalker?”

“Yeah.” He didn’t care that he couldn’t feel the Force as much as he was used to. Anakin Skywalker was free.

“There’s someone outside the cell.”

He sat up and stared. “Ahsoka?”

“Hey, master!” Something in his gut churned. Ahsoka's smiled pinched but genuine. “You ready to come home?”

“How?”

“There’s a defector helping us.” Anakin went to the door and watched his padawan begin to work on the lock, “Master Plo Koon is here and a few clones. We’re getting you out of here.”

“The guards and Dooku, Dooku was here just a minute ago.”

“He just left,” His padawan assured him as the ray shield flipped off and the energized bars began to power down. “We saw him get into transport and he'd be in hyperspace by now.”

“My lightsaber?”

“I have it.” Plo Koon joined the duo, clone trailing behind. Anakin could see a few curious prisoners in adjoining cells keeping quiet and watching to proceedings with interest. “You look well, Skywalker.”

“Thanks,” Anakin muttered distractedly, “Seriously, how did you find me? How did you even get on the planet? I might not have been awake when they brought me in but I’ve been trying a breakout a dozen times and I’ve been caught every time.”

“I said there was a defector!” Ahsoka whispered and produced her lightsabers to slice the door to pieces. “Come on; we’re running out of time.”

“Leaving?” Anakin turned about to stare at Meeder. The much older human was lazily observing the scene. “If you get caught you’re going to be in the cooler until you’re dead.”

“We won’t get caught!” Ahsoka glared, “We’re going to rescue him.”

“Do you want to come, Meeder?”

“Willingly join the company of Jedi?” Meeder raised his eyebrows, “You know I can’t stand you and yours. Go, I’ll escape some other day.”
“Meeder.” Anakin tugged his arm out of Plo Koon grip and turned, “Are you sure?”

“I’m going back to sleep,” Meeder said with clear irritation, “put the ray shield back up, so the draft doesn’t come in.”

“Come on!” Ahsoka yanked her master out of the prison cell. She slapped the button for the ray shield and tried to push Anakin down the causeway. “Master!”

“Sorry, Snips. A little distracted you guys need to know that I can’t use the Force right now.” They moved into a hallway.

“Why not, sir?” A clone asked.

“Dooku,” he stopped short as two droids entered. As soon as the droid registered an escaped prisoner and hostiles, all hell broke loose. Anakin was shoved behind his escorts while blaster bolts flew. The troopers took up a defensive formation, protecting him. On either side, Ahsoka and Plo Koon were redirecting the blaster bolts. More droids rolled in only to be taken out by an unseen assailant.

A woman emerged from a separate hall, frantic and wide-eyed. “What’s with you idiots! We need to get out of here yesterday! Let’s go!”

“Who are you?” clutching his surgery scars and almost wishing for the pain medications, Anakin stumbled after the nervous Separatist and his fellow Jedi. Clones brought up the rear. “I don’t recognize you and where are all of the organic guards?”

“You ask too many questions.” The rounded a corner to shoot out more droids. “Skywalker, you’re getting out of here.”

“I know.” He really shouldn’t be aggravating his injuries by moving so much. The woman grunted as he fell against her shoulders, staggering along.

“Master!”

“I’m okay Ahoska, just an injury that’s not healing well.” He hissed through gritted teeth, “How much further?”

“Not much.” Plo Koon cut a neat hole through a door, pulling the group through. “Just a few more corridors.”

#$3

Poda, even as she led the Jedi through the most ridiculous escape attempt she’d ever manufactured, kept a sharp eye on how Obi Wan’s escape was going. The updates hastily whispered in her earpieces told her that it was not going well. Apparently, Mace Windu had brought along an idiot padawan from another master. They had roused the alarm, a real one, and set the Citadel in lockdown. The fact that her graciousness of arranging their escapes was being insulted set her teeth and temper on edge. To have brought an untested, poorly trained padawan into the middle of a high-security prison was the equivalent of spitting in her face.

“What’s your name?” Skywalker was fading fast, helped by the drug she’d given him under the guise of hoisting him onto a shoulder.

“Does it matter?”

“For the report,” he slurred, his long limbs swinging about and nearly throwing her off balance.
“Kid, I know how many holes that have been poked in your intelligence. I don’t want my name floating around in there so people can use it against me. I’ve got a family to look after.”

“Okay. She staggered and collapsed, yelping, as a blaster bolt scored a direct hit on her back. The armor went up in smoke and she activated the trigger that would send her to the brink of death. Consciousness faded fast. Plo Koon took up the responsibility of dragging Skywalker and they left the Separatist on the floor to die.

#$$#

“Damned ungrateful brats,” Poda massaged her chest with a glare at the holo of Count Dooku. “They left me for dead.”

“You wanted them to leave you for dead,” The Count pointed out.

“I know I wanted them to but that doesn’t change the fact that they left me for dead after I selflessly took a bribe to help Skywalker escape.”

“You engineered the escape!”

“I know!” Poda exclaimed and leaned back into her chair. The poison she’d taken was still hurting every muscle in her body and the splash back of the blaster bolt was aching furiously. “I know…and I must report that Obi-Wan Kenobi was not rescued last night. Padawan Tiaval ruined the mission with a rather spectacular meltdown that triggered a few of the real alarms. He and the clones did not make it out. Mace Windu is, at last check, on his way back to the Republic. I suggest that we take Kenobi’s trial public. Keep the Jedi’s eyes off Skywalker and on Kenobi.”

“A wise suggestion.” Dooku admitted.

“The argument against Kenobi being put to death for war crimes ought to that he has had no previous military training, general incompetence, and the fact that he is not at all versed in the codes of High War or Low War.”

Dooku felt a twist of uneasiness but nodded. “Have it be so, broadcast on the stations that the Republic can easily hack into.”

“It will be the second trial of the century.” Poda promised. “We also just got word the Skywalker is back in Republic space, alive and well.”

“Very good.” Yan Dooku nodded and disconnected his call. Once the image of his long-suffering intelligence chief vanished he pick up the notes his cousin had left for him. There were a dozen very worrying conclusions written there. A few diagnoses’ for Skywalker that really needed to be looked at. Not to mention that he was walking right back into the jaws of those who could easily be blamed for all of them. He would have to wait for and see what would arise.

#$$4

Anakin tossed the bundle of Sith stitched clothes at an unfamiliar clone when he emerged from his cabin. A few of his robes had been brought from the temple.

“Take those down and lock them up.” He ordered, pulling the familiar mask over his face and stalking toward the bridge.

“Master.” Ahsoka joined him in the hall.
“Hey there, Snips.” She squeaked as Anakin pulled the smaller Jedi into a heavy hug. “I missed you, you know.”

“Really?” Ahoska usually tried to squirm her way out of these hugs, citing the Jedi doctrine and complaining about his human smell.

“Yeah,” He kissed the top of her head, “It was three months alone. I think you’ve grown.”

“I didn’t,” Ahsoka assured him, “I promise you I didn’t but you were gone so long. And then Dooku sued the Order and then… I missed you too, Skyyguy.”

“Hey, we’ll be alright. When we get Obi-Wan out, we'll go right back to what we were doing, crushing the Seppies and clankers.”

“Master,” she bit her lip and looked away, “there was the second rescue at the same time. Only Master Windu made it out. They were supposed to get Obi-Wan.” Anakin felt his stomach bottom out and he pulled away from Ahsoka just enough to look her in the eyes.

“What?”

“He’s not making it and we just got a report that the Seppies are dragging him in front of a war crimes trial.”

“That… sounds like exactly what Dooku was threatening to do.” Anakin swallowed and patted his padawan. “We need to talk to the Council.”

“Master,” She pressed her hands against his stomach and he drew back from the unwelcome weight on his new surgical scar. “Please, don’t do anything. Master Yoda and the others will handle it; you need to sleep and meditate. You’ve been in prison for months; you need to regain your bearings and stuff. Please. I told Padme I’d make sure you'd rest when we got you back.”

“Ahsoka.”

“Look, the council will handle it. Please, go get some sleep.” Her bright blue eyes were ignited with worry and Anakin felt himself caving. “They handled that last one.”

“They gave him what he wanted so they could avoid a PR disaster. I was watching the trial, Ahsoka! I know what happened.”

“I know you know.” She begged, pulling him back to his cabin. “But if you get involved then everyone will wonder why they didn’t do that to you? They’ll be curious and then they’ll look into you and then the council will be an awkward spot. Just…let them handle it. Please, Master?”

“What is wrong with me? Why would I put the Council in an awkward spot?” He demanded, glaring at the younger togruta whose suddenly cringed at her words.

“I know you know.” She begged, pulling him back to his cabin. “But if you get involved then everyone will wonder why they didn’t do that to you? They’ll be curious and then they’ll look into you and then the council will be an awkward spot. Just…let them handle it. Please, Master?”

“What is wrong with me? Why would I put the Council in an awkward spot?” He demanded, glaring at the younger togruta whose suddenly cringed at her words.

“Well…I mean…you…were thought to have defected when you didn’t check in.”

“I was captured! I had a heart attack!”

“I’m just telling you! That’s what happened; they don’t….please just let the Council handle this?”

“I’m going back to bed.” Anakin replied, peeling Ahsoka off him. He felt betrayed and insulted all in one and had never hated Yoda more as much as he did now. “Wake me up when we get back to the temple.”
“Master!”
Chapter Summary

Character talk around a lot. The plot is primed to move more next chapter.

“LEIA!” The jedi padawan flinched as Luke materialized in their usual sitting spot with a flash of bright yellow. “I found a story to share!”

“A what?” Luke looked the same but there was a cheerful tinge to his eyes Leia wondered if he knew his eyes were glowing.

“A story,” He smacked the chair next to him, “I got a story to share with you. You told me about your speeder and so I went out to find the perfect story to tell you in return.”

“Why would you go through that much effort?”

“It seemed fair!” Luke cheered when she took her seat. “You told me a story so I get to tell you one! Master says it’s always wise to share.”

“Okay, where did you go to find the story?”

“I went out and got one. I had to get one cool to share so my friends and I went to the undercity market just a few dozen blocks from the Temple.”

“Oh okay.” Leia tilted her head to the side, “I’m all ears. Tell me what the market was like.”

“Well, it started when the soup guy/girl told us about the festival last night.”

“Three weeks until the Ryloth conference.” Mace Windu said quietly. The council chambers were nearly empty save for the human and the twi’lek. They stood side by side, staring down at the traffic of the city planet. Silence echoed around them tinged with an uncertain and uncomfortable edge. A stain had hung around the council chamber since the coup and had only worsened in recent year.

“Is your padawan still having difficulty mastering even the basics?” Shaak Ti wondered.

“Yes.” Windu pressed his palms together, begging for some sort of relief of the stress and worries that had plagued him for weeks. “I am reluctant to use the Revan’s Cure.”

“She is the offspring of Anakin Skywalker and she is failing.”

“Removing the inhibitor might be wisest.” Windu ventured.

Shaak Ti turned her hooded eyes toward the human and shook her great head. “We would alert Skywalker to her existence. I remember his passion, should he learn of his children’s fate he will burn the Republic around us.”

“His wife promised to do the honors.”
“Hmm.” Ti closed her eyes again. “Revan’s Cure will fix young Leia. It will unfold her true potential as a Jedi Knight.”

“Even Luke?”

‘Especially Luke. He has gained the same worrying habits of his father. Master Kenobi told me that he has been absent and has claimed it is all in pursuit of his class work. Even Kenobi seems unfocused in our training sessions in recent weeks. I believe that Master Kenobi has been failing in his duties as a Master.”

“If you think he has let the boy out on anything like a leash your wrong, Master Ti. He keeps very close watch over Luke and examines him at least one a week.”

“Then why would Kenobi be unfocused in training? He has always shown the proper diligence?”

“Perhaps he feels that meeting Skywalker again would be enough to push him again. Push him away from the Jedi Order.”

“I do not believe so.” Ti shifted in her seat and passed a small holocron toward Windu. “Here is your section of Revan’s cure. All of the masters will be administering different parts of it. Study it and when you have mastered your part then return it to me. I am its keeper.”

Mace Windu accepted the holocron, nodding.

汉·索洛（Han Solo）一直在靠近这里停泊的共和国舰队边缘徘徊了三天，等待舰队离开。他们会在他启动引擎的那一刻发现他，并且一旦被抓住，谁也不知道会有什么样的麻烦。他虽然年轻，但和蔼可亲，但这不会阻止他们把他送进监狱，再把钥匙扔掉。

“还要等多久， Chewie?” 威克丘（Chewie）的副驾驶耸了耸肩。【也许再过几个小时。他们即将结束这一趟巡逻。】

“好的，王后珍贵的货物需要送到拉克斯·西克敦。”【为什么？】

“我不清楚。她只是说要确保货物送到阿纳金·天行者（Anakin Skywalker）和杜库（Dooku）手上。别问我为什么。”年龄较大的生物低吼着，瞪着空中的短小人类。汉·索洛（Han Solo）露出笑容，耸了耸肩，从狭小的工作空间中挤了出来。他不希望再被锁在狭窄的空间里。他没有做任何事情，只是取下自己的工装，说：“我会在驾驶席上。”又一个露出笑容，索洛离开了他的朋友。他有事情要处理。

“我们都准备好去瑞洛斯会议了吗，唐？”

“不，我们已经接近了。Kitster比Pouting Blondie（撅嘴的金发）短，但我们会顺利的。”

“我听到了。”安纳金（Anakin）将头从茶杯中抬起。唐无视了他。

“衣服已经准备好，Kitster准备好了。嘿。”黑人从他的工作中抬起头来。等待着女人继续说。“你能表现出同样的愤怒吗？真正从他第一次叛变的日子遗留下来的风格。”

“可我们已经准备好了，安纳金？”

“没有，我们快要到了。Kitster比Pouting Blondie短，但我们能够处理的。”

“我听到了。”安纳金将头从茶杯中抬起。唐无视了他。

“我们正在准备衣服。Kitster准备好了。嘿。”黑人抬起头来。他从他的工作空间中挤了出来，等待着女人继续说。“你能表现出同样的愤怒吗？真正从他第一次叛变的日子遗留下来的风格。”
“I’m in the room!” Anakin finally took effort to glare at the woman. “Right here. Listening to you!”

“See if you can sulk and pout a lot. Keep your shoulder slumped and don’t look anyone in the eye.” Tang leaned against Kitster, laughing. “Do your absolute best to a real AWK!” She yelped as the enraged senator hurled himself across the room to tackle her off the chair and to the floor.

“I thought you two had outgrown this children wrestling!” Dooku despaired. “I am too old to parent middle-aged infants.”

Neither wrestler replied as they tussled along the floor, bumping into furniture and hissing the entire way. Insults flew thick and fast as Dooku went unheeded. “Representative Kitster, are you ready?”

“The conference is two weeks away.”

“It is, however. I do not wish to take you into any true danger. This will be the first time the Jedi have seen Anakin since his defection outside of broadcasts and the battle field. I want it to go well even if you are kidnapped.”

“Kidnapping a Confederate senator would be a political nightmare.”

“Goodness!” Dooku easily held the entire tea-set in the air as the coffee table rocked under a poorly placed kicked. “I never told the Republic that Anakin was attending the Ryloth conference. They know I am along with my aides but I never specifically specified Anakin was coming.” Kitster watched the faux innocent man across the table and laughed brightly.

“Surely that is more maneuverable position than anything else!”

“Master Yoda will make a grave error trying to seize Anakin again. I will protect my young friend with all I have.”

“Anakin will be on Naboo?”

“Yes, he will be. Signing the treaty to bring Naboo into the Confederacy. I will need you to be on your guard so nothing goes wrong. While I have not said that Anakin will be there we certainly wish to give the impression that he will be>”

“It shouldn’t be too hard.” Kitster smiled and then ducked as something breakable was tossed into the air. Tang was heard to snarling and Anakin growling. Their fight had escalated into a knot of limbs that looked difficult to untangle. Tang’s face was red and newly bruised; most of Anakin’s hair had been knocked from the braid. “You two should listen.”

“I’m allowed to blow off steam,” Tang retorted, “I’m the one planning this whole operation. I’ve been adult since I was born. Bite me, Kitster.”

“Tang, Anakin, if you two are done playing we do have other work to attend to.”

‘Pigeonholing the Jedi with the kidnap of Kitster would kinch it for us. Trahs them publicly and they’ll never recover. People might be all for the Jedi to restore order but such an overreach would ruin them.”

“Agreed.” Anakin leaned up and helped Tang to her feet, “But they won’t care. We’ll have to dismantle their entire empire from the ground up and no one battle will make it work.”

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“Bait? The conference is two weeks away and you want my padawan to be bait?” Obi Wan Kenobi rubbed his bloodshot eyes, “Really?”

“Drawn to Luke, Skywalker will be. Capture him when he speaks to the boy, we will.”

“There’s no guarantee that Anakin will even notice Luke. That Luke will even notice Anakin.” Obi Wan protested. “and if he does then what if Anakin grabs Luke before we can stop him.”

“Luke is your padawan,” Mace Windu, “you really think he will allow himself to be kidnapped? By Anakin Skywalker?”

“It does sound unlikely,” Obi Wan sagged in his seat, tired and worn. “But I’m not sure Luke would even want to speak to Anakin. He is deathly afraid of him, all of his generation are.”

“Fail, this plan will not.”

“We will have Anakin in hand as soon as possible. Luke has two weeks to prepare for the conference.”

“As you wish, Masters.”

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“Master?” Luke looked up from his datapad as Obi Wan walked into the room, looking tired and drawn. “Are you alright?”


“I finished that one age ago, Master Tatami told me it was the best essay she’d read. I was really happy about that so I’ve descided to make sure I only to my absolute best when I’m writing essays and doing projects.”

“That’s a wise decision, Padawan.” Obi Wan watched Luke try to hide the smile he wanted to show off. He patted the boy on the head and gave him a smile to encourage. Luke beamed a second later.

“I feel like I’m finally doing something well! I can’t use the Force and I can’t really duel as well as the others but I’m finally doing something right! I can do essay’s and stuff. Turns out I can research like nobodies business! I’m so excited! I can’t beat my classmates in duels but I can sure crush them in the debate field. I’m so excited to learn more about it!” Luke bounded from his perch and around the room. “This is great! I’m good at something!”

“That is good, Luke.” Obi Wan placated the boy, “Please, sit down. I need to ask you some questions.”

“Questions, what kind of questions?”

“Well,” Obi Wan patted the seat beside him, “What do you know about Anakin Skywalker?”

“Well, for starters. I know he betrayed the Republic when he murdered the Chancellor. I know he was censured at least twice and that his padawan was accused of blowing up the temple.”
“Yes, well. He’s going to be at the Ryloth Conference.”

“That’s when Ryloth officially become part of the ICS?”

“Yes, he’s going to be there to make sure it goes well on the Seppie end.” Obi Wan wondered just how his old friend would look. “And we’re going to be there too to keep the peace.”

“Okay.”

“He’ll feel dark, darker than the undercity.” Luke blinked a few times and scrunched his face up as if he didn’t believe any part of the planet could ever be dark. “And cold.”

“Like you feel cold?” Luke asked.

“I don’t feel cold.” Obi Wan leaned away from Luke’s innocent smile, “Do I?”

“Sure you do. Most of the older Master’s feel cold. I know I can’t feel much in the Force but when I can I feel cold off of you.”


“Like…well. Not like ice but almost like ice. Like when you get your sock wet before you can put your boot on. That kind of cold chill. It feels like that. …are the masters not supposed to feel like that?”

“No, Luke.” Obi Wan closed his mouth slowly and watched his padawan shift under the stern stare. “The masters are not supposed to feel like that.”

“Really? The others feel the same thing, we just guessed that the way it’s supposed to be.”

“How does master Yoda feel?”

Luke grimaced, “Weird, really weird. Like, sometimes he’d warm but sometimes he just feels like a block of ice. I mean, he doesn’t feel dark. I don’t even know how that feels really but he doesn’t feel warm or nice. I know he’s supposed to be really close to the light side but…he seems like he’s in the shadows.” The Master’s eyes widened and he pressed his hand to his forehead. “Master?”

“Go to your room.” He ordered. “Meditate. I’ll return later.” He heard to scramble to leave and didn’t care if he felt a tinge of fear around the blond. How could the entire mastery of the Jedi Order feel dark? How could Yoda feel cold to Luke. Yoda was the cornerstone of the modern Jedi Order! Obi Wan reached for an answer and nearly yelped when the Force did not come to his beckoning. He reached again and it leaned away still.

Meditation had never been this difficult before. His outward push sent a few vases to the floor. They shattered upon impact and he sighed. He’d have another mess to clean up.

In his room, Luke flinched and looked for an escape that didn’t lead him past his master. He didn’t know he could handle the man in a bad mood again. Luke hated getting yelled at and getting the impression that he was wrong about everything. He’d finally found something he was good at and his master hadn’t even paid attention to him.
Padme started blankly at the twi’lek teenager. She was slim, green, and grim. “What did you say your name was?”


“Yes.” She leaned away from the young twi’lek and shook her head, “What are you doing here?”

“A little behind the times are you?” The green girl shrugged, “Taa dropped me here because my father was making a mess of things. If he’d tried to stick me in his harem father would have leveled the planet but keeping me alive and under Jedi control,” she jabbed a green finger skyward. “Keep father under control.”

“You’re….sixteen! Fifteen! At best! Taa would?”

“Orn Free Taa is a travesty to our entire race.” Hera Syndulla hopped up to settle on a barrel and smiled at Padme. “I heard you were here but wanted to check it out for myself.”

“Oh, right.” Padme held out her hand, “A pleasure to meet you.”

“Hi,” Hera beamed and took her hand. “How long have you been here?”

“Not long. You?”

“Four years. Thankfully my friend Numa was brought here too along with some clones that once helped her in the war. Waxed and Boil, they’ve been helping me. If you want I can bring back to the Farm.”

“The Farm?”

“Yeah, the clones that ended up here,” Hera drummed her heels against the barrel. “They expanded the farms, improved them too. I live there when I’m off rotation.”

“Rotation?” Padme lifted her hands out of the water she’d been cleaning clothes in. “What rotation are you on?”

“Piloting and mechanics!” Hera said, her drumming picking up speed, “I love fixing things and flying them. I love flying, it’s the best. There’s nothing better in the galaxy! I get to fly some of the rescue ships when the Warden feels it’s not too dangerous! I get some time on the simulator too but if I ever get the chance to fly wild.” The twi’lek took a deep breath and stared star ward. “You’d never see me touch the ground again. I’d stay up there,” her small hand, greasy and scarred reached toward the blue sky above. “And never come down. I’d be free.”

Padme looked down and swallowed the sudden lump in her throat. “That’s nice.” She sniffed, “My husband was just like that.” Blinking past the tears she gave Hera a watery smile. “He had kyber in his heart too.”

“Kyber?”

“Kyber make the strongest stars,” She said, “The wildest, most powerful stars had hearts of kyber. That’s what the jedi use to make their lightsabers. Anakin couldn’t stand being on the ground unless he was with someone else.” Padme sighed a bit and then nodded. “Let me tell you about his first real time in a ship.” Hera’s eyes gleamed. “He was nine years old and Naboo had been under blockade by the Trade Federation.
Chapter Summary

Just a few conversations.

Luke woke up the next morning to find his master already awake and looking as if he hadn’t slept at all. His hair was mused and a spiked up, his robes wrinkled and a hollow look was sunk deep into his eyes.

“Master?” He hovered at the edge of the door, unsure if he ought to disturb him. Obi Wan jolted about and flinched when he saw Luke. For a second his pale lips for a name that was not Luke’s.

“What are you doing up?” The man croaked hoarsely and rubbed his forehead.

“Master, its 0630, time for breakfast and then calisthenics and then classes for me at least, you might have some meeting with the council scheduled. I don’t know.”

“It’s morning already?”

“Did you meditate the whole night away, Master?” Luke always go the impression the meditaion was supposed to be a lot more relaxing.

“I tried,” Master Kenobi yawned hugely and stretched his arms over his head. “I had a little trouble.”

“Oh, like me? It’s okay.” Luke wandered into the room and toward the little kitchenette. “I have a lot of trouble with meditation. I’ll make you some tea so you feel better. It’ll help, I promise.”

“Luke,” there was something like fondness in his masters voice. Almost like when Dilje had decided the only way to keep him from wandering off in the market was to hold his hand.

“No, no,” he waved the older man down, “Let me make you some tea. I can do that at least, right?”

“Alright, Padawan,” His master settled back into a comfortable slump to watch him. Luke the water boiling and the tea pot ready before the red-haired man spoke again. “Luke, last night, what did you mean the old masters felt cold?”

“Huh?”

“What did you mean last night when you told me that the masters felt cold?”

“Just that,” Luke said, “They sometimes feel cold. I mean, I can’t feel you guys a lot because I can’t use the force much but when I do the older masters just feel cold.”

Obi Wan watched the padawan putter around, pulling down his favorite tea cup and then Luke’s own mug and a small dish of carefully hoarded sugar. “Could you elaborate?” He prompted.

“Well…cold is cold but different kinds of cold too.” Luke frowned, “I’m not good at these things, Master.”

“Do your best,” he prompted and Luke knew that tone well enough to start talking.
“I don’t know how the Dark feels but you said Anakin Skywalker would feel cold and I sure know how that one feels. It’s always cold here.” Luke shivered and then laughed. “But like…do you remember that mission with that pretty lady and that really ugly bantha? Their world never ever got to see the sun because of the clouds.”

“The old masters feel like…a planet with no sun.”

“I guess, I don’t know much about those words to talk about things like that stuff.” Luke stirred the tea leaves into the hot water and shrugged a bit from his position next to the counter.

“Alright,” Obi Wan watched Luke carefully. The boy seemed preoccupied with his task, unaware of the enormous bombshell he had just dropped on him. He looked so much like Anakin in the moment it was almost painful. “Luke, I do have some news to tell you.”

“Okay, I’m listening, Master. I promise, I’m just trying to find the lid.”

“Master Ji’mi requested that I take up your saber training personally.”

“You’ve always done that.” Luke glanced over his shoulder, confused.

“Permanently.”

“But then I wouldn’t be allowed into the class!” Luke cried and Obi Wan could sympathize with the boy’s outrage.

“Luke, be at peace.” He chided, “Master Ji’mi has kept you in the same class for four years now.”

“Not because I can’t do my forms!” Luke waved his arms around, “It’s just that I can’t win any duels! I try and I try really hard but they always keep beating me ’cause I can’t use the force! I’m still pretty good for a Null! Master, you have to let me go back. I worked really hard! I’ll work even harder. Please! I gotta learn how to duel!”

“Master Ji’mi has made up her mind,” Obi Wan said firmly and then sought to find a silver lining that Luke might appreciate. “Look at it this way; you’ll be able to spend more time with me when I teach you all I know.”

From the incredulous and frustrated expression on his face that was not nearly enough to help Luke recover from the indignity of being kicked out the basic saber forms class.

Luke’s expression wavered and he swayed a minute before stiffly going back to the tea. Neither of them seemed sure what to do or say. Obi Wan settled back into his usual meditation pose and waited for his tea.

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With her master still at the main Jedi Temple, Leia had almost complete freedom. She split her days between wandering through the mountains and the palace gardens to following Bail Organa around the palace. Since none of the other Jedi masters liked to venture into actual Palace they were left in relative peace.

“And then he told me he was heading to Coruscant but he wouldn’t tell me why. I don’t know why he wouldn’t, he usually tells me everything.” Leia propped her chin on the desk and stared at the Prince Consort. “Do you know why my master on gone?”

“Not really.” Bail wavered between his paperwork and the adorable little Jedi. “Maybe he’s gone to speak the council.”

“Maybe.” Leia pouted, “I want to visit Coruscant someday. I heard the markets there are really great.
They have stalls where you can get this great soup that the person makes right in front of you and then you can just sit there and eat. Apparently it’s super cheap too and really good. Plus, they’ve got a whole section just for clothes and a lot of different fabrics too but apparently wearing a lot of colors is frowned on past a certain level.

“How did you hear that?” Bail knew just how much Leia was taught about Coruscant and it had not been that. From the shifty expression on her face he knew something was up.

“Can you keep a secret?” Leia whispered, leaning across the desk. Bail gave up on his work and focused all of his attention on the girl.

“Yes.” Leia glanced around and then nodded toward the garden just beyond his office doors. “Let’s go outside.” Once they were both crouched beneath the low hanging branches of a lilac tree and their voices drowned out by the gurgling spring right next to their feet, Leia spoke again. “I made a friend.”

“Really?” Bail grinned, “That’s fantastic! Who are they?”

“His name is Luke and he’s in my head.” Leia shifted in the dirt and picked up a rock and passed it over to him, “He used to be in my nightmares but we met in a library.”

“Really?” More confused now Bail thought it would be best if he waited for Leia to finish.

“Yeah, like a dream space that we share and stuff and we can talk about stuff. I told him about my speeder and then he comes back the next night all excited because he has a story to share too. He went out to find one so he could share it with me. So I know a lot about the markets he went to and the people he met. It sounds exciting so I really want to go so I can try that soup too.”

“What is he like?”

“Luke is…kinda scatty and he says he can’t use the force much either.” Leia rocked back and forth on her heels, “Like me. He told me can’t meditate either and usually ends up falling asleep when he tries. He really likes spicy food but his master can’t stand it so he never gets to eat it but he loves really soft sweets and never gets those either.”

“Oh dear.” Bail knew, even without knowing the details, that this would cause Leia serious trouble if Windu heard even a breath of it. “Leia,” he interrupted her and laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Listen to me. You cannot let your master know anything about this Luke.”

“I know how to keep secrets, Prince Bail.” Leia snorted and Bail tightened his grip.

“Listen to me, Leia. You are a very smart child and you are very clever but you cannot let your master have even an idea of your dreams.”

“Yeah I know that.” Leia’s voice dropped, “Prince, what’s wrong?”

“I don’t know; Leia but I know that you will be in a lot of unfair trouble if you let anyone else know about this Luke boy. Please, promise me you won’t mention him to anyone else or mention anything he told you.”

“But.”

“Please, Leia. Please promise me.” Bail felt his heart stir when she gave a fearful nod.

“I couldn’t get in that much trouble. Why would they punish me?”
“Leia, beyond this palace and temple there are many things not right with the galaxy. Many things that you could be punished for that seem unjust and unfair and they are but you cannot let your master know.”

“They’re just stories, we’re just sharing stories! What’s wrong with that? They tell me stories about how the Order was formed and about my master’s old missions! Why should this make any difference?”

“Leia…” Bail took a deep breath and forced him to acknowledge the truth he had wanted to keep at bay for so long. “They can control those stories not yours and that frightens your masters.”

“Why?” She hunched closer to him, looking at him with wide brown eyes.

“Power relies on control and your stories are not under your masters control. Leia, do you remember last time you did something without your masters permission and he found out?” Leia flinched and then pouted.

“Yeah,” she whispered/hissed, “I got in a lot of trouble for a long time and just because I fixed a droid. Luke said he did the same thing and go in lots of trouble too.”

“This would be much worse because it’s not a behavior that can be corrected or stopped by just watching over someone.”

“I won’t ever mention it again,” Leia promised and mimed locking her mouth shut. “I promise.”

“I don’t want to scare you but I also don’t want you to get in trouble again.”

“Okay, I promise I won’t mention it. I won’t even think about it. Please don’t be afraid, Prince Bail.”

“You can just call me Bail you know. I don’t mind.” His heart ached. Leia was afraid of her own caretakers. She was afraid of thinking and sharing and that, more than anything, hurt him. Leia was quiet before she nodded. “Okay, Bail.” He smiled as best he could manage at the moment and startled when she jumped him for a hug. Carefully he wrapped his arms around her shoulders and held her close.

“Oh, Leia.” His hand rested on her head and he sighed deeply. “I am so sorry that this is the galaxy you have grown up in.”

“Warden Erie lets me work on some of the search and rescue ships if they need and I’m nearby. It’s great, they’re actually really high tech compared to the other stuff around here. Apparently they eat up most of the budget.” Hera helped Padme lift a blanket, heavy with water, onto the next line. “He’s really focused on safety even if we’re all prisoners.”

“Have you met him?”

“Yeah, he’s not bad for a human man. I don’t hate him but I still don’t like him much.” Padme laughed quietly and began tucking the blanket into place to keep the wind from knocking it off the line. “Padme, why are you doing laundry?”

“It keeps me outside,” Padme said and looked down at her soggy, wrinkled hands. “I spent enough time inside the last few years that I…I can’t go into a building.”
“That’s why you’ve got that little tent-ish thing set up in the trees?”

“Yes.”

“Oh,” Hera looked away, “I’m sorry.”

“Hmmm,” Padme smiled at the young twi’lek, “It’s alright.”

“On Ryloth my father is a political dissenter. One day he was out and the Senator’s men raided our house and they kidnapped me.”

“Hera.” The girl hunched and looked away. “I spent almost a year in the same room, alone except whenever that kriffing bastard wanted to gloat. I was so afraid and so alone and.”

“Hera.”

“I just…want you to know that I know how you feel and…I can help you. If you want.”

“Did you get sent here?” Padme wondered and fiddled with her short hair.

“Well, yeah.” Hera shrugged, “They really wanted to make sure you were okay and since we were kinda in similar positions they thought we should talk and I really did want to help.”


“Except?” Hera waited for the other shoe to drop. Padme was quiet for a bit and she sighed deeply.

“Nothing, I’m just trying to.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to be alone for as long as you’ve been, Padem. You’ve been isolating yourself and.”

“Too many people around makes me dizzy.”

“I get that, I really do but if you come with me to my place then it’ll just be four of us and we’ll set up your little tent outside! You can help with the farm or the garden and there’s only four of us and we live up the road from the rest of the clones and troopers.”

“You want me to move.” Padme realized suddenly.

“Just a little,” Hera admitted, “you don’t have to say yes or give me answer yet but think about it at least.”

“I’ll think about it,” Padme agreed.
Dooku has trouble with many things. Anakin has even more.

“Peace and serenity. Balance and serenity.” Anakin sucked in a deep breath and let it out with a sigh. The low lights of the meditation room flared for a second. “Balance and serenity. Peace. There is no emotion there is only peace.”

“Master? Are you just spouting off words?”

“Hmm.” Anakin opened his eyes to see Ahsoka near drowning in his cloak, not moving from her own meditation seat. “Why are you wearing my cloak?”

“It’s really soft. The only one in the whole temple that doesn’t rub my montreals wrong. Isn’t this the one that you got from prison?”

“The quartermaster won’t give me another one. Told me I was going through them too fast.” Anakin said and didn’t move to recover his cloak. “Have you even tried to meditate?”

“I can’t when I’m this worried about Obi Wan, Master.”

“Hmmm.” Anakin knew this was the point he should tell her to drop her attachment to Obi Wan. To tell her that whatever the Force wished for Obi Wan would come to pass. That she should not be so attached to the man to be this agitated.

“How come you got this really nice cloak from the seppies and you still can’t get this stuff from the temple?” Ahsoka burrowed further into the cloak, pouting at him.

“I’m not sure.”

“Master, I know you humans can’t see as well as I can in the dark so why are the lights so low?”

“They’re more comfortable like that.” He said, “Do you want the lights up?”

“No, Master. I was just curious.”

“Alright, Ahsoka. Meditation.”

“Right.” She ducked down and took another deep breath. This time instead of settling into meditation she spoke again. “Why isn’t the Council letting you leave the Temple.”

“Snips.” Anakin wasn’t as tired or irritated as he usually was at this stage in the meditation practice so he only sighed. “I’m not…”

“You’re not supposed to tell me that you were going under for and evaluation.”

“How did you?”

“We’re in the middle of a war, information isn’t really all that secure anymore. High enough rank
gets you a peak at Council meetings. Skyguy, why would they Evaluate you?”

“A lot of reasons,” Anakin slumped. “Snips, can you focus on the meditation?”

“Um,” she flared with embarrassment for a bit and then shook her head. “Not really, master. I’m sorry.”

“Its fine,” Anakin shook his head, “What do you think you could work on?”

“I don’t know. How can you be so calm? You only just got back into Republic three days ago and the Council won’t even let you leave the temple. You were in prison for so long but they at least let you go outside. This isn’t fair, you didn’t do anything wrong!”

“Snips.”

“Master, why is every time something goes wrong you’re always the one in trouble.”

“I’m not always in trouble. That would be ridiculous.”

“Sure feels like it.” She muttered. “What about Obi Wan? I heard the seppies were dragging him in for a trial. They were going to… I don’t know.”

“Obi Wan is going to be charged for war crimes.” He said quietly. This information was already circulating among the Council but since they never seemed to think of him as anything other than a decoration they sometimes yelled at; they probably never considered he was listening to them when they argued. “The Separatists have the right and the legal ability to try him. Probably on a Corellian court.”

“But the Corellia system is Republic.” Ahsoka insisted.

“Have you ever met a Corellian?” Anakin asked faintly, “They do not work like the rest of the galaxy. A Hapan court could be bribed and one that is staunchly Seppies or Republic would look bad. Corellians care about Corellians and making everyone else envy them for their ships. There are way too many economic ties between both governments, their political minefield, all their cultural heritage plus the diversity of their system. Corellian doesn’t just refer to humans you know. They are far from unbiased but in this galaxy it’s the best Dooku is probably going to get.”

“But what if they execute him?”

“I don’t know if they will or not.” Anakin hummed to hide his confusion and distress. “They might not even get the trial started. I don’t think anyone’s ever actually tried a Jedi for anything.”

“What if they do?”

“Then I guess they do.”

“But what about Master Kenobi? Aren’t we going to rescue him?”

“That would be a really bad idea. Politics and stuff. I don’t think the Corellian high court wants their prisoner broken out without much of an explanation. It would put us on bad grounds with their shipping yards.”

“But he’s a Jedi. He’s one of the greatest Jedi of all time. They can’t do this to him.”

“Snips, they can. There aren’t actually any rules that they the Jedi are above the law. The thing with the Dooku is that he’s the first person with the money and pull to actually do it.”
“If it can happen why wouldn’t anyone have dragged up a Master in front of a jury before? The Republic’s existed for a thousand years.”

Anakin knew the answer. The Republic would never let the happen. It would look too bad on any of the Jedi for it to happen. They had to maintain the mythological status of its members than admit many of them made mistakes. Since the Separatists had deep pockets and Yen Dooku had a grudge lovingly cultivated for forty years it was possible at this point. “I don’t know.” He told her.

“I sure hope he’s okay.” Ahsoka said and then glanced up at him. “Master, you’d come get me, wouldn’t you? If I was stuck in prison?”

“It depends on what for?” He said seriously and then gave her a smile to soothe the worry in her eyes.

“Did he even do any war crimes?” She demanded a moment later, “Just because he’s been winning battles doesn’t mean he’s been committing war crimes.”

“Actually.” Anakin coughed. One of the reading materials he’d had while in that prison were Meeder’s worn out old data chips with books. The first one he’d read was the entire Alderann Convention and then the Mandalore Rules of War. It had been an unsettling revelation to know that he’d been skirting the lines far too much in recent months. At least he hadn’t jumped right over the edge.

“Master!” Her voice was heavy with accusation, “You sound like a Seppie.”

“I’m telling you the truth.” He snarled, anger in every cell of his body. Ahsoka leaned back, surprised. “Snips, there are laws. Ones that have to be obeyed. We’re fighting a war across the galaxy, billions have died and billions more are going to die and there has to be a way to minimize that and everything else that’s going into the shredder. We’re de-regualting banks for the Force’s sake! Losing health care, rationing for the rest of the galaxy. We shouldn’t be…Ahsoka. I’ve read the materials on the rules of war and…Obi Wan’s broken some of them.” His voice slowly petered out until it was nothing but a whisper. Ahsoka blinked rapidly.

“What if I’d been framed?”

“What?” He lifted his head in the dark room to focus on her bright blue eyes.

“What if I’d been in prison for unfair reasons. Would you come get me out?”

“I…I would, yes.” Anakin grinned a bit to alleviate the heavy atmosphere.

“What do you thinks going to happen to him?”

I don’t know, Snips.”

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“You recommend what?” Count Dooku stared down at Poda, grimacing his usual grimace for whenever the woman was involved.

“Republic holo-films statistics reveal that these traits are more commonly associated with villain/ bad guys. It isn’t very nuanced but if you want to come across as the sinister leader of the Confederacy as well as a Dark Lord then I would recommend these changes or embellishments.”

“My dear intern, I do not have a sinister laugh.”
“You don’t have a laugh at all but that doesn’t stop you from indulging in a sinister chuckle. I think that Kenobi will be easy to fool like this. If I have to break him out of prison then he has to carry back the word of your true villainy.”

“This is inanity.”

“I think it has merit, brother.” Yen Dooku wafted into the conference room. “Appearance and theatrics are half of the court room as well.”

“And here I thought it was only your verbal cruelty.”

“There’s that too. Let me see the list.” Her bony fingers snatched it out of his and Count Dooku shook his head. “Ah, perfect. You’re wearing a dark enough red to seem scary. Go get your cape, that will add a sinister shadow to the red and then if you get some eyeliner then it would make you look like your yellow eyes are much more evil.”

“I am a political leader,” Dooku told them gravely. “I do not indulge in such theatrics.”

“IT doesn’t matter.” Poda had already produced a thin box and opened it to reveal various eye make-up.

“I will have your job.”

“I’m going to blacklist you for any other professional snooper.” Poda said carelessly and sat on the table right next to him. “The cape is necessary. Kenobi and his Jedi scum have insulted me enough already with their mediocre prison break skills. I want them to return home trembling.”

“I love you so much, Poda.” Yen sighed, “When this thing dies do come work for me.”

“I would love to except then who would antagonize this thing? Hold still.” Considering the woman held a very small metal rod with prickly edged just centimeters from his eyes Dooku obeyed. He knew her record. She’d managed to kill someone with a tea cup once. He didn’t want to know what she could accomplish with make-up materials.

Poda switched out for various tools and powders and then held up a large compact. “What is that?”

He had been silent during the entirety of being painted until his officer had produced the new materials.

“Powder, dear brother.” Yen said calmly, “Now let the nice lady do her job.”

“I am not some painted whore.” Dooku retorted, leaning back into his chair. He withered a bit under their glares and then pointed at the compact. “What is that?”

“Powder, foundation of sorts. We’re going to make you look paler than usual, with the lights dimmed and with only the backlit yellows on you’re going to look so very sinister. Kenobi will return to his Council with a favorable report of you.” Yan sighed and nodded. Several minutes later he stared into the mirror offered.

“Goodness, I look like a holo actor.”

“I know.” Poda put her tools away, “Remember what the list said. Keep your voice agreeable but only that. Let your stance, movements, and facial expressions do the talking. Tell him you’re ready to rip him to shreds with your body language.”

“He is my grand-padawan.” Yan sighed as he pulled his cape on.
“He’s one who doesn’t listen to you.” Yen did not look up from her padd. “I told you Skywalker should be your focus.”

“I spoke to Skywalker.” Yan Dooku frowned as Poda readjusted his cape and then his collar. “If you are finished interfering?”

“We’re putting on a production.” She reminded him. “Vital to the war effort. Kenobi had been festering in that cell for a while now, he might be amendable to anything you say.”

“He won’t be.” Yen drawled, “He’s a card-carrying member of a cult.”

Yan Dooku shook his head. “Am I going to need more tips on how to win an acting award or can I go menace Obi Wan Kenobi in peace?”

“I’ll be watching from the security room. If you can then try and make him lose his temper.”

“I’m going to be expecting to find your letter of resignation on my desk this time tomorrow.” He told the woman before sweeping out of the conference room and toward the cell block. He heard the woman mutter a mocking, “As if.” Just before the door shut.

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Obi Wan Kenobi had not passed a restful two and half months in the Separatist prison. His bristles had grown unchecked by a razor in the last few months. His hair was brushing his ears too. He wasn’t allowed anything sharp enough to cut through anything. Meat in his meals came pre-cut, as did his vegetables and tubers. Since he was considered such a dangerous prisoner he had nothing to do except occasionally work out in his small cell. No entertainment and only enough company to talk to to keep him from going mad.

He spent most of his time meditating in silence and sleeping.

He wondered how Anakin managed prison.

“Meditation.” Obi Wan did not open his eyes. The Darkness he’s sensed flare earlier that day was now in front of his cell. It wasn’t easy to be a Jedi in the citadel. The Force was dulled here and the way the prison was built was meant to magnify that effect. “The friend of the Jedi during the dullness of prison. “

“What do the Sith know of meditation?” He asked, not uncurling form his pose. “Dooku?”

“Enough, I suppose.” Came the gravelly voice of the older human. “To be focused enough to defeat you.”

“I am sure there was some flavor of foul play.” Kenobi retorted.

“There may have been, my young friend. How are you managing prison?”

“I’m doing fine.” Obi Wan opened his eyes slowly and nearly reeled back. Dooku had to have been dabbling in the Dark Arts to look as awful as he did. There was a new depth to his depravity it seemed. The man was pale, paler than a white kyber crystal. His eyes were sunken deep and a hellish yellow. There was a predatory lurch to his shoulders and walk. “I cannot say the same for you, Count. What manner of Sith magic have you been interfering with?”

“No magic,” the smile directed at him was toothy, dangerous, unsettling. Obi Wan leaned back. “There is news I must convey. I am deeply saddened but the Corellian High Court has accepted your
trail. There is nothing I can do that this point.”

“I do not need your help, Count. The jury will see that justice will be done.”

“The justice they will do will not be the kind you are expecting if you believe they will see you free.” The Sith said calmly but there was nothing calm in his gait, in his eyes. They gleamed with madness under the dull light.

“The Council will never allow this.”

“The Council does not have anything resembling a foothold in the Corellian System. Even the Corellian Temple will watch idly. I can, however, make some exceptions for you if you were to provide me with.”

“I will give you nothing, Dooku.” Obi Wan glared at the man. “When they learn how I have been treated here then you may find the jury more.”

“You have been treated exactly the way the Convention outlines a prisoner of your rank ought to be considering how dangerous you are.” The Sith replied wryly, “There won’t be any sympathy for you for not getting a razor to shave with.” Obi Wan glared.

“And what have you done with my men? What of my padawan?”

“Skywalker was rescued some time ago.” Dooku said, “Your men are being treated according to the statutes of the Alderann Convention. There is no need to be so dramatic you accuse me of having slaughter two ship full of Clones just so you can feel vindicated as the righteous in case it turned out to be true. If seems your Council has left you to rot. Hmm, abandoned by your holy order. What other surprises could the Force have for you, Kenobi?”

Dooku was not surprised when the familiar gleam of someone pulling even harder on the strings of self-delusions entered Kenobi’s eyes.

“I have not been abandoned by the Order, Dooku.” Kenobi told him seriously, believing himself.

“Are you so sure? So sure that the Council will not abandon you to the tender mercies of your Light. There are no attachments there to save you, your military leadership is easily replaced. I have seen what happens to Padawans on the field, Kenobi.” His words rang uncomfortably true but there was too much darkness lurking around him for Obi Wan to take him for his word. “They are prepared to let go, ‘if it is time’ without a thought of if they can delay that time or is proactiveness also against your tenants? There is no one to help you, Kenobi. Save for me. Take my hand and I will give you.”

“I will never join you, Dooku.” Kenobi snarled and Yan drew back from the spit hurled his way. “I am a Jedi Knight.”

“Then there is little I can do for you. I’m sorry.” Dooku gave him a slight bow and left the Jedi to his musings.

Once he was in the turbo lift he could nearly feel Poda’s miserable sigh through the Force. She was miserable that the man would be going free.

“I bet I could break him properly.” She said the instant he was back in the conference room. “Nothing left but a broken shell. A fitting end don’t you think?”

“How is his rescue coming?”
“Abysmally, someone reminded the Jedi that snatching Obi Wan back from the clutches of the law might make them look bad in front of the Corellian system. They still need those ships and soldiers. I might have to hire mercenaries to kidnap him for a decent ransom. From there he’ll escape and there is no reason for him to return to trial he thinks is a farce.”

“A Separatist plot he can run away from.”

“Yes.” Poda looked depressed and then she squared her shoulders. “No one appreciates me.”

“How you suffer.” Dooku mused, “So often at the hands of ungrateful fools.”

“Yes,” she stared into the distance. “Your cousin has sent you an updated report on Skywalker and I have the latest debates of the Republic senate.”

“Any mention of Kenobi with our contact in the Council?”

“None yet. Skywalker is still on lock down and not going anywhere. Apparently they’re staving off the Evaluation.”

“The boy is on lock down, unable to leave the temple?” Yan asked, a bit surprised as they both boarded his usual transport vessel. His staff was assembled and waiting in the kitchen where he usually preferred to discuss business.

“Yes.”

“Fools,” he snorted and accepted the mirror and the make-up facial wipes. After some struggling he managed to get most of it off and then stormed into the refresher to get the rest. Poda waited patiently for him to re-emerge. “One would think,” he snarled into the towel around his face. “That the name Skywalker would imply that he is not to be tethered to anything, much less by the orders of fools.”

“He’s staying put as far as we can tell.”

“Hmm.” Dooku wondered if those fools truly knew what they were doing. “Very well.”

#$#4

Padme glowered at the distant view of the Jedi Temple. Somewhere in the depths of the ancient building was her husband. Locked down under the control of his Masters and unable to leave. Apparently being broken out of a Separatist prison didn’t give them the clue he was going to get jittery or flighty soon. Anakin flew. Anakin needed to fly, he needed to be free from the ground. It was ingrained in every part of his skin and in his cells.

“Artoo,” The blue and white droid beeped at her. “can you get to the temple?”

He beeped an affirmative.

“Would you please go there?” She asked, leaning down to look right in his photo-receptor. “Please, keep him company? I know he’s under a lot of stress so please…go?” Artoo rolled forward to bump affectionately into her leg and then beeped again. “Would you record a message for me, please?” Artoo gave his consent and she smiled at the loyal little droid.

#$34

“Skywalker.” Anakin flinched as the meditation room lights flared to full power. He clamped down on his senses and ducked into his retrieved cloak. Ahsoka had gone off to bed despite protests and he
had been trying to fine some measure of peace in the Temple.

“Yes?” He asked, still squinting into the brightness and hating every second of it. His headache flared again.

“Your droid is back.” Mace Windu told him plainly, “He’s waiting at the front entrance.”

“Artoo?” He braved the bright light and stood up. “He’s here. Is the Naboo Consulate done with him?”

“I guess.” Windu stared blankly at him. “I don’t know why they don’t get their own astromech.”

“Artoo is trained for their sort of missions. He’s been a good companion for years.”

“I wonder why they gave him to you, though.” Windu said and Anakin smiled off the suspicion.

“As a Friend of Naboo I am entitled to gifts of gratitude.” Anakin told the Master blithely. “I hope they gave him an oil bath, Artoo hates it when his joints are rusty.” He cheerfully ignored Mace Windu’s glare as he pushed his way out of the room.

He met Artoo in the main hall. The little droid squealed loud enough to make the nearby masters and padawans cringe as he barreled into his knees.

“Hey, buddy.” He laughed and pulled the droid into a hug. “Boy, did I miss you. I could have used you too but then you wouldn’t be back with me, would you?” The droid beeped and Anakin laughed as he translated the binary. “That’s not polite, Artoo, but I get what you mean. Come on. I’ll take a look at your little servos to make sure nothing’s wrong.” Grinning from ear to ear hand and the droid made their way to his rooms.
Obi Wan usually took solace in the Room of a Thousand Fountains. He found peace in the bubbling fountains, comfort from the rustling of leaves from artificial winds, and companionship in the few padawans and initiates that sometimes got lost in it.

Except today. Today he could not find peace or any sort of calm. His center was unbalanced and off. Luke’s off handed words and easy dismissal of the light that the Council was reported to carry had set him reeling.

Cold. Luke thought they were cold. The children were raised and growing in a cold environment. Luke, Obi Wan cut his eyes, Luke thought he was cold. Luke thought his master was supposed to be cold.

“Something on your mind, Kenobi.”

“Master Windu.” The graying Jedi settled into the spot next to him. “Nice have you back on Courascant. It’s been a while.”

“The Alderann Temple didn’t go up easily and my own padawan’s taken my time.”

“Of course,” Obi Wan finally opened his eyes. “How is she?”

“Weak in the Force but strong in her mind. Even if she never becomes a true master I think she will make an excellent negotiator.”

“Luke is intelligent as well but also weak in the Force.” Obi Wan watched the aging master carefully. “Has Leia said anything to…concern you?”

“Many things.” Mace said, “Mostly about bed time and meditation time but nothing out of the ordinary for a padawan.”

“Yesterday Luke told me that the masters he could feel felt cold.” Obi Wan scratched his beard. “He told me that even though he wasn’t all too good at picking up information he said when he could reach the Force that I, we, all felt cold.”

“Cold?” Windu watched him carefully. “What does that even mean?”

“I’m not sure.” Kenobi confessed, “Luke left me to meditate on it.”

“He’s clearly mistaken. I haven’t felt the order this united since the war, since Luke was born. I’ve never felt the temple this calm.”

“You don’t believe that Luke sensing the cold may indicative of the Order as a whole?” Obi Wan dithered. “I thought he might be.”
“If Luke is sensing cold he’s not sensing it from the masters.” Mace said abruptly. “Leia doesn’t blurt this sort of nonsense.”

“Never the less,” He persisted. “I think he might be speaking the truth. Luke cannot lie.”

“But it is possible that Luke does not understand. You yourself said that Luke can only reach the force sometimes. The inhibitor chip prevents anything further than even the most basic of techniques and that means Luke won’t have had as much training working with the Force.”

“Yes.”


“How do we correct it?” He settled his own graying head into his hand, fearing what would happen if he looked up to Windu’s face. “How can we teach him the truth? How can we help him?”

“Only after Revan’s cure can Luke reach his true potential.” Mace said. “And Leia too. They’ve been poisoned by the blood of their parents. If they didn’t have the inhibitor chips then who knows what sort of havoc they could wreck? They will be the best Jedi this galaxy has ever seen as soon as they’ve been cured. Skywalker too.” Mace gripped his shoulder. “We can bring him back, Kenobi. We can bring Anakin Skywalker back too. He’ll be even stronger than before when we erase his weaknesses. Once we make him the proper Chosen One he is meant to be.”

“What if it doesn’t work? What if we can’t help Anakin?” Obi Wan whispered. “He’s been with Dooku for so long.”

“Obi Wan.” Mace’s voice was gentle, deep and comforting. He looked to the side to see the man smiling at him. “If Darth Revan could be restored to her rightful place in the Jedi then I believe Anakin can be too. He is powerful but not powerful to overcome the commands of the entire council.”

“You’re right, of course.” Obi Wan said quietly. “I suppose I’m simply having doubts. I’m just concerned the Luke won’t reached his true potential.

“It is possible that Luke.”

“The Skywalker’s will be some of the best Jedi we’ve ever had.” Mace Windu told him. “But only when they’ve been healed.”

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Representative Kitster ducked into the section of Mos Eisly that had once been its busy and overcrowded slave quarters. He waved to the crowd of children bouncing a ball of twine between them and had to squeeze his way into the crowded little hovel that served as Anakin Skywalker’s Tatooine home. He found Anakin sitting in his usual spot by the fire pit trying to tap out command on his datapad while a curious, grubby finger toddler grasped for it.

Grandmother and Grandfather Deensa were arguing over by the stove while their various adopted children ran around, shrieking.

“Their roof finally caved,” Anakin explained when Kitster gave him a glance. He untangled the toddler from his datapad and his robes, trying to set her on her feet. “They’re staying here until it gets repaired. I have room, Kitster, don’t worry. I added the loft of the kids a couple of years back.” Anakin reminded Kitster of this every time he hosted a displaced family despite the fact that Kitster
had helped install it. “Is there news from the Senate?”

“No, Owen messaged me and asked if you would stop by soon.”

“The vaporators?”

“The vaporators.”

“All right.” Very gently he pried the toddler off him and set her in the four arms of her sibling. “I could go tonight, will you come with me?” Kitster nodded.

“Where is the Senator off to?” Grandmother Deensa grumbled, waddling from the stove into the wide single room with a chipped mug in one hand. “Eh?”

“Just visiting my brother, Grandmother,” Anakin replied dutifully, bending down to kiss her furry forehead. “The house if yours while you need it.”

“You are a good senator.” Deensa patted his cheek and huffed when another child careened into her stomach. “Oh goodness. You may come home to find it wrecked. Children! Stop running in here. Senator Skywalker has very breakable things.”

“Anything that I can’t afford to miss is already elsewhere,” Anakin told her, “Come, come. Make yourself at home. I’ll be back in a day or so.” He gathered up his usual bag and followed Kitster back into the street. “How did your last session go?”

“As well as can be expected. Ryloth’s new senator is very confused and bloodthirsty. Aleco Syndulla is demanding we do something to retrieve her daughter from whatever prison she’s in. She’s afraid that despite the promises she was given that Hera still ended up in one of Taa’s harems. Plus Ryloth is very much torn between,” he ducked under a wooden sign, “Between their old culture and what they want to build now. Their journey will not be an easy one.”

“Most likely not.” Anakin tightened the sash around his robes. Kitster watched his friends nearly bleached hair flop around in its long braid when Anakin climbed into his speeder. “Come on, Owen’ll want them done before nightfall.

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Beru Lars kept a sharp eye on the horizon. Not for the Tusken raiders she had once feared. Not for any of the Hutt goons but for her step brother in-law. 14 years ago she and her husband had been terrified landowners clinging to their small lands and tools. Fearing criminals and raiders in equal measures until a knock had come in the middle of the night.

She remembered that night clearly. Owen standing ready with the rifle, just out of sight to get a clear shot of anyone trying to get through the main entrance. She’d been carrying her favorite knife which Beru knew how to use. It hadn’t been anyone she’d expected.

It was Anakin. Anakin who had come by three years before to bury their mother. Anakin who had spent his shock and mourning in the garage fixing everything broken. Anakin the Jedi. A soldier. A leader. A general.

Through all of Anakin’s sweeping changes he brought to the galaxy and to his own planet he remained in contact with the Larses. His sent occasional gifts of tools and bolts of sturdy clothes. Nothing extravagant that would be out of place on a moisture farm. He sent letters too, of actual
paper that were delivered with whatever else he sent. Beru thought it was a little wasteful to have the planets senator being used as a glorified repairman but Anakin never seemed put out by their calls.

As the landspeeder approached she waved at the figure behind the wheel. Anakin didn’t wave back until he’d parked.

“Beru!” He beamed, jumping from the speeder and sweeping her up into a hug. She inhaled the scent of off-world perfumes, dust, and sweat and tea. His braid was coming undone, long wisps of hair flying around his head and shoulder like a halo. “How have you been?

“The same, Anakin. It’s nice to see you Representative Kitster.” The younger man blushed and nodded gracefully as he dismounted as well. “Thank you for coming, Ani.”

“No trouble, no trouble. I’m glad I can help. Hmm, is Owen cooking?”

“He’s cooking.” She affirmed, squeezing the biomechanical hand that slipped into hers. “It’s a slow cooker meal so he can go inspect your work.” Anakin had first been offended by Owen’s insistence on checking his work but had eventually discovered that it meant Owen just wanted to have something he could do with Anakin. Now Anakin enjoyed the usually taciturn man’s company because it gave him something to level off on. Something like bedrock for him to work from.

Kitster joined Beru in the house to help with the minor repairs on their various droids when Owen and Anakin left for the fields.

“Something on your mind, Anakin?” Owen asked. It had been a few hours since Anakin had been meticulously cleaning the same piece of equipment. It needed to be cleaner than before it the machine was going to survive another few seasons. “You’ve been even more spacy than usual.”

“No sure.” Anakin unclenched his teeth, allowing the drivers between them to fall into his lap. “I’m just…feeling something.”

“Yes,” Owen said, “Humans usually feel things, that means your nerve endings are working.”

“Considering what’s happened to me I’m surprised they still are,” Anakin ignored his step-brother’s sarcasm. “But this is different, the Force.” He looked off at the distant sea dunes and then at the darkening sky. Owen knew that look. It was the one that burned brighter than the twin suns with the passion, the yearning, the absolute pining it’s bearer had for the stars. It belonged only on those that explored and worked and suffered for years to fill and unnamable cavity in their soul. Seeing it on Anakin made Owen almost despair. Even years of war and political intrigue and more, even after freeing the slaves, after pulling down the Hutts, even after becoming the Senator of a free Tatooine the man was still starving. His brother was still eating to fill a stomach that continuously, still drinking like a sand dune.

“Anakin.” Owen watched the senator carefully twisted the mechanism between his hands.

“I don’t even know what I’m looking for. I just know…that. I just feel that I’m supposed to be looking for something. Sometime I can catch a glimpse, like the green sun flare off Naboo’s ocean…” Owen wasn’t a romantic, he didn’t dream and yearn or search. He was content in his work and his home and in the role he’d played in history. Watching a living sun bumble around an un-destined orbit was painful.

“Maybe it was something you left with the Jedi.” Owen grunted, looking away from Anakin and focusing completely on returning his part to its rightful place. “Did you make sure to pack your gear properly?”
“I…never made it back to the temple after the sieges. I was just returned for the battle when I defected. I didn’t pack anything.”

“Maybe it’s a friend you left.” Owen didn’t see Anakin eye him curiously nor did he see his brother reached out to tap his shoulder before apparently thinking better of the motion and drawing back. “People forget things when they got running all over the place.”

“You’re right.” Anakin muttered.

“If you want to find out what your missing then go looking. Sitting in the sand and pining isn’t going to do a damn bit of good, eh?” Owen turned around and took Anakin’s piece. “The way I figure it to solve a problem you need to actually start on the problem. Figure out what’s broken,” He hissed as his fingers slipped and he lost his grip. He continued to wrestle with the vaporator while Anakin waited. “Figure out what’s missing and you’ve got to go and find that answer. You’ve got to put the work into it. Now I’m not saying you don’t work, Anakin. Stars knows that’s not the case but you are a dreamer.” Owen grinned in triumph when the piece clicked back into the place.

“You need to turn it counter clockwise.” The blond senator reminded him. “I might be a dreamer but.”

“Which means,” Owen interjected, “Is that you just need to be reminded of these things called goals.” Owen did as he was bid and then plopped back into the cooling sand. “Dreamers need anchors too cause if you let go of bedrock you’re…gone.” Anakin watched him carefully.

“I hope you know you did just mildly insult me but I get what you’re saying.” Anakin told him, “You are a good brother.” Owen grunted but otherwise remained silent. “I guess when I return to the Senate I’ll just have to ask Tang and Dooku. They might have an idea.”

In truth, Anakin already had part of an idea. His thoughts of Padme always led him back to the startling realization that the Force was leading him elsewhere.

“Come on, Anakin.” Owen stood, “These vaporators aren’t going to fix themselves.”

“We’re not going to be staying the night,” Anakin told Owen, “Kitster has a conference to get to and I’ve got my own commission to bully into working properly. You should hear about the result of the Ryloth Conference in a couple of days. I think we’re going to have to invite a lot of ex-slaves to Tatooin and if not then at least move a bunch of the therapists off world for a short time. It’s not going to be easy for the planet to transition.”

“What’re you planning on doing to their Senator? Seems to me like he’s making everything worse there. I’ve heard from the twi’lek dancers we’ve run through the farm that he is what makes the system worse. Man that can brand a toddlers lekku doesn’t deserve anything.”

“The contract stipulates that Ryloth is going to be keeping its current Senator.” Anakin told him loftily, deliberately looking away from his step-brother. “Provided he obeys the laws of the Confederacy.” Owen took a moment to digest Anakin’s report and burst into laughter.

“I’ll just bet you’re dying to jump down his throat!”

“Slavery might be outlawed in the Republic but it’s not like the Emperor is doing anything about. Ryloth is still a pit of crime and inequity.”

“Good, run the vermin out of town.” Owen agreed, “and if you can.” He paused. Discomfort was visible. Owen was a man of pride but not too proud to ask for the help when he needed it. “If you can then could you pick up…one of those nice scarves for Beru. Just,” he looked away, “she wants
something pretty and I sure can’t make it. She doesn’t say anything but I can tell. Beru’s a practical woman, smart, and a real pragmatist. Could you get her something? I can pay you but I just need someone who knows her to pick, whatever it is out.”

“When I go to Ryloth next I’ll pick up something for Beru.” Anakin promised, marveling at the stoic man. He knew Owen could embroider and sew, the man had maid Beru’s wedding veil after all, but he had a limited skill. “Come on, let’s go. The suns are getting low.”

“Right.” Owen brushed off his moment of discomfort and they were off.

Later that evening, when the suns had gone down and the farm had been left to the long married couple and the two politicians were starting up their ship Kitster started giggling.

“What?” Anakin flipped his braid out of the way as the engine whined. “What’s funny?”

“Beru asked me to pick up something nice for Owen when I’m on Ryloth.” Kitster buried his face in his hands, giggling and ignoring his co-pilot duties. “They are so.... I am so happy they are so…”

“Owen asked me to picked up something for Beru.” Anakin felt laughter bubble up.

“Life day isn’t for months.” Kitster chuckled, “I’m so glad that after 13 years they’re still doing things like this. Anakin busied himself with piloting and sternly reminded himself that it would not due to be jealous of his step-brother. He was proud of Owen and Beru.

#$#$3

Padme did not immediately take Hera up on her offer to move to one of the farms. She stayed near bedrock, gathering information and learning how the planet operated. She spoke to dozens of political prisoners and former bounty hunters until she discovered just who was the boss of the planet.

A weequay pirate. Former member of Hondo Ohnaka’s crew and occasional death stick smoker. He was lanky, even by weequay standards. Tall, with long braids and narrow eyes. He couldn’t have been over a century old. As smart as he was and as much as he controlled he’d probably known about Padme’s search for him from the first day.

“You are looking for me?” The weequay and all his cohorts had been respectful of her desire to never be inside unless necessary. He was out near the little clearing that she’d made into her campground. Sitting on the wooden crate that served as her table. He looked like he’d been waiting for her to return from her fishing trip. “You have found me.”

“You found me.” Padme pointed out, and set her make-shift rod against the tree and dropped her string of fish into a bucket. “You knew I was looking for you.”

“Hmm.” His dark eyes focused briefly on the fish and then on Padme. Her shirt of pulled tight and her pants rolled up to her knees and her feet bare. She could not have looked any less like a Senator or Queen. “I did not know you could fish.”

“I was raised on Naboo. Fish is a staple there and everyone is taught how to fish. It’s not too hard once you learn. You must have come here for a reason, what’s got your attention?”

“In a few days, the Jedi will relinquish control of Ryloth to the Confederacy.” The alien watched through lidded eyes as Padme set about tidying her camp up and preparing her pilfered tools to gut and clean the fish. “I have heard through a reasonable source that Aleco Syndulla, who stands to take the seat of Senator, demands that her daughter and niece be returned to her. She demands that any
Ryloth political prisoners that Taa had made would be returned home. So, Hera could go home soon."

“And?” When Padme was younger she’d cried when she killed a fish before. Now, she only watched the miserably flopping thing before dispassionately spearing its brain with a knife.

“I heard even the slightest rumors that…Naboo will soon be joining the Confederacy.” The human paused. “There are some mechanisms in play that will remove it from the Republic. If this is the case then you may be going back to Naboo.”

“They would never let me go home.” Padme summarily shoved the weequay off her table and flopped the first fish down. “Ever.”

“Hmmm, why is that?” He didn’t seem put out by finding himself faceplanting into the dirt. Jumping back to his feet and grinning at the human. “Why didn’t you say something?”

“They’ve committed a crime against myself and Anakin. One that…” she paused, “What do you want?”

“You’ve been looking for me. Why?”

“I want to know if there is a way for me to get off here.” She slammed her cleaver into the neck.

“This place is a safe place. There is no censure here. We make our own paper, we write and sing and dance to our own selves content. No one will tell us to be quiet.”

“And what good does that do anyone? An island of peace and security? You can write all the books and philosophy pieces you want but it doesn’t do any good for the galaxy! There is a whole Republic out there that’s being brainwashed every time the Jedi shut something else down! The whole planet is safe from censure but what about the people that aren’t?”

“What about them? I do not care about them.”

“Why not. Why not care about the millions of people that are caught up in this who didn’t ask to be. The people who are losing their freedoms every single day so some people can be comfortable.”

“If they cared that much about their freedoms they couldn’t have done something about it a while ago. They don’t care about speaking without consequence. Or doing anything. They cared about their pocketbooks and their purses and never about anything else. The Core does not deserve your pity or your help. Let them wallow in the injustice inflicted upon them by themselves. They wanted war, they got war. They wanted money, they sure got money. The galaxy splintered when your husband murdered the Chancellor and then he went on to rescue and save those that the pathetic Republic ignored and marginalized for centuries.” The weequay sucked in a shallow breath, his face inscrutable, “Let them suffer. I can get you off this planet and into jedi free territory. If that is what you want.”

She has listened to the weequay crime boss carefully and realized that what he said was probably the common sentiment across the Confederate planets. Very slowly she nodded. “I have long since realized the crimes of the Republic and of my own Senate but now… The Jedi have committed a highly personal crime against me. I don’t care for the Republic.” She wouldn’t cast gungan pearls before trampling rancors feet. She wouldn’t try and rebuild a wall that didn’t want to be created or to heal a person deliberately making themselves sick. It was stupid and personally unfair if she tried to help the same government that had abandoned her. “I served it for years for nothing. My hard work undone by the greed and the selfishness and the war profiteering. But,” Padme tightened her grip on
her knife, “I will not allow the Jedi to control it. I want every iota of power they have ripped clean away. I never want a mother to watch her children taken from her to become child soldiers. I want to depose the Jedi.”

“Ah, one last bit of aid to an undeserving galaxy.” He nodded, “Surely, Amidala, if the Old Republic had had one tenth of your integrity and selflessness then I am sure the galaxy we live in would be a much different place.” The crime boss gave a bow. “Do you know how you wish to depose the Jedi? If not there are some excellent political analysts that we could employ for this task.” The former queen remained silent, working her fish until she had a good number of fillets all set aside on a cast iron skillet. He seemed content to wait, picking long blades of grass that grew, untended, beneath her hammock and weaving them into a small hat. The rhythm of cooking filled the silence. Padme worked her way through the rest of the fish. Eventually storing the other fillets in a cryo-freeze box and cleaning up her table.

Only when her food was ready did she speak again. “If Naboo intends to leave the Republic then we need to start working and discrediting the Republic before then. Showing that it’s former greatest supporter is no longer backing them would cast a pallor of doubt over the Jedi Empire.”

“Oh, this is true. So you would need to get out a message within… the next day. Three or four in the next week because the Ryloth Conference is only five days away. I do not know the specifics but I am sure that the Aquisition General will conquer again.”

“Who?”

“Tang, that is one of her nicknames.”

“Who is Tang?”

“Eh… you do not know who the High General is?” The alien forwent a fork and instead picked at his meal with his fingers.

“House arrest. Once I was arrested I didn’t get any outside information.” She shuddered. “I knew that Tang was High General but intelligence had always told me Tang was an alien of sorts.”

“Oh, no. General Tang is a human woman, younger than her counterpart, Skywalker. The reason, I think, people thought she was an alien was because she was so young during the war. Plus apparently she needed a lot of mobile medical equipment from damage from the war she fought on her own planet.”

“I’ve been so out of touch with the galaxy. It’s a wonder that Obi Wan even bothered to come to ask me if I knew anything on.” She stopped with a jerk and turned with wide eyes to the weequay. “Why did he come?”

“Why did he ask about Cham Syndulla?”

“You don’t happen to think that the Jedi are planning on disrupting the Ryloth Conference, do you? I mean… this is. That would be a huge breach!”

“What did he ask for specifically?”

“Anything I remembered about Cham. Anything at all but then the Republic intelligence had always been spotty, at best. I could never figure out why. But,” she paced in a circle, abandoning her dinner plate. “Why?”

“They have no intentions of giving Ryloth to the Confederacy!” The weequay dropped his own
fillet. It plopped back into its juices with a wet thump. “Shavit! That’s why they wanted Cham’s information! ‘Cept you came down and ran them off!”

“But why would they not secede Ryloth? They’ve have to justify it or at least have the soldiers and ships to back them up.”

“Dooku and Skywalker are going to be there! If this is an opening salvo into a new war then they’d’ve gotten rid of the opposition leaders in a single day or so.” The political prisoner and the former pirate stopped moving simultaneously.

“But I can’t believe this! This is foolish, even for Obi Wan. Why come here. What information could I have given him?”

“Probably where the true ancestral home of the Syndulla’s is. They don’t tell people about it, none of the big houses do. If they know where he’s going to go to ground, then they’ll be able to flush him out. They’ll be able to stop him from doing anything to upset their plans.”

“I know where the Syndulla home is.” Padme froze and swallowed down the sudden spike in terror. “Hera! Hera knows. She’ll.” They both sprinted from the camp toward Bedrock. Rock and dust flung themselves about in a hazy dust cloud as Padme and Hodo made for the very secret and very illegal planetary communication device. They made quite a pair, running through town and knocking over chairs of the bar as they slid into the room.

“Lo! Get me a line of the Plo Farm! I need Hera Syndulla and her cousin Numa and anyone who knows how to find the ancestral Syndulla home to be hidden! Take them out of the canyon and get them lost. Now! Two decoy teams need to be deployed too, scramble the chip signals and copy it!” Hodo collapsed against the bar, gasping as Padme came to a crashing halt against a barrel of fermenting honey.

“We need to get news out. They have to know the conference is a trap!”

Lo was already gone, lifting up the trapdoor beneath the taps and vanishing into the entirely too complex tunnel system. He was shouting at the prisoners milling around.

“Were we on time?” Padme gasped, nearly collapsing into a heap. She hadn’t had to run in so many years it was painful now. “How soon can we know?”

“A minute if we were late.” Hodo grunted, helping himself to one of the beer taps with a frown. “Twenty minutes for the teams to be set up and bugged out.”

“Will the canyon hide them?” Padme demanded.

“The canyon interferes with tracking signals and there is a network of a million different tunnels that we’ve explored and bobby trapped that we can hide them in.”

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“HERA! HERA! NUMA!” Frantic screaming and shrieking yanked the two teenage twi’leks from their current chore of pitching hay into the different stalls.

“What is it?” Hera shrugged at Numa’s question and jerked back when Hopper sprinted into the barn. He was wearing his repainted armguards and boots and carried a heavy pack.

“Girls! Pack your things. You need to bug out. Now! You’re both in danger.” There were two abandoned pitchforks in seconds as they were dropped and the cousins sprinted past the barn and
into the yard. Short green blades waved under the soft breeze, fluttering the curtains of the distant house too.

Hopper, Hera, and Numa froze as the distinct whine of a space worthy craft. “Too late!” He shouted and seized them by their shoulders. “Follow me, stay low. Do not let them see you!” The whine got louder as Hopper lead the girls past the barn and into the nearby pasture toward the woods at a dead run. A distant ship came into view over the horizon; an ugly gray mark in the otherwise clear skies. Neither of them had time to think or even fear what was coming. They focused on not tripping over animal droppings, uneven ground, and stick and rocks when they crashed into the tree line. “No time to rest. Hurry!” A bovine lowed at them and huffed when Hera didn’t move fast enough to avoid bouncing into its meaty flank.

“Sorry,” She yelped and used the momentum to shove herself in the direction of the fading footsteps. A moment she crashed into a small steam and came out the other side soaking wet.

“Come on, Hera.” Hopper called. “There isn’t much time!”

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“Are you sure that Hera Syndulla is even here?” Wolffe heard the words, uttered by a young human voice. Probably from someone both too sure of himself and at the same time suffering a few crippling insecurities about decision making. He didn’t recognize the voice, he didn’t really need to. Once the boy and the woman rounded the corner of the house and marched up the porch steps he identified them both.

“I am sure she is, Padawan.” Depa Billaba told her padawan. “Commander Wolffe, a pleasure.” Wolffe had only ever seen the other Jedi in passing. She looked older, with a few streaks of gray and wrinkles but overall as dangerous as ever. Her padawan, Caleb Dume, a stocky fellow only a few shades lighter than his master was standing awkwardly to the side. He fiddled with his hands as if he couldn’t figure out where to put them.

“If you’ve landed your ugly death trap in any of my gardens you’re going to be eating your kyber crystal.” He told the pair mildly.

“Uh.” Depa looked serenely on but Caleb shrugged, “I don’t think so. I’m pretty sure we landed in a field.”

“Great.” Wolffe heaved himself up from his work of snapping peas and pulled his hat on. “Probably scared the hell out of the animals too. Thanks for that. I felt like spending the night rounding up the herd because the engine backwash melted our fences.” He brushed past the Jedi, shouting. “DAGS! PILLER!”

“What?” And irritated shout echoed back from the vicinity of the second barn. A round monstrosity that had been painted a bioluminescent pink that glowed like a beacon every night.

“WHAT?”

“CHECK THE SOUTH FENCE!” Wolffe shouted. “GOT SOME HYPERSPACE IDIOTS UP HERE!”

“TELL THEM TO FRAKK OFF!”

“IN A SEC!” Wolffe pulled hands down from around his mouth and relayed the message. “Frakk off.”
“No.” Depa smiled faintly and shook her head. Caleb looked fascinated by the whole proceedings.

“Alright.” He shrugged. “Then what the kriff do you want?”

“We are here to speak to Hera Syndulla.” Billaba told him. “She lives here, does she not”

“Sometimes.” Wolffe shrugged but lead the two Jedi down the porch and toward another barn whose red walls rose in the far distance. He wasn’t much in the mood to be dealing with the Jedi and figured that his father should really be the one to handle them. He waved at any brothers he saw on the way, pausing to help a few push a wagon out of a puddle of mud. All the while Depa followed patiently.

“It is certainly a handsome farm you and your siblings have built.” She tried but Wolffe waved her off.

“Had to get something out of the whole mess. Figured living well’s the best revenge on your kind since no one really wanted the army to have a brain of its own. It is a nice farm, thanks for noticing.”

“Who are we going to talk to?” Caleb finally ventured after more silence. “Does it seem like.”

“Shut up.” Wolffe ordered and they slipped into the barns quiet, musty interior. Hay and dust rose into the air as the three slipped through the ajar door. Only a few dim lights were on, casting kneeling figure into obscure shadows. Depa Billaba gasped audibly the moment she recognized the Force signature and bowed deeply when Plo Koon stood. Caleb scrambled to follow her lead but Wolffe waved.

“Depa! Caleb!” The Kel-dor greeted warmly, “You both look well. Goodness, Caleb, you’ve grown so tall.”

“Master Plo.” Caleb’s blush was visible even in the dim light when the older being easily ruffled his hair. “I thought you had become a hermit.”

“No, dear boy. I did as the Force bid me.” He nodded to Wolffe who still hadn’t uncrossed his arms or pushed off from his lean against the hay bale. “I followed my sons.”

“Sons?” Depa didn’t seem surprised but Caleb gaped. “But.”

“Did you have something you wanted to discuss?” Plo asked, easily interrupting the boy before he could make a fool of himself. “I have a very unhappy nerf that has had a very long labor. She is nearing the end of it, would like to assist me, young one?”

“I…” Caleb looked for assistance from his master who only gazed on serenely. “Alright. I’ll help you.”

“Excellent.” Wolffe covered a laugh when Caleb was easily pushed into the stall where the nerf was lowing miserable. “Now, this is going to be unpleasant.” Plo said and Depa drifted closer to the clone.

“A hermit?” Wolffe asked, chewing idly on a sliver of hay. “That’s what Jedi do to hide from the galaxy?”

“No one knew where Master Plo went. He left one day and there was never any information about his location.”

“He didn’t want to be found. Thought he’d have a nice retirement but apparently not.”
“You told me Hera only lives on the farm sometimes. Where else would she live? Where else would she be safe.”

“Literally anywhere. This place is for political prisoners and whatnot. We’re criminals but we’ve got standards and customs. She could be anywhere. The Xiang Sea has a big fishing town, she likes to go swimming.”

“I found it.” They paused when Caleb shrieked and the nerf began to grunt rhythmically. “Odd that the warden would not allow us to activate her tracking chip.”

“That’s for emergencies only. Not for whenever you get your robes in a twist.” Wolfe spat out his bit of hay as the grunting increased in frequency. The low tones of his father’s voice echoed over the animal’s desperate cries and Caleb’s own disgust. “If you want to find her you need to do it the old-fashioned way.”

“I am.” Depa’s dark eyes zeroed in on him. “What are you hiding, I wonder.”

“Lots of things.” Wolfe replied evenly, “You should probably go help your boy, he sounds like he’s about to faint.”

“Caleb had done battle many times. If he cannot handle one animal giving birth then I will despair of him.”

“Except you won’t despair of him. You’ll just get rid of him because despair is too close to an emotion for you to be safe from your own Council.” Dark lips thinned in a frown and Wolfe smirked. Plo shouted his congratulations as a sickening wet thump echoed through the room followed shortly by a tiny mewl.

“How does she look, Pops?”

“Healthy as we could ask for, my son.” Plo called and emerged from the stall with a happy air. Caleb came on his heels, a bit green around the gills. “She will be a proud nerf as well. Now, I believe you two had some questions for me?”

“Yes,” Depa kept her distance as Plo went to the rain barrel and began to wash various bodily fluids off him. “The matter of Hera Syndulla, we need to speak with her.”

“I have no idea where Hera Syndulla is.” Plo told her, tossing the words over his shoulders. “But she cannot leave this planet. Would you like to join us for dinner?”

“Don’t take offense to this,” Wolfe grunted, “But I don’t want you to come to dinner. I’d rather not waste food on you.”

“Ouch.” Caleb sniggered, “We don’t bite.”

“I do.” Wolfe growled.

“I would like to stay.” Depa announced, pulling her padawan close to her side. “Caleb will search for our quarry.”

“Yes, Master.” Wolfe felt his heart sink, knowing what was coming next.

“I’ll take him around, don’t want the kid to be eaten or something.” He couldn’t let the padawan run around without supervision. That would be begging for trouble. A lot of it. He might actually hunt down Hera without any sort of interference.
“Son,” Plo sighed and Wolff bristled at the nearly uneasy tone. “Please be careful.”

“Right.” He grunted his annoyance and stomped from the barn and headed back toward the house. By this time the other boys would have emptied out Hera and Numa’s living space and removed any trace of them living there for extended periods of time. Rocky and Meller would have moved in, claiming the beds and impressive closet space. If Hopper didn’t have the girls off the farm by now it was already too late.

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“You realize.” Hodo said when Padme had regained her breath and quaffed a drink. “That this means that they’re going to be looking for you too. You need to get out of town too. They’ll head here first looking for Hera.”

“Where do I go?”

“The sea. Take a barge down the river and take a fishing trawler out of the bay. They are impossible to track once out at sea.”

“I haven’t been out to sea in a long time.” Padme said. “But how do I get to the river? I’ve only seen the small creeks.”

“Lolo will take you. Go to the pharmacy and he’ll get you to the river. We’ll pack your things so don’t worry about them. You need to go now. Lolo! Ya hear that!”

“Yes!”

“Make sure she gets on a trawler with holoNet capabilities! We need at least two political analysts out there with her. We still want her words to get out.” Hodo waved Padme off as she made her way out of the bar and into the dusty street.

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“So what are you hiding from your master?” The ride from the farm to Bedrock was a long one. Caleb Dume didn’t seem to know how to start a conversation and Wolff was keener on talking. Except that something about the boy was bugging him. He could see secrets and lies having lived one for the first 13 or so years of his life.

“What?” Caleb jerked the joystick, sending the ship dirt ward at high speeds. He corrected a second later, blushing. “I’m not. What are you talking about? There’s nothing I’m hiding.”

“Geez, can’t even fake innocence. What’s gotten into these kids? Can’t lie anymore. When I dealt with padawans they could lie as easily as breathe.”

“I’m not lying to my master.” Caleb said, sounding more like he was trying to convince himself than Wolff. “Anyway, what’s with Master Plo being your father? I don’t get it.”

“Yeah, you don’t have to.”

“But…what’s.”

“Tell ya what.” Wolff glared, “You tell me what you’re hiding from your master and I’ll tell you about Pops. Deal?”

“I…you can’t tell anyone.” Caleb said firmly. “No one. Not even Master Plo.”
“I’m not a babbler, kid, get going.” The boy nodded a bit and twisted his grip around the ship control. For a second he looked uncertain, afraid even before opening his mouth.

“I can’t… really use the force anymore.” Wolffe’s eyebrows rose but he remained quiet. “I can… to a certain degree. It’s still there but instead of being connected or a part of it like I’m supposed to I just feel sidelined. It started about the time that Master Skywalker murdered the chancellor, about eight months later I… I was. I just felt cut off.”

“So you’re hiding that fact that you can’t really use the Force from your Jedi master. How are you managing that, by the way?”

“Doesn’t matter.” Caleb grumbled.

“Well, if you can still use can you still listen to it?”

“What?”

“Listen to the Force. Pops is always going on about it. Listen to the Force and do what it says. He followed it here after experiencing kinda the same thing.”

“But he’s a farmer! He’s up to his elbows in shav and mud!”

“So what?”

“I’m not going to go to the Agricorps! I won’t.”

“There’s nothing bad about farming. We keep this whole planet fed. Well, us and the other farms. We take care of people, giving them what they really need.”

“But where would it lead me?” Caleb asked, green eyes flicking over to Wolffe. “If Master Plo came here to farm then.”

“Shut up your pride for one second.” Wolffe growled at the boy, his eye narrowing. “If you’re listening to the Force then it’s going to take you where you’re needed. There’s no shame in being a farmer. If you don’t cut your whining I’m gonna tell pops and you can explain to him why you think that his following the Force is… pathetic or bad or whatever. I’d love to see how you manage that.”

“It’s not that I think Master Plo’s newest… hobby or whatever is bad but he was lead here by the Force and I’m worried the Force will take me somewhere.”

“Kid, seeing the result of doing your Jedi duty scares you. I get that.” Wolffe said, “But look if you’re so stuck up then you don’t want to do what you really need to then shut up already. I get it.”

“I’m not afraid.” Caleb retorted, “I’m just… cautious.”

“Sure, we’re approaching Bedrock. So keep your eyes peeled. Don’t land near the town, there’s a meadow that the search and rescue ships use when they have to land.”

“Alright.” Caleb did as he was bid. When they had landed and made their way down to the town he kept his eyes open and roving. “This is a pretty neat place. How come everything is so… rustic?”

“Cause everything in it was built by us. Well, by the prisoners. This is the oldest town.

“So… what about tools and stuff? What about all the?”

“Nothing. The first people dropped here were supposed to die. Apparently most of them were too
stubborn. So they built of this place. Most of it is outdate and kinda weak after having spent a life surrounded by high tech military gear and some of the fastest ships in the galaxy. It’s nice though, we’ve got our lives to ourselves.”

“Sure seems nice.” Caleb pulled his oversized cloak closer to himself. “So where do we start?”

“What do you think I should pack, Master? My formal robes? What about my extra padawan beads just in case one breaks? Oh, do you think I should take a present for the other diplomats. I heard its common to take presents to new people. What about taking my extra tools?”

“Luke, you barely know how to use those tools. Put them back.”

“But I could learn and what if the shuttle crashes and we have to survive off the land and make do with what we brought in our bags. We’ll want some tools then.”

“Luke, this is a very simple trip to Ryloth. There will be no crashing and surviving off the land.” Obi Wan pinched the bridge of his nose. “We’ll be fine, this is routine as routine can get. Put my multitool down please.”


“What’s gotten into you?” Obi Wan placed his own folded up robes in his bag. “You seem a little more high strung than usual.”

“I guess I’m just jumpy, Master.” Luke said. He picked up a worn out stuffed bantha and shoved it into his own bag. The stuffed animals watched Luke with thrice repaired button eyes as the young Jedi began to count out his socks. “I’ve never been to Ryloth. I’ve always wanted to see it too. It’s going to be so cool, plus, I finally get to meet some real Separatists.” Luke beamed up at a confused Obi Wan who was in the middle of pulling down his own set of dress robes. “Hmm, I think you’re collar is caught on something. Don’t pull, you might rip it.”

“Oh, thank you, Luke.” Obi Wan disappeared into the closet as he untangled his robes. As he did so his movement jostled a bundle of white fabric from a side shelf that flopped down to land in Luke’s outstretched arm.

“Uh.” Luke blinked. It was the softest thing he’d ever felt. It ran over his hands like water, cool and gentle. The thing was the purest shade of white he’d ever seen. A blanket that must have been for someone a lot younger but still big enough for Luke to wrap around his shoulders. Entranced by the fabric Luke didn’t see his master turn around. He didn’t see the horrified expression nor did he hear the gasp of horror that followed second later.

“Where did you get that?” Obi Wan snapped, yanking the white blanket from his hands and pulling back. “Where, Luke?”

“I just found it! It fell off the shelve when you bumped into it!” Luke cried, scrambling back a few feet himself. “I’m sorry. I just thought it shouldn’t get dirty! It’s so white and pretty! Honest! I just found it!”

“Oh, well.” Obi Wan stopped and then looked sheepish. “It’s just a baby blanket.”

“Okay.” Luke didn’t venture any close until Obi Wan sighed deeply and then dropped back onto his bed.
“It was yours. When we brought you to the temple.” Luke watched his master run the fabric through his hands and tease a corner. “You were such a small baby. I don’t think you stopped crying for… weeks really.”

“I didn’t cry!”

“You did, you were a fussy baby and this blanket was sometimes the only thing that could keep you calm. I don’t know why I kept it.” Obi Wan snorted. “I.”

“It’s very soft.”

“Yes, you might notice your robes are made with different materials than the others.” Luke blinked. “We noticed at that certain things made you cry. Like fabrics and scents and there’s a reason why I only drink Corellian tea when you’re gone. And why I keep the lights a little low.” Luke blushed heavily. “There was once a Jedi who suffered from the same problem but on a much larger scale. We learned our lesson after him.”

“Oh,” Luke paused and then held out his hands. “Can I hold it again?”

“Sure,” Obi Wan hesitated but set the blanket into his hands and smiled when Luke began to admire it.

“Can I keep it? You did say it was mine.”

“I did.” The man sighed and nodded. “Just don’t get it dirty please. Naboo cotton is a nightmare to clean.”


“What are you going to do with it?”

“I don’t know! I’m sure I’ll figure out something though!” Luke bounced back over to his bag and wrapped the worn out old bantha in the white fabric. Once the thing was swaddled he set the whole thing back into his bag and began to force it close. “Oh look, your holocron fell!” Luke pointed to a spot near Obi Wan’s foot. “You’re dropping everything today, Master.”

“Yes, so it seems.” Obi Wan smiled faintly at the boy and retrieved his holocron with an easy pull of the Force. The secrets of Revan’s Cure buzzed under his hand.

“Don’t worry, master!” Luke assured him, “I have a feeling that the Ryloth Conference is going to be our most interesting mission yet!” Master Kenobi sighed as Luke lugged his bag out of the room and toward the hanger where the ship was waiting. He could only agree silently as his Padwan ran from view.

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Padme watched the strange device light up in the relative darkness of early dusk. Her company aboard the fishing trawler was a large rodian with a heavy rasp. He typed quickly though, composing the warning for the Confederacy as the signal receiver atop of the mast began to flicker red and blue.

“Is it ready?” She asked, clinging to the mast when the ship gave another nauseating roll.

“Just about, just about.”

“Ugh.” Four or five more days she was going to be on the ship. Stuck until the conference was over.
and/or the Jedi had left the planet. She hoped that the others could give the Jedi a proper runaround and stall them until the conference was over. Whatever happened it was no doubt going to be an interesting conference.

“It’s up and away.” The rodian said, snapping his device shut. “How do you feel about writing up a preachy speech?”

“I’m up to it.” Padme nodded firmly. “Let’s get started.”
Dilje was stepping into the usual Think Tank. The early afternoon was the best time to go to the library on days she didn’t have classes. They were the best time to go anywhere. Shop attendants usually were in good moods in the early afternoon. Food in stalls was the freshest, everything about the planet looked neater in early afternoon sunlight.

Even early afternoon sunlight couldn’t make Han look any better.

“Han?” The twi’lek was slumped in his seat, eyes flicking between the datapad on the table and the window. “Han?”

“Hmm.” He hummed at her but didn’t move.

“What’s happened? What went wrong? Are you alright? No one found your work, did they?”

“No.” Her friend paused and finally looked her in the eye. She felt her heart stop at the despair she saw lodged there. “They came for him.”

“Who?” She breathed. “Who came for who?”

“The Jedi,” his voice shuttered to a halt, “my brother. He’s been taken. Tested last night, the snatcher came this morning.”

“I didn’t…which one?”

“Mipp, they…he isn’t even registered. He was a home birth. Mom didn’t tell anyone about him. Dad…he was taken this morning too on conspiracy charges.”

“What about Tel, where is he?”

“Mom hid him down the street. Drugged heavily. Didn’t get taken or tested. The watcher took him to the hospital while…they took him from the front room to get tested! Right when Mom was in the house!” Han didn’t look like he knew what to feel. His eyes were blank, expression empty but his voice was trembling with heavy emotion.

“What about the police? Watchers are supposed to keep an eye out for unnoticed force sensitives. Not take them from their houses. Can’t they stop this?” Even asking this question she knew what it was going to be.

“They told us…because we were concealing him that it didn’t matter and that we should be lucky that we all weren’t being arrested.” Han buried his head in his hands.

“Where is Tel now? Does he need help?”

“We sent him away. We’ll. Dilje, I came to tell you because I’m leaving. We all are. I won’t tell you the details but you need to keep your head down and stick to your usual routine. Don’t rock the boat. All of our friends are going to be investigated when we leave.”

“Han! What am I supposed to do? I was planning on going to that interview that the Emperor’s hosting! That’s a selfish thing to say. I’m sorry. I…I won’t go. I’ll just. Shit, what do you need me to do?”

“Keep quiet.” Han said and he looked up at her, tears were dripping down his cheeks. “I’m sorry, Dilje. I’m so sorry. I can’t…”

“Don’t apologize to me.” She whispered, sitting next to him and yanking him into a hug. “Never, you have done anything wrong. I’ll do what I can to help. Just ask.”
“I can’t ask anything,” Han sobbed into her shoulder and he lost ever shred of coherency even as he clung tightly to his friend. His apologies blurred into a mindless, tearful babble.

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Jedi transport ships sure had gotten an update. Somehow becoming more and more luxurious as time went on. Less about functionality and more about comfort. It wasn’t a change that Obi Wan really minded. Now he didn’t have to share a room with his padawan. Luke got bumped down to the padawan room and Obi Wan got the room to himself. Yoda and the other council members got nice rooms too and the rest of the ships staff were off in the dorsal section. It was also nice that there was a pretty sizable on-board bar that Obi Wan chose to abuse for a moment.

“What’s on your mind, Kenobi?” Windu asked, coming up to him and eyeing the tumbler in his hand. “Little strong for this early?”

“Maybe.”

“I can make you earn that drink,” Mace told him.


“I thought I might look over the ship first so.”

“Now, Luke.” He ordered and the blond glumly slinked out of the room. “You were saying?” Windu raised an eyebrow and he nodded.

“Come with me.” Obi Wan took his glass and the decanter to the conference room where Yoda and Luminara waited. Windu moved to the table and pressed a button on the holo projector. “We got intel on this a few hours ago. Released onto the public HoloNet. We’re scrubbing it from the Net but it’s already too late. It speaks of an unnerving potential Separatist plot.”

“What happened?” An image of a globe surrounded by three loops of chain appeared. Obi Wan felt his heart seize up as the sonorous voice of Padme Amidala echoed out.

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“Citizens of the galaxy.” Anakin sucked a short breath, clutching unconsciously harder at Kitster’s hand. Kitster took his grip and squeezed back. The other assembled officers and Tang all leaned closer. The quiet was nearly suffocating. Dooku remained silent. “For so many the only living memory of this galaxy is one at war. It is a galaxy in fear. It has been entire life-times of the horrors of war. Entire generations lost to the fighting of the Clone Wars. Since the death of Palpatine a new kind of horror has taken rise within the Republic. Laws passed the refuse civil liberties. The right to assemble, to speak freely, to pursue happiness as people see fit. These are becoming less and less of indelible rights and more and more privileges for the few. The nightmare of the Republic is worsening with every day. Children taken. Stolen! From their parents to serve Emperor Yoda and the Jedi Order against their wishes and those of their parents. Innovators jailed every day for the simple skill to create. Poets, writers, artists, speakers, all mass incarcerated under the accusation of causing civil unrest. Schools now becoming little more than indoctrination instead of education, fitting history to fit them as they please. The is not the Republic I served! This is not the Republic I loved! This is not what we were meant to be. We were not created by our Gods to fit into little boxes and to become as people wanted us to be. We are to love and to hate and laugh and to cry and to exist as nothing else except ourselves. This is not understood by the ruling power! This is not understood by the Emperor! Citizens, we have been betrayed! We have been abused and used by the
Emperor. I charge him now to step down. I charge Grandmaster Yoda to return the power of the
government to the people. I charge him to disband the Jedi Order!

The abrupt silence after the speech ended only lasted for a second. Anakin slammed his fists onto the
table, roaring in excitement. Tang leapt from her chair, seized him around the middle and hoisted him
into the air. The entire room burst into excited shouting and yelling. Anakin laughed giddily as he
was whirled around in a circle and dropped back onto the floor.

“YES! YES! THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT I WANTED TO HAPPEN! THIS IS PERFECTION!”
Tang jumped around in a circle of excitement. “YES!”
The shouting reached a crescendo and Dooku gave a slight smile. When the noise settled down to a
tolerable decibel he waved for Tang to come closer. “Well done, Tang. What next?”

“The conference is in five days.” She said, shifting on the balls of her feet as Anakin began to
coordinate her men into a comprehensive organization again. “I move the fleet to Ryloth, we do
some serious intimidation and then we get Naboo and Ryloth!”

“That simple?”

“There is obviously more nuance than that but that is the gist of it!” Tang beamed and seemed to
squirm from excitement. “Alright, I’m going to coordinate with our operatives on world and see
what’s going on.”

The second the speech ended Obi Wan blinked twice and slugged back the entire tumbler of alcohol.
His head went numb and his eyes darkened.

“What are we doing to mitigate this?” He demanded, the threats Padme had levelled a few weeks
ago coming to the surface with furious vengeance.

“Master Billaba and her padwan are on planet. She reports that she has not located Padme Amidala
nor has her padwan managed to find Hera Syndulla.”

“If we don’t find one of them then Ryloth will go back to being and absolute mess once Cham takes
up arms again. We have to find him.”

“Apparently, she has also located Plo Koon.” Windu said. Obi Wan poured himself another glass.
“He claims to have followed the will of the Force. He farms now, with the old members of the
Wolfpack. Apparently adopting them.”

“Master Plo was always attached to his men.” The ginger sighed, bringing the cold glass to his
forehead. “Always so very attached. How have they not found Hera Syndulla?”

“That wasn’t explained.” Windu said and the holo desk shut off with a click. Yoda didn’t move from
his mediation pose. “We’re in a tight fit here. Our plan hinges no finding exactly where Cham
Syndulla’s ancestral home. If he is allowed to resume his rebel activities any control of the planet
would be chaos.”

“I know. I know. We just need to find one of them.” He said, “I have full confidence in Master
Billaba and her padawan. Caleb Dume is a very capable young man.”

“Agree, I do.” Yoda finally spoke as Obi Wan took another gulp of amber liquid. “Another concern,
I have. Clouded, the Force has begun. Quiet and reluctant, it is.”
“I haven’t had trouble.” Obi Wan said and he gave the Force the equivalent of a cursory glance.

“With all due respect, Master Yoda. We have some bigger problems right now. Namely, Padme Amidala has the capabilities to get an unsanctioned transmission off the planet. This either speaks of treachery on the part of the warden or that the prisoners have a good amount of illegal technology.”

“The warden is not a traitor.” Obi Wan said, “I have met the man. He is…he does not possess a strong personality nor the conviction needed to be a traitor. He may be…incompetent but not a traitor. I believe the blame would lay with the prisoners. There are a number of scientists and the like who would rid up a transmission device to reach hyperspace.”

“How about shutting down the transmitter or the satellites? Do we know where those are?” Mace shook his head.

“Not even an inkling. All of them are cloaked in some way or another. We’d have to send an investigative team to 13 to figure out where they are. Short of shutting down the HoloNet we have no way of stopping any of the transmissions. I have technicians scrambling to shut down anything that comes out of the planet.”

“Speaks of further treason, it does.” Said Yoda, his green ears twitched a bit and he nodded to Obi Wan. “Contact with Separatists, Amidala may have had. Before or after her imprisonment, the question is.”

“After,” Windu said, “Her house arrest limited her interactions with people to only the Jedi. She hasn’t spoken to her handmaidens, any of her staff, or her family since the arrest.”

“She has.” The ginger knight took a gulp of liquid courage. “When I spoke to her she levelled a few threats at me and the Republic. Ones I had not given any sort of authority until today. If she still holds to a grudge she could be very dangerous.”

“I would give her less of credence than her husband.”

“We have plans to capture Anakin but we don’t have any contingency plans for Padme Amidala. Short of execution and isolation there isn’t a way to deal with her that would reflect favorably for us. We know she’s a danger to the Republic.”

“A danger she is, passion and fear and hate, she carries.” Yoda stood and waddled around the room to Obi Wan. “Hatred too. Five days still, not enough time for any proper action to be taken on her part. Time, we have. Stop her we may with a reformed Skywalker and children.” Yoda nodded and gestured for the door to open. A patiently waiting initiate was holding an enormous stack of flimsi.

“A treaty to consider, we do.”

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The victory after Padme Amidala’s speech didn’t last long for Anakin, Kitster, Tang, or Dooku. With the proclamation out in the public their plans had been put on the fast track to completion. They were set to leave for Ryloth in just an hour and Anakin was getting nervous.

“You’ll be careful, won’t you?” His blue eyes were soft with worry and he was holding his friend tightly. Kitster smiled and nodded.

“Anakin.” Dooku and Tang set themselves off into a corner, distancing themselves from the two. “I’ll be fine. I will have Dooku with me.”

“I don’t.” He sighed and his grip on Kitster’s shoulders tightened. “I know, but I’m…wary. Just
please, be careful. Don’t go anywhere alone, don’t accept anything they may offer you to eat or
drink and don’t listen to them.”

“What are you afraid of, Anakin?” Kitster asked, his own nervousness blooming into existence as
Anakin’s lined face drew even further.

“I’m afraid.” The man closed his eyes and yanked Kitster into a hug. He held him close, memorizing
his heartbeat and his scent. “That I won’t ever see you again. Promise me, Kit, that you’ll be
careful.”

“I promise.” Kitster’s emotions were dangerously close to the surface yet. “Be careful on Naboo.”
“When I get there the Light Fleet will be on Ryloth. I think the person in the most danger is you or
Tang. Please, be careful.”

“I will, Anakin.” Kitster promised again and they separated. They glanced to Tang and Dooku. Both
of them looked distinctly bland. “Tang, Count.”

“I’m taking the temporarily renamed Loman Fleet to Ryloth in a few hours.”

“Temporarily renamed?” Anakin frowned at the woman. She gave a familiar, infuriating, grin.

“I’m going to be calling it the Dark Fleet during the Conference. I am sure that this should frighten
the Jedi enough to call up the Light Fleet from Naboo.”

“Then I land on world after they have dealt with the local garrisons and politicians and sign the treaty
with the queen.” Anakin nodded.

“I bring the Loman Fleet to Naboo and take of defense and keep an eye out for any potential
attacks.”

“I simply relax and deny everything.” Dooku said cheerfully.

“And protect Kitster,” Anakin glowered.

“And protect Kitster.” Dooku agreed. “And in event of Jedi betrayal we have operatives standing
by.”

“If I didn’t know the Jedi any better I would say we were all being paranoid.” Anakin grumbled and
he reluctantly detached himself from Kitster. “Is everyone ready to leave?”

“We are.” Dooku agreed and he waved off Tang and Kitster. They departed for the waiting shuttle.
Anakin paused. “Anakin, my young friend. We will rescue Padme, she will return. I promise you.”
Anakin sighed and wrapped his arms around himself. A defensive gesture he’d abandoned a long
time ago.

“She has a target on her back since her speech. We have to trust the people of 13 to protect her and
keep her from a second arrest. Padme, she’s in great danger. She knows this and I…”

“Anakin.” Dooku set a hand on his shoulder and the blond nearly leaned into the much older human.

“I’m afraid of how she’ll react to me. How she’ll hate me and… I don’t know… there’s so much in
the air right now. Padme will hate me, I know it.”

“I understand your fears and your concern but if you distract yourself with these thoughts you won’t
be able to manage your duty. I don’t want to push them away or to tell you to ignore these feelings
but this…you will have to face when Padme is actually here. I believe you will do more harm to yourself by fretting. Whatever Padme thinks is what she thinks and I very much doubt you could ever change her mind.”

“That’s not fantastic advice.” He pointed out. “Not like usual.”

“I haven’t had time to think about an answer for this and I have never faced a situation like this before. I am an eternal bachelor.” Yan pursed his lips. “I will think of something better to say later, I promise.”

“Thank you for trying.” Anakin said, “I’m going to go to my shuttle now and I’m going to leave for Naboo. If anything happens while I’m gone just message me. Any important information comes in just message me.”

“Go, go. It is as if you don’t trust me.”

“Sometimes,” Anakin laughed and nodded to his own shuttle. “Sometime I really don’t.”

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Leia watched the other initiates and padawans with something a lot like envy. She tried to not seethe or to sulk or to hate how she could never play with them. She tried very hard not to cry. Jedi didn’t cry. Jedi didn’t have dreams. Jedi weren’t afraid of failure. Jedi didn’t fail.

She pulled her cloak closer and leaned against the wall. The game they were playing was simple. Well, for a Jedi it was simple. It was impossible for anyone else. It was impossible for Leia.

The game consisted of three different colored balls, one goal post, teams of six, and all the while balanced on a field of round poles twenty feet tall. Leia could balance well and jump between the poles with no problem. Her trouble came from gripping and controlling the balls with the Force.

The goalkeeper on the blue team waved cheerfully at her where she sat in the shade but his attention was yanked back to the game and he didn’t see her try to wave back. Leia sighed and stood up. There was over an hour left in the relaxation period and she wasn’t going to spend it all sitting against a wall because she couldn’t play with the others.

She left the Jedi section of the palace and found the closest Royal Advisor. When she asked if the King or Queen was free the woman gave her a curious frown and told Leia that she’d ask. “What is you’d like to relay to their majesties?”

“It’s not any serious business.” Leia said, “I just wanted to know if I could speak to one or more of them. Please.”

“I will relay your message, Padawan Leia.” The advisor vanished into a section of the wall and Leia scuffed her feet into the floor and began to look at the paintings of long gone kings and queens on the wall. She was halfway through the Villa dynasty when the wall opened again. To her surprise both the King and Queen appeared.

“Oh.” She gave a hasty bow. “Good afternoon.”

“Leia.” Queen Breha hurried across the hall, “Is everything alright. Neve told me you looked upset.”

“I…” Her shy glance to both of them made the royal couple blink in surprise. “I just…I wanted to ask you for advice. If you’re not too busy, I mean.”
“We would love to speak to you.” Bail said, “Did you want to go to the gardens?”

“Sure. Um.” She blushed and felt more than a little uncomfortable. “Okay.” Bail scooped up one hand and Breha took the other. She grinned broadly at them as they all moved toward the gardens where she knew they would have total privacy. “So,” they had made it beyond the palace and were wandering carelessly through the paths when Leia finally spoke. “I was just…thinking. I’m not very good at being a Jedi.” They said nothing. She kicked a rock and stuffed her hands into her pockets. “I’m not really good at anything I’m supposed to be good at. I can’t use the Force like the other kids and I’m not a very good padawan. I was just…do you think it’s possible I wasn’t meant to be the Jedi?”

“How do you mean?” Breha asked. Leia did not see the frantic expression the two passed.

“Well, Master Windu says the Force is supposed to have a plan for me. He always says it like he knows what it is but I…I think he might be wrong. If you look at my skill and Force sensitivity I’m actually lower than all the other kids here. I shouldn’t be a padawan, much less a padawan of Master Windu. I am though, and it doesn’t feel right. I just…what if he’s wrong and he doesn’t know what I’m supposed to be. He says I’m going to be one of the best Jedi ever. The best of the best, the strongest, the smartest.” Her eyes turned down to the gravel. “I think he’s just trying to make us both feel better. Him because he got such a lousy padawan and me because I’m just lousy.”

“Leia, you are a brilliant and wise young woman.” Breha set a hand on her shoulder and smiled when Leia looked up. “It is very possible the path of the Jedi is not for you. Our destinies are chosen by ourselves, we are creatures of free will. We build and create our own lives.”

“Are your instincts telling you what you ought to be?” Bail asked, feeling a deep pity for the young woman. Her expression was quiet and miserable.

“Not really…but I just don’t think I’m a good enough Jedi.”

“And.” The queen gently prompted. Leia took a deep breath and squared her shoulders.

“If I can’t be a good Jedi then…do you think I could be good at anything else? I mean, I’m really ashamed of not being able to do it but I thought it would probably be better to find something that’s not as useful or good and do that because I just…I can’t be a padawan anymore. I don’t like being lied to.”

“Leia, just because you might not be a Jedi does not make leaving it shameful nor does it mean that anything else you do would be shameful. I am not a Jedi, are you ashamed of me?”

“No! No! That’s not what I meant! I just, I was supposed to be able to do it but I can’t! I can’t. I try so hard to lift things and to meditate and to sleep without dreams but I fail every time! I…I what’s wrong with me that I can’t do it. Why can’t I be a Jedi too?” She dashed the blur of tears from her eyes, hating who vulnerable she felt and sounded. “What’s wrong with me?”

“Oh, Leia.” She didn’t have time to move or protest when Breha dropped to her knees on the gravel and snagged the distraught padawan into a tight hug. Leia folded into her embrace, burying her face into the swathes of fabric, holding onto the queen as if she’d vanish in an instant. “There is nothing wrong with you. You are a smart, kind, wise little child.”

“I was all that I’d be a better Jedi.” Leia muttered into the woman’s clothes, hiding her eyes. “I’d be able to do things I was supposed to do. I wouldn’t be thinking about leaving.” Breha’s breath hitched and she stood, picking the padawan up easily. The girl squeaked and stared at the queen.
“I can walk!”

“I know.” Breha pressed a kiss to her forehead. “But as my own mother used to tell me. Sadness is scared away with cuddles. If we are to speak of such unhappy things then we should do it where we are more comfortable.”

“I’m not…I am a Jedi padawan.” Leia told her but didn’t pull away. “I don’t need any of these things.”

“Hmmm.” Breha easily carried the girl out of the gardens and toward the summer house. “You still like hot chocolate, right?”

“Yes.” Something had to be wrong with Leia because she wasn’t trying to extract herself from the Queen. She was leaning into the embrace, reveling the warmth, soaking up the comfort, nearly drowning in the easy affection.

Bail set a heavy hand on her back and smiled when she glanced up at him. “My parents sent us a few gallons of nerf milk. I think can whip up some ice cream if you like.”

“I like ice cream.” Leia replied and she went boneless in the strong grip surrounding her. The padawan did not understand that she was feeling touch and affection starved. If she had known what it was Leia would have denied it.

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The padawan room wasn’t big and it wasn’t small. It had a bunk, a small attached refresher, and a little desk for him to work on. As soon as Luke made it into the room he tossed his back onto the desk and pulled out his stuffed nerf and the white blanket it was wrapped in.

He tucked the swaddled nerf against his chest and immediately reversed out of the room. There was a small viewport in the engine room. Removable in the case that new engine parts needed to be transported through it. The entire room could be sealed off and exposed to the vacuum of space if need be.

Luke loved the engine rooms on these ships. They were deserted, quiet, and it gave him a chance to watch the stars go by. Technically he wasn’t allowed to watch lift off or the jump into hyperspace. He wasn’t supposed to be anywhere except in his room until his master came for him. He already broke the rules on an often-enough basis that he didn’t feel guilty about sneaking down to the engine room to sneak a peek.

Courscant was a bright ugly ball of smog, enormous ships, and star scrapers. Watching it shrink into the distance, from taking up the whole viewport to only a small dot was fantastic. When the ship had reached the jump point the pilots voice came over the intercom.

“Prepare for jump to hyperspace.” The ship shudder and launched forward. The stars blurred past into thick lines and Luke beamed. He tucked the nerf under his arm and settled in to watch. It was a two-day hyperspace journey, Luke would have plenty of time with his master later.

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“The search for Hera Syndulla has now become our top priority.” The blue hologram of Depa Billaba hovered between Wolffe and Caleb. I will search for Padme Amidala and you for Syndulla. We have four days, five if we stretch it. Disturbing evidence has arisen that the prisoners of this planet have access to illegally advanced technology. Do not be misled by them. Follow the force, my padawan. IT will lead you true.”
“Yes, Master.” Caleb nodded and she smiled. In that single instant he felt tall and invincible as her approval hummed along their bond. “Thank you, for giving me such an important task, Master. I won’t let you down.”

“I know you won’t, Caleb. May the Force be with you.”

“May the Force be with you.” Caleb replied and the line went dead. He turned to grin at Wolffe. The ugly glare aimed at him had the smile slipping off his face in a second. “What?”

“Four days to search the whole planet? Four days to find Hera and get what you need from her? Seriously? You think you can do it? What, does sense and reality have nothing to do with you? Look, you’re not going to find Hera. I’m telling you now.”

“If I don’t find Hera then my Master will find Padme Amidala. We won’t fail!”

“And what she going to do when she finds her? Huh? Do you Jedi even think? Padme liberated her planet when she was fourteen. Fourteen she deposed of a Chancellor. She was on the front lines of the war more often than some generals. She fought of people across the galaxy and now she’s got a grudge against the Jedi! She’d angry and not taking any prisoners! Your master may find Padme Amidala but I pity her because she’s not going to get what she’s looking for!”

“How do you know that? My Master has never failed!” Caleb shouted, rising to his feet. Wolffe didn’t budge.

“Follow the Force, idiot. You can’t even use it.”

“I can too! Just…not all that well. I can still use it.”

“She’s telling you to heed the Force, kid. When it leads you where you’re supposed to go you’re both going to be pretty kriffed when it’s not where you want to go.” He propped his feet up on the console. “And that’s that, kid.”

Instead of trying to argue with the clone Caleb shook his head and stomped back into the corridor. “I’m going to mediate. The Force will lead me where I need to go.” Wolffe watched him with a shake of his head.

“Fine.”

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At the helm of her temporarily renamed ship High General Tang paced. Her captain waited off to the side patiently.

“What is our ETA, Helmsman?”

“Twenty minutes, sir. Engines hot and the shields are prepped to go. Fuel is at maximum capacity.”

“Good.” She took her seat and activated the klaxon and the overhead. “All hands to battle stations! All hands to battle stations. Reversion to sub-light in nineteen minutes.” Red lights flared on a steady beat and she felt the shift of ship wide energy. The anticipation began to mount, excitement, fear, and concern all rolled into one. Infusing her with the battle-lust that made her such an effective commander. “Ours is not a mission of destruction or attack. We are to look intimidating as possible to frighten the soft armed Jedi with due diligence.” There wasn’t a verbal cheer but the entire ship began to resonate with the anticipation. Her smile turned downright nasty.
“Incoming message from the shuttle, sir.” Called a member of the pit crew and Tang nodded. “I’ll take it in the next room.” When she activated the comm unit she gave the tired looking count a smile. “How goes Kitsters transformation into a slightly shorter Anakin Skywalker?”

“Well enough. Kitster is enjoying himself.”

“And we haven’t deliberately stated that it is Anakin Skywalker coming to the conference?”

“No, they are building what they believe is happening from the bare information they’ve been granted. They assume it is Anakin.”

“All the more reason to destroy them when they attempt to kidnap our red herring.”

“I called because I felt a shift on your ship. I assume that your crew is ready?”

“Yes, of course. My men are superb in all ways. Why?”

“I thought I felt a distinct shift toward murder. You do have a knack of inciting the mast base of emotions in people.”

“You flatterer. Tell Kitster to not trip over his robes.” She disconnected the call and stalked back to her bridge.

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Luke felt his master’s anticipation and trepidation keenly in the Force. He felt how it worsened with every passing hour. The closer and closer they got to Ryloth the more he stuck to Luke. He watched over him at every hour. Eating meals with him, practicing, and trying to meditate. Luke loved the attention. When he got the chance, he shared everything with his master. He told him about the blanket and how much he liked. He told him about his classes, about the little games he’d made up to play in the Room of a 1000 Fountains. Sometimes his master listened and sometimes he didn’t.

He didn’t even mind that Luke eventually fell to babbling about nothing. His little observations on how the ship sounded, how the food tasted, and then if the stuffed nerf actually needed a name. When his voice slowed down and the voice stopped working he tilted his head to the side, “Master, are you alright?” Unlike when he’d been younger Luke didn’t try to touch his masters hand or to hug him. “You seem nervous.”

“It will be an interesting conference.” Obi Wan said blankly, looking away from Luke and staring out the viewport. His voice went flat. “An interesting experience.” Two hours later the man was still sitting there. His eyes were empty, his expression non-existent. Luke, returning from dinner, gasped.

“Master, are you all right?” Luke pressed a hand to his forehead like he’d seen in the old holo-films that Han had let him watch one. “Master?” Obi Wan was unresponsive. Fussing, Luke prodded him until he was sitting on his bed and pushed him back until he was laying down. “I’ll go get someone!”

“No.” Obi Wan’s eyes were closed but his hand still caught Luke’s wrist. The blond paused. “No, I don’t need anyone. Go.”

“Go what?”

“Go out. Leave me in peace, please. For one night. One night where my life isn’t bothered by…go out, Luke.”
“Master? This is my room.” Luke pushed at Obi Wan’s side and gaped when the man turned on his side with a huff. Furiously angry, angrier than he could remember being ever, Luke grabbed his baby blanket, his stuffed nerf and stomped out. Since fair was fair he made his way up to his masters room and pushed his way in.

It was empty and cold and silent. The ceiling was too high, the walls too far apart, and not a single thing out of place. It didn’t look lived in. It looked like a tomb.

Luke set his nerf on the head of the bed and spread the blanket over the bed spread and then crawled in. The blankets were cold, the bed was freezing. It felt as if the central air had been turned on as high as possible. Luke didn’t mind.

He pushed back his mounting unhappiness and tried to fall asleep.

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Anakin Skywalker. He was going to see Anakin Skywalker for the first time in 13 years. The boy he had raised. The Knight he’d taught. The brother he’d fought beside. The man he had loved so much for so long.

Obi Wan stared blankly at the wall.

A small blond head hovered in his mind’s-eye. He wasn’t sure if it was Anakin or Luke.

Were they so different? Despite his best efforts, Luke still acted and looked almost exactly like his father. He was so much alike it hurt Obi Wan to speak to him. It hurt Obi Wan to be around him. The father’s betrayal had hurt too much, cut too deeply. He cursed the day that Yoda had given him the boy. He cursed the day that Dooku had seduced his padawan. He cursed the day his master had landed on Tatooine in the first place and the sandstorm that had blown up.

He wondered what might have happened if they had left Anakin Skywalker where they had found him? How would the galaxy turned out? What would it have become? If Anakin Skywalker had never become a Jedi, what would have happened?

Maybe, Obi Wan thought selfishly, the galaxy would have turned out for the better
Chapter Summary

Anakin gets some presents and he and Padme hang out.

Poda glanced between the report in her hands and the Sith Lord across the conference table. Her attention was twisted between the necessity to inform Dooku of its contents and calculating what sort of response that this report was going to get.

“If you are waiting on any sign of gratitude then you will die in that chair.” Dooku murmured, not looking up.

“Ah, no. I would never expect anything for all my years of dedicated service and second to none brilliance,” Poda replied, “but a report has just come in.”

“And?” He looked up from his paperwork, the glasses at the end of his nose were pushed back up.

“How comfortable are you with living with willful self-delusion?” She asked, fingering the edge of the datapad. “Sir?”

“What?” He massaged his temples, “happened?”

“Well, in short order. Your sister is doing too fine a job with her prosecution of Kenobi. Secondly, someone, ahem, leaked that location of one of our ion cannon factories which resulted in its destruction. The could weaken our northern line against the Jedi.”

“What are you not telling me, Poda?”

“This news isn’t bad enough for you?”

“Poda!”

“Erm, if there is any hope of successfully derailing Kenobi’s trail and getting him…free, we’d have to steal or destroy the evidence against him. Which, that would be also illegal. Not to mention unethical.”

“I was not aware ethics were of any use to you save in the case of using them against others.” Dooku asked, his temper stretching thin.

“True, which I why I propose that Skywalker be the one to tamper with the evidence.”

“Poda?”

“He is the best choice. His attachment to Kenobi would be the perfect excuse for the Jedi order to send him. He has a reputation of skill for breaking and entering. He would be perfect to tamper with the evidence.”

“He might be. He also might object.”

“That won’t be a problem.” Poda set the padd on the table and slid his Dooku’s direction, “the
council will just overrule him. He will do as he is ordered.”

“This is true.” Dooku took his up and surveyed the report. “How much trouble will the lack of ion cannons cause us?”

“Enough to be irritating. I’ve begun investigation into the potential leak. I’ve changed the pass codes and the access keycards are being switched out. I won’t allow this to happen again. Too many intelligence leaks is getting infuriating. I’m not sure who to blame but I figure it out I will have them shot.”

“Ah.” Dooku figured that it must have been Palpatine’s work. The man was trying to weaken the Separatists again to make the Republic think that the war only need more time. His constant undermining of Dooku’s effort to wage a genuine war was becoming infuriating. He could only imagine how Poda was feeling. “Skywalker was just facing a jedi Evaluation. One to determine his abilities and skill.

“Idiots.”

“He cannot have the confidence of the Council right now.”

“The Jedi war general is in prison. Undergoing daily interrogation and investigation. The Jedi will take what they can get and they will like it.”

“Ah, you may find that the Council may still send Windu.”

“No one appreciates me,” Poda slumped in her chair, “all this work and I’m just mocked and despised.”

“Your idea does have merit.” He thought of what Sidious might consider of it. “I will see to its completion.”

“Eh? That is my job.”

“Not this time.” Dooku blithely ignored the suspicious gaze directed at him. “I will take care of it.”

#$#$#

Anakin had his arm opened in front of him on the work bench. His other hand was holding a blowtorch and a small driver was clenched between his teeth. “Coh’ahn in!” He called past the tool when a knock came and his door slid open.

“Uh.”

He spat the driver out. “In here.” He called and the tiny initiate came waddling into his work room.

“Knight Skywalker.” He humanoid chirped, “I have a message for you.”

“Oh, thanks, can you just come up here?” He patted his second work stool and watched the little being scramble on top of it. At the sight of his arm laying open and him poised above it like a surgeon with a scaple, the initiate scrambled back.

“Ew.”

“Ew? I’m just repairing one of the servos.” Anakin laughed and grinned at the grimacing toddler. “What’s so gross about that?”
“It’s gross.”

“Not that gross.” He chided and closed the panel on his arm, “What did you need?”

“Message.” The boy held out the note but kept his eyes transfixed on the metal arm in front of him. “Are you a human or a droid?”

“What?” Anakin stared down at the child, blinking rapidly and then he leaned away when the boy tilted his head to the side, “why do you ask?”

“Cuz I heard the masters talk that you lost your human…ness?” The boy frowned and bit his lip, “when you got that new arm. So are you a fancy droid now? ‘Cept, I don’t think that there are droids that can use the force. Right? I don’t know.”

“Who told you this?” Anakin asked, his eyebrows rising along with his temper. “What? That is ridiculous, plenty of people have prosthetics!”

“Hmmuhm?” The child shrugged and wandered from the room, mumbling to himself. Anakin stared after the boy, gaping in surprise and then turning back to the message he’d brought. It was a summons to the council chamber.

He was torn between being frustrated with the random summons and the fact that people seemed to think he’d lost his humanity with his arm. Anakin growled, crumbling up the piece of flimsi and tossing into a nearby bin. For a moment, he stared down at his arm.

It was a fine piece of work. Not built in the temple. All Naboo design, from the elbow joint forged directly from the same material their starships were built from. To the tips of his fingers which were perfect for delicate work of any kind. It was a piece of art, sold gold coloring with the metals and wiring all done to show off the brilliance of its design.

Anakin considered it for a moment longer before pulling out one of his rarely used gloves and yanking it over the metal. He threw on his least sensory offensive robes and did his best to control his rising anger as he made his way to the council room.

There, he found the council assembled in full form and in formal robes. He was summoned often enough that this wouldn’t have bothered him except that Mace Windu was looking pleasant and assured.

Cautiously he moved to the center of the room and suppressed the memory of standing in the exact spot so many years ago.

“Masters?” In the privacy of his enormous cloak sleeves, he twisted his fingers together and felt the bone and metal strain.

“We have a mission for you. High priority, you will need every ounce of your skill to accomplish.”

“Of grave importance, this is.” Yoda intoned and Anakin felt the enormous, unpleasant presence of Yoda turn to him. He also felt the sinking feeling of impending doom. “A rescue for Master Kenobi, this is.”

“I…we’re not going to contest the trial?”

“No,” Adi Gallia looked uncomfortable and shifted before settling, “The evidence is enough and overwhelming. We have taken a more…a dishonorable route but one that is necessary. For the swift completion of the war we must have Master Kenobi back.” Anakin waited and Windu added.
“You’re going to Corellia. The holo projector beside him lit up and Anakin stepped back as the outline of a star-scraper appeared. “This houses the temporary offices of the Dooku and Suun Law Firm. Here,” he pointed to a red light that appeared, “On the eightieth floor, is where the case reports are filed.”

“What?” He demanded hoarsely, “do you want? You can’t…what?”

“Calm down, Skywalker.” Windu ordered and another blue building appeared. “Here is where the evidence is stored, the local Planetary Defense Headquarters. Probably the most secure building on the planet.”

“And you want me to tamper with the evidence?” He demanded, his twisting with misery as they stared at him.

“I thought that was obvious.” Windu replied and Anakin closed his mouth with a snap.

“Tampering with evidence is against the laws on every single planet. Every single one. This include Hutt controlled planets.”

“Master Kenobi surely does mean more to you?” Mundi asked, tilted his enormous head to the side. Anakin’s eyes burned with a low fury and he gave a jerky nod.

He spent the next ten minutes listening to the rundown of the security system and who would be his contact. When the meeting was completed, he was detached enough from his own mind and body that he walked up to Mace Windu.

“Did you need something else?” Windu asked as Anakin gestured to one of the free tea rooms.

“Yes,” as if watching from the outside, Anakin nodded the direction of the creche. “The initiate who brought me the message said something concerning. He told me that the Masters were discussing that…maybe I’d lost part of my humanity when I lost my hand.”

“Plenty of people have prosthetics,” Windu reminded him, “And initiates are very young.”

“Very young who are exposed to only a certain group of people. He couldn’t have picked this up from outside the temple.” Anakin felt the familiar burn of shame along his throat. “I’m telling you this because you’re the master in charge of initiates. Who teaches them and who guides them around the temple.”

“What do you want me to do, Skywalker?” He asked tiredly, “initiates will grow out of this eventually. They’ll learn how wrong that is. A Jedi is not prejudiced or cruel. You have a prosthetic, so do many people. Some masters have prosthetics.”

“That masters are the one who taught them.” Anakin said, “ones that didn’t grow out of it.”

“Skywalker,” Mace shook his head and seemed to think for a few minutes. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thank you,” Anakin muttered and wandered away, pulling his hood over his head and rejoining artoo in the council ante chambers. “Hey, buddy.” He set a hand on his dome and they walked away from the Council. “How do you feel about a field trip?”

#$#$#

The library was not as busy as it had been last time Anakin had come down. Many of the rooms were empty of patrons and the shelves seemed even emptier than before.
“I’ve been here before, buddy. I don’t know what’s wrong. I hope it’s not going to be closed down.” He frowned at the unpolished buttresses overhead. Boots clacked against the marble and the dust stirred at his approached. In the unnerving silence of the library, he reached for comfort from his droid.

“Not yet.” He whirled around, his hand going for his saber. Anakin sighed ta the sight of the familiar twi’lek. “What are you doing here, young human? The library is closed for renovations.”

“Renovations?” Artoo beeped a dispiriting remark and Anakin nodded in silent agreement. “I don’t see any.”

“Renovations to the libraries inventory,” the twi’le replied, and set an empty box on the ground. “I’m being ordered to remove a number of works due to their inflammatory content. Did you need something?”

“Just a matter of…curiosity.”

“Ah, what are you looking for? I can help you.” The librarian kicked the box aside, some excitement bleeding into his eyes and motions.

“Errr, I’m not really sure.” Anakin rubbed his metal arm and glanced away. “I just. I was thinking and the I thought a whole lot more. Then I did some pacing and then I came here after my meeting because, well.”

“Yes?”

“Do you have anything on…what it means…to be ...I don’t know how to phrase this. I really don’t. I guess that I just.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Thanks for your time.” He turned to leave only to have his arm snagged by the twi’lek.

“Work through your words and I’ll see what I can do.”

“I.” Anakin took a soft breath, “I need something, anything on what it means to be human. On what…what does it mean to be alive? What does it mean to be…a person? What do people think of prosthetics and that sort of stuff. I…I guess it’s crazy, isn’t it?”

“Not at all! This is perfect! Oh, I’m so glad you came to me. I have some perfect poetry for you to read and then some other things. Come, oh, you will love these.”

“But.” Technically the Jedi weren’t banned from reading anything but every question that Anakin had posed was already answered by the Jedi. Answers that did not resonate with the former slave. “How do you?”

“Here! The Collected Works of Etmire! A perfect place to start. Her work will reduce you to tears, build up your fury! It will soothe you like a mother’s song and hug. It will show you! Ah, these are
some of my favorite works, really, they are.” He stepped away from a box and pulled out a small pack of data chips. “I want you to take these. To help you, get some flimsi, or a padd and write down your impressions. Think about what she’s really saying and what it means to you.”

“I’ve never heard of Etmire.” Anakin turned the chips over in his hands. “Who was she?”

“No one knows. She’s one of the ancient poets, of the classical times. Her writing suggests she was either the most powerful on her planet or… the most vulnerable. No one knows. But, you will like her works. Here! Another one you will need to read. It is ‘Homeless’ it is about the lack of understanding and knowledge of where humans come from and what their history is and how it affects people in all ages and times. This is not poetry but it is provocative. I am not human and I enjoyed it. Hmm,” he rifled through another box. “Here are three on war. I am sure that they will not be enjoyable but they are important pieces.”

“No thanks, I’m not sure I can stomach any more propaganda.”

“It is not propaganda. That’s why it’s in here. Because it isn’t propaganda. It describes the realities and horror of war. Supposedly written during the Mandalorian Wars by someone in Revan’s direct circle. It hasn’t been proven but it would prove interesting, wouldn’t it?”

“I guess.”

“Here are a few comedic works, a few satires. These are hilarious, they were written by a humor columnist from Corellia a few decades ago. I’ve laughed so hard I’ve cried. Hmmm, here, two good tragedies, a thriller novel, some raunchy comedies. A play or two, or three. Hmm, oh, you know what else you need. Some stories of love. Those are always the best. I have a number of them around here.”

“Are you sure I need these? Maybe I could just.”

“No.” The librarian froze and turned around. “Look, this! This is what you need! You question your existence, your humanity, your soul! This is how you revive it. This is how you rediscover yourself!”

“Oh.” He set the dozens of chips into the Artoo’s nifty storage nook and stood up. “What? What do you think… being alive is about? I guess, I can’t think of a better way to phrase it.”

“Hmm, for me?” The twi’lek ran his bony hands over a box of books. “For me it is the passion of these writings. It is a love and loss and hatred and courage that every book and poem and song holds. It is about sharing these things, it is about ever emotion and every feeling that I have that makes me alive.”

“I… someone told me that they thought I’d lost part of humanity when I got… a prosthetic.” He wavered, “which is why I’m here. I just… I want to be… I don’t want to be not human.” He swallowed, “I don’t want this war to change me so much I don’t remember who I was.” For a moment, the library was silent.

“I don’t know how I can help you with that.” The twi’lek said, “But I do know someone who can.”

“What do you mean?” Anakin followed the librarian out of the room and into another one where he produced a business card.

“A therapist. Someone I met a while ago. She is very good and is fastidious of doctor/client
“I don’t need a therapist.” Anakin scowled but snatched up the card. “Who is this ‘Helgina’?”

“A therapist, one who can help you.”

“I don’t.”

“You came here to find some answers, you man.” Anakin sighed deeply, “I am trying to help, if you let me. Now, you don’t have to visit her. You don’t even have to look for her. I only ask if you think about it.”

“Alright.”

“The card has her contact information. You can reach her over the holonet or her office on Naboo.”

“I’ll think about it.” Anakin agreed and slipped it into his pocket. “I… thanks for all your reading materials. I think they’ll help.”

“I hope so. If not, then you can always come back.” He gestured to the area around him, “These aren’t going anywhere.”

“Yeah… right. Um,” Anakin shuffled back a few steps and then stopped, “You’ve read all what you gave me, right?”

“Yes, why?”

“Well, do you think I could come back and ask you about them? I’m not always so good at figuring this stuff out so….”

“Of course,” the twi’lek smiled brightly, “I would be honored to help you.”

#S#S#

“How did you convince them to let you leave the temple.” Padme slipped into their enormous bathroom and began to unhook her dress.

“I…” Anakin busied himself with forming a beard made of suds to avoid answering.

“Ani.” He sighed as her dress hit the floor. She stood in front of the vanity and pulled ornaments from her hair.

“I have a mission I don’t like but I can’t tell them no because it helps me get Obi Wan back.” He finally answered, turning his sudsy face toward her. “And I can’t tell you but… you’ll probably see it soon enough.”

“Hmm, but how’d you tell them you were leaving?”

“I didn’t.” He smiled when he winked at him.

“I don’t like hairy men,” She told him and he wiped the suds off. “Is it perfect?”

“Perfect.” Padme cheerfully discarded the last of her make-up and clothes before joining Anakin in the tub.

“You’re right,” she gave a heartfelt groan as the warm water engulfed her, “perfect.”
“Hmm. “Anakin ran wet fingers through her hair, unbraiding it and scooping water onto her head. “I went to the public library today. One on the lower levels.”

“And?” She leaned against him, sighing deeply as the stress of the day began to slough off.

“I got some reading material. I…I also go an information card from…the librarian. He…I think I scared him.”

“What kind of therapist?” Padme sat up, staring at her husband. Anakin shrugged.

“One from Naboo. I looked her up. Her name’s Helgina. Apparently very good but…expensive.”

“Helgina?” Padme blinked, “she’s distantly related to Dooku.” Anakin glanced sharply down at her. “She was recently invited to visit him. I told her, we all told her that it would be foolish and political suicide but she went anyway.”

“And reason why?”

“I guess her cousin needed a therapist but she’s not human. I’m not sure which species she is.”

“Maybe she took on a patient for him.” Anakin frowned, “or he wanted information on a patient.”

“If Dooku had wanted information on a patient she wouldn’t have given it.” Padme nodded carefully, “Naboo has very strict laws on this. If she was suspected of giving away patient information she’d be striped of her degree and firm.”

“Hmmm. Well, the librarian told me she was very good. I guess, he gave me the card because…I think I scared him.”

“How did you scare him? Oh, did you wash your back?”

“I’ve just been soaking, but I just. An initiate said something odd today and it made me think…that I’ve lost parts of me. That…he thought I’d lost part of my humanity when I lost my hand.”

“What! That’s ridiculous! How…who? Who is responsible for that? Which.”

“I asked Master Windu to look into it.”

“Master Windu doesn’t really like you, Anakin.” Padme pointed out and he shrugged as she hefted the smooth washcloth and wagged it his direction. “You’ve told me that your relationship is prickly and not a very good one.”

“It isn’t,” Anakin sighed deeply as Padme ran the soft cloth over his collar bone and down his arm. “But it is under his jurisdiction.”

“Then he had better do his job. I won’t have people thinking my husband is less of a man just because he’s got a prosthetic.” She growled and he laughed.

“I’m sure he’ll do his job. He is very serious about the work he does.”

“I’m not going to stand by and let some jerk, some uneducated child insult you. I have to deal with enough senators making unkind insinuations about you and the Chancellor.”

“Hmm. Well, do you think I need to see a therapist?”

“It might help you. I talk to a councilor droid. I know plenty of senators that speak to councilors.
Since Helgina is from Naboo then there will be no trouble getting a hold of her.”

“After my mission.” His blue eyes flickered with sadness, “I’m not sure how well I’ll handle the aftermath. I’m going deep into Separatist territory.”

“You’ll be safe, won’t you? Ani?”

“I promise I’ll be as safe as possible. I won’t even be going under as a Jedi. I’m going in as a civilian. No one will be able to trace me.”

“What do you not like about this mission? If you’re allowed to tell me.”

“I wasn’t allowed to marry you,” Anakin told her wryly, “why should this stop me?”

“Hmm, good question.”

“It’s more…I don’t want you to know what I’m going to do because…it’s not…I don’t like it.”

“Hmm.” Padme nuzzled against him. “If you don’t want to tell me, I won’t ask you to.”

“Thank you, my love.”

“I did want to ask you something.” Padme said after a while, her voice soft and a little unsure. Anakin leaned back just enough to look her in the eyes. “If you’re up for it tonight.”

“Is it sex?”

“It is sex but it’s something I thought would be…stimulating. For me. You don’t have to anything. Well, you do but not what you’re thinking.”

“Is it from that book Artoo got us?”

“Yes.”

“Oh,” he laughed, “tell me about it.”

“The datapad is in the kitchen.” Padme huffed, “I’m no prude but I’m not saying this out-loud.”

“As you wish.” Anakin kissed the top of her head and reached out with a tendril of the force. Summoning the datapad to the bathtub until it landed neatly in his hand.

“That is useful.” He scooted away from Padme who’d begun scrubbing her own skin with a much harsher bath towel. She liked the scratchy feeling and how red her skin could look right after a bath but Anakin would stick with his. Anakin leaned over the bathtubs side, reading the datapad quietly until he’d finished the section she’d given him.

“Are you sure you want this? It doesn’t seem comfortable.” Anakin leaned back to looked at his smirking wife.

“I’m positive. If you’re up for it too.”

“I am.”

“After we’ve eaten dinner.” Padme promised and she splashed him with suds and water. “I’m curious, what sort of reading material did the librarian give you?”
“Some good stuff, I think. I’m going to read it on my mission. I’m taking Artoo, he’s going to keep me company. He has the books stored his in his chambers. I did want to ask, what do you know about public funding for the libraries here?”

“Public funding is ending even faster than I feared. Most of it going to the war effort. I can’t seem to stem the flow. More clones, more troops, more battle-ships, more guns. What I’ve don’t doesn’t make an impact. Too many public places are being shut down. Courascant gardens and conservatories and parks. I have no idea what to do.”

“Well, the library was in the middle of down-sizing its works. He told me that most of it had been banned for inflammatory content.”

“Hmph, that’s ridiculous. Democracy is founded on the ideals of freedom. Of speech and material. No one should ever restrict a library from circulating.” Padme stared up at the ceiling. “Sometimes it just feels that I’m trying to stop a dam from breaking with only my hands. Water running everywhere.”

“You do your best,” Anakin kissed her head again, “that’s all anyone can ask of you, really.” He drummed an uneven beat on the side of the tub and then sighed.

“What are you thinking about?”

“How to make you scream later.”

“Haha, Ani, I know when you’re deflecting.”

“Do you really think I need a therapist? There are temple healers I can talk too, plus. I mean, it’s not usual for a Jedi to go. I don’t think I’m.”

“There’s nothing wrong with going to see someone to help you, Ani.” Padme said, turning around to pick up the ridiculous bath toy her she’d bought on a whim some months ago. She wound up the little boat and let it buzz across the water’s surface. “Plenty of people do it. If you need it for safety or help then it’s probably best if you do. There’s nothing wrong with seeking professional help.”

“So, you think I should visit Helgina?”

“Her or any other doctor. I can have my staff put together a list of people if you like.”

“After my mission,” He promised and leaned across the buzzing toy boat to kiss her wet shoulder.

+++++ Several Hours Later+++ They were back in the tub, though this time is lacked the bubble bath soap and the senseless bath toy. Anakin nearly had to pour his wife into the hot water, her attention and focus was shattered. She was boneless in his grip and nearly out of her mind. Padme clung to his chest and arms like a baby gungan, still sighing.

“You need to let me go clean up the bed, Padme.” Anakin said, trying to detach his sated wife.

“No, you stay here.” She yanked him, fully clothed, into the tub sending sheets of water pouring over the sides and onto the bathroom floor. Anakin came up sputtering as she laughed. “With me.”

“Padme, I’m still dressed.” He protested and squirmed as she latched onto him again.

“I know, which is why your perfect. My beautiful husband, all soaking wet.”
“I knew this would happen,” Anakin rubbed his face, “I knew it. Why did I even bother to keep my clothes on?”

“Because I asked you,” Padme muttered into his collarbone, “because you dressed and me naked is one of my favorites.”

“I know, my love.” He cradled her close and kissed her forehead, “but the bedroom is really a mess. Which it wouldn’t have been if you’d have better control.” The senator giggled.

“What are you going to do, oh my strong and my husband…spank me?” She laughed as his face went pink and he looked toward the ceiling as if seeking divine help.

“If you ask.” He finally replied, with a dramatic tone that indicated he would do it for her sake.

“I’m only joking, Anakin, I wouldn’t ask.” She sleepily nuzzled at him, “thank you, Ani. For such a fantastic night.”

“Anything, my love.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to return the favor?”

“I’m not really in the headspace to appreciate an orgasm right now but I’ll keep your offer in mind next time I am.”

“What a burden for me, to love my husband so thoroughly he can’t speak straight. I have no idea how I’m going to cope.” Her dramatic proclamation was met with a laugh and a kiss to her drenched hair.

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Yan Dooku had the reflexes and paranoia of a hundred Sith lords. The distrust of a dozen senators and the wiliness of a hutt. He was prepared for an attempted assassination at any given point of the day. Which was why he woke up the second he felt the door to his room creak open.

He remained in bed, pretending to sleep.

The stranger slipped across the room, avoiding his most obvious traps and even the less obvious ones. With the force he could readily identify them as a human, maybe a woman. He wasn’t sure. Still, as he clutched as his lightsaber and the blaster, he could hear.

“Your fake sleeping is some of the worst I’ve seen.” The stranger stepped onto the end of his bed and presumably sat on the bed frame. “Geez, if I wanted you dead I could have managed it before I even hit the first pressure plate.”

“Poda?” Dooku sat upright, holding his un-lit lightsaber and blaster at the ready. He blinked a few times and then glared at the woman wrapped in black and gray. “What are you doing here?”

“Your sister told me that if I woke you up she’d hang my corpse out on the front gate for all to see.” Poda shrugged and unwrapped her head. “I have information that can’t wait for her delicate sensibilities.”

“What is it?”

“It’s from Tang. Tang is saying that the constant offensive actions of the Confederacy is stretching the generals and troops thin. It’s also creating too much instability for the police forces to manage.
Too many opportunities for pirates and scum to get through. Tang wants your permission to form up our borders and enforce them."

“Firm up?” One of the reasons the war was so successful was because the war kept escalating. Sidious would not get the empire he wanted if the Confederacy established firm boundaries and defended them. His job was to keep the war moving. “If we firm up then we’re stuck in a war of attrition and can’t move supplies in and out. We’d be in more trouble.”

“Tang wanted me to suggest it, sir.” Poda’s dark eyes raked over his form. “You will do your duty? One day we will have defensible borders?”

“Of course.” His chief of intelligence nodded and began making her way from his room. “Poda,” she paused, “you wouldn’t consider my assassination as a respectable means to ensure that the confederacy does become an independent system of planets?”

“Of course not,” and she vanished through the door. Yan leaned back against his pillows, her lie ringing like a death keel in his ears.

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Anakin kissed Padme goodbye, sent a final message to the council, and packed up a weeks worth of non-perishable rations before boarding a refugee ship head off world.

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He spent the days aboard the refugee ship sitting in the darkest corner, curled up with Artoo, and reading. Burning this way through the novels and the plays, almost too afraid to touch the poetry and dissertations on humanity. From the refugee ship he transferred to an underground gambling ring on Corellia, winning a few thousand credits to buy himself new clothes and a proper ship. He won a few more thousand credits for bribes and then some more just for the heck of it. He stored a good number in Artoo, saving them to his banks.

“You never know when you’ll need them.” He told the droid, patting his head.

Anakin spent the next few days casing out the building, watching the guard rotations, the people who passed in an out. At one point he caught sight of a Yen Dooku herself, surrounded by a dozen reporters. All of them were slavishly begging for a story or a leak or something to give to their editors.

She was tall, like her brother. Her eyes were a flinty brown, her suit a severe cut, her face lined and firm. Intensity radiated from every line of her body. Yen Dooku radiated power and control, much like her brother. And much like her brother, Anakin did not want to tangle with her.

“Madam Dooku! What comments can you give us on the Jedi case?”

“Only that the letter of the law is being followed by both parties.” Yen replied, stepping away, “and that Obi Wan Kenobi will be prosecuted the full extent of the law.”

“When is his transfer due to Corellia?”

“Is the Corellian Jedi Temple going to be offering protection or guard?”

“I am not at liberty to answer either of those questions.” The woman waved the reports away, “the trial will not be broadcast but the trial will be open. Opening arguments start at eight, seven days
“Anakin Skywalker is on Corellia.” This time Poda waited until he was dressed and in his office before jumping him with information. “His disguise is excellent. If I hadn’t known he was coming I wouldn’t have spotted him. His droid doesn’t even look like an astromech droid. I wouldn’t have known it was the iconic duo. Too bad for them,” Poda jauntily sat herself on the side of his desk, “I did know.”

“And the break in is going as planned?”

“Assuming Skywalker doesn’t get coughed. Also, if your sister ever learns of this she is going to kill you, resurrect your body and then kill you again.”

“I am well aware of this.” Yan answered and he held up a report from Ventress. “What do you think?”

“She could be useful if you weren’t hobbling her. Also, if your relationship didn’t make me cringe. I don’t know how she lets you get away with being so scummy.”

“I talking about her report.”

“Oh…errrr, this doesn’t work well then. “

“Poda.”

“If you treated me the way you treat Ventress you would be dead six times over. Give me Ventress, I will turn her into a truly useful assassin instead of your jedi punching bag.”

“No.”

“She could be great.”

“She has her uses.”

“So do you.”

“Are you finished?”

“I’ll have some fantastic blackmail material on Skywalker. Do you want to use it in the future?”

“We may need it but it would be distasteful for us to use it.”

“Almost as distasteful as letting our prized prisoner get away?”

“You may leave, Poda.”

“Skywalker should be breaking in in a few days. Do you want to watch?”

“No.”

“Fine, but I’m inviting everyone from your staff and we’re going to have snacks and drinks. Come if you like.”

“Very well.” Dooku waved the woman off, concerning himself with the possible futures as dictated
R2-D2 was a clever droid, too clever by half, with the ruthless sense of sadism to rival a human. At this point, Anakin was pretty sure he’d messed up his droids. Another droid would have disabled the cameras and left it at that. Another droid would have missed the secondary traps, the primary traps, and the extra cameras. Only Artoo was paranoid to look for the extra measures.

“You’re starting to remind me of me.” Anakin whispered, sliding through the office door and examining the empty room. Though the earpieces, Artoo buzzed a mocking remark and the Jedi almost laughed. “Alright, I didn’t want to do this either but we’ve got our orders.”

{Kriff the orders and kriff the Order. You should have told them no}

“I couldn’t have told them no.” Anakin replied, slipping around until he came across the appropriate filing cabinet. “And don’t you have a part of the con to take care of.”

{I can do my job and tell you how to live at the same time.} Artoo buzzed. He was rolling along the busy floors of the Planetary Defense Headquarters, ignored by all. {I calculate that you would be much happier if you left the Jedi Order and returned to the Senator.}

“Artoo,” Anakin undid the lock and began to rifle through the evidence files. “Ohhh, there is a lot of stuff here. There are infractions and crime that Obi Wan’s committed since…Force! Since he was a padawan! Look here, geez. Who even found this stuff?”

{Probably someone who doesn’t like him.}

“Artoo…?”

{I didn’t do it.} Artoo protested, programming the evidence locker to open. The droid rolled down the hallway and found the locker of Obi Wan Kenobi. It was enormous, and stuffed right between D-1 and D-3. Which registry told Artoo belonged to local gang lords.

“He has pulled a lot of loose wire jokes and he isn’t always appreciative.” Anakin answered, stuffing as many files as he could into his pack.

{No. He isn’t.} Artoo’s little done swivelled between the lockers and he seemed to be thinking.

Two buildings away Poda rubbed her forehead. “I get that the droid disabled everything but we have the conversation and the recording of the defense station.”

“I don’t think this will be enough blackmail.” Replied an aide, sipping his ale and watching R2-D2 rolled back and forth in front of the lockers. “And what’s taking the droid so long?”

“I don’t know?” Poda glumly watched the empty screens where Anakin Skywalker suspiciously wasn’t.

“Artoo?” Skywalker’s voice filtered over the speakers. “Are you ready?”

The droid whistled in agreement. {Are you sure?}

“Of course I’m sure! Artoo, this is our chance to help Obi Wan!”
Obi Wan is not nice."

"Artoo!"

"Fine." The droid blared down the line and Poda watched with increasing shock as the droid rolled to the locker one over from Kenobi’s and began to reprogram the electronics.

"Whose locker is that?"

"The secondary evidence locker for a customs official." Someone answered

"So that is not Obi Wan Kenobi’s evidence locker?"

"Not even a little."

"Can droids hold grudges?" Poda wondered and then shook her head. "Stupid question, the answer is obvious." R2-D2 rolled away from the now smoldering evidence locker and out sight of the cameras. "Well, we have their conversation, that’ll have to do."

"Artoo? Did you set the evidence locker on fire! Artoo!"

"You wanted me to!"

"I wanted you to get rid of it! Not set it on fire!"

"Fire gets rid of a lot of things." The droid beeped and Poda put her head in her hands.

"Do you think he realizes just how much extra work he gave me?"

"I don’t think the droid cares. I think he wants to see Obi Wan Kenobi gone. Geez, I want to see Skywalker’s face when he realizes what happened. It’ll be priceless."

"Pretty much. Oh, gods. I have to tell the count." She groaned and dragged herself out of the conference room and toward Dooku’s office. Once there, she flopped onto the seat opposite. "Are you aware," she took a deep breath, "of how much Anakin Skywalker’s droid does not like Obi Wan Kenobi?"

"Hmm?"

"R2-D2, longtime companion of Anakin Skywalker, apparently dislikes Obi Wan Kenobi so much he is willing…to burn the wrong evidence locker."

Yan finally looked up. "Excuse me?"

"He sabotaged the mission."

"He what?"

"I’m not going to repeat that because I know you heard but…yes. R2-D2 just…did that. Incredible. I heard their conversation, the encryption was good but not that good. Apparently, Kenobi is not nice to droids."

"I would not imagine him to be, no."

“And…that little R2 unit sure doesn’t seem all that…droid dislike so he.” Poda covered her eyes, unsure if her body was trying to cry or laugh. "He ruined the wrong evidence locker."
“By the force!”

“Urh! This is going to cause me so much work! Urh, we’re going to have to bribe the officials! Oh my!”

“Next time we capture, Skywalker,” Dooku vowed, “I am deactivating the droid.”

“No, I will make him my friend. I will feed him the…droid attention he needs. I will make him mine.”

“I don’t think that’s going to work.” Dooku told her truthfully. “We may have to destroy it.”

“I would be sad…and I am going to start investing in droids. Good droids, droids like R2-D2.”

“This is going to backfire spectacularly.” Dooku said, “bribe the necessary officials.”

“No one appreciates how hard I work.” Poda sighed, leaving her boss to his musings and heading back to her own meeting room to begin making calls.

#$#$#$#

Obi Wan Kenobi had not felt this keen of embarrassment in years. He hadn’t considered just how difficult it might actually be to be in prison. So, used to single cells, isolation, or at least comfort. Here, he was just another number.

“Hey! Glow stick.” Obi Wan shaded his eyes with his hand and leaned around the pole to look at an approaching criminal. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m sitting here,” he replied, watching the enormous human stomp closer.

“You’re sitting in my spot.”

“This isn’t your spot,” Obi Wan said and he leaned back into the relaxed pose that he’d been in. “this is just a spot in the exercise yard. It belongs to no one.”

“Get out of my spot, Glow Stick.” The man snarled and Obi Wan glanced at him.

“If you’re going to insist on identifying a simple spot of dirt as your own simply to have the material possessions then I am confused. You’re putting your identity on dust. You could put it in your muscles, since that’s all you seem to use.”

“Hey!” Obi Wan looked to another man, a twi’lek covered in gang tattoos. “Get out of his spot. He gets twitchy. Just let him sit there, ya jerk.”

The man twitched and glanced between Obi Wan and the twi’lek. “That’s my spot.”

“I know it is,” the alien answered, glaring down at Kenobi, “I know, let’s get this bag of poodoo to move.”

“You can try.” Obi Wan answered genially and they both glowered only long enough for the approaching rattling of armor to approach.

Obi Wan glanced to the side just soon enough to see a black boot come from nowhere and slam into his head.
“Don’t tell me the Jedi scum is causing trouble?” A woman’s voice asked and there was a ringing silence from the yard. Obi Wan, shoved face first into the dirt and pinned by the heavy foot, didn’t reply.

“He’s in my spot,” the larger human answered and Obi Wan felt something long and thin poke his shoulder.

“The jedi won’t be here long.” The boot was removed and Obi Wan sat up, brushing dirt from his face and shoulders.

“Assualting a prisoner?” He drawled and lurched back in time to avoid something whippy striking his face. Obi Wan stared up at the woman above him, a furious glower on a dark face.

“Boys?” She glanced around to the prison guards and the prisoners, “what was that?”

“Sure looked a lot like self-defense,” the twi’lek said, “those Glow Sticks sure are dangerous.”

“A lot like self-defense,” the woman agreed and Obi Wan her nudge him again, “pick yourself out of the dirt, Jedi. You’re wanted.”

“Well that’s nice,” he answered, painfully unfolding his limbs and trying his best to stand, “that someone needs me.”

“Not for long, Jedi.” The woman answered and he was nearly dragged from the yard. From the yard he was escorted to the internal chambers where he’d been introduced to the warden. Here, the warden was waiting.

“Hmph, you’re lucky, Jedi.” The man said, wiggling a brief case at him. “That I like credits way more than I like just about anything else.”

“And this is my lucky because?” Obi Wan spread his arms and shrugged, “why?”

“You’re leaving.” The man answered and jammed a thumb in the direction of the door. “Get going.”

“I’m…leaving?” What was the council up to? He’d expected his rescue a few weeks. Before his trial became a humiliating debacale.

The man seemed more interested in counting his money, “The doors right there,” a guard pointed toward the door. “Go.”

Obi Wan glanced between the man and the door and then down at the force inhibiting collar around his neck. “Do you mind?”

“Yep.” A moment later, Obi Wan was left alone in the ante chamber to the prison as every guard and official abandoned the room.

Twenty minutes later he was walking out into the sun the bustling over-city of Corellia. Confused and out of his depth, Obi Wan made his way toward the Jedi temple. Not knowing the Anakin was already off world and headed to Naboo.

#$#$#$#

“What happened here?” The towering shrieking of Yen Dooku was enough to send her aide and students for cover. Police officers and government officials made the effort but failed. The woman stormed around her sabotaged offices, cursing and swearing. “WHERE ARE MY FILES?
“WHERE ARE THEY?”

“I….” a younger police officer leaned away, “this break in occurred around the same time as a break in at the planetary defense head quarters. We believe that the saboteur attempted to disrupt the files on Obi Wan Kenobi.”

“I know that.” Yen hissed, leaning uncomfortably over the small man. “I know that. Where is the evidence?”

“The wrong evidence locker was sabotaged,” The man dithered, leaning away in terror. He felt his soul attempting to vacate his body. “The wrong one. All the evidence on Obi Wan is still there!”

“That means only have to re-file paperwork and rebuild my case.” Still in a towering fury, Yen sat back in one of her chairs. “Then I can work with that.”

“Well,” the officers all cringed and winced when a dark glare was directed at them from beneath the shadow of a bony hand.

“Well…what?”

“We received a call this morning,” Yen stood up abruptly, shoving her chair back… “Obi Wan was spotted, in full prisoner garb, making an escape. When our officers attempted to pursue…he fled into the undercity. We believe he may be making his way to the Jedi Temple.”

“THEN CORDORN THE JEDI TEMPLE!”

“Ermmm…we can do that but we can’t …. legally, search the building for a fugitive. He can claim sanctuary…and then be protected.” Yen’s anger mounted. “Under the Bill of Rights…as established in the systems charter. The Jedi are protected as a religious order.”

“Then TREAT THEM LIKE ONE! NOT LIKE AN EXTENSION OF THE KRIFFING LAW!” The police all cringed further as Yen shouted, “FIND KENOBI! FIND HIM NOW!”

"Your sister is not taking this well at all.” Poda observed picking a long-fried tuber off her bosses plate. “Kenobi is in the Corellian Jedi temple. We sent the police officers on the trail of the warden but they won’t know who bribed him.”

“Why get rid of the warden?” Yan asked, shielding his plate from further pilfering.

“He’s corrupt and I am so glad that someone got to slap Kenobi. I wanted to do it so bad.”

“Yes, I am aware of your fantasies of violence. Far more than I’d like to be.” Dooku replied wryly, “where is Skywalker?”

“Headed out, our agents saw him leave the planet but we don’t have much beyond that. Not interested in that either. As far as I can tell, if your sister can’t have Kenobi’s hide as a prize, I think she’ll get the Jeid’s. She seems to be leaning toward presenting them as a cult.”

“The Jedi are a cult.”

“Which you left.”

“Had I stayed I shudder to think what I would have become.”
“Well, I don’t know if you could have become more pretentious if you tried.”

“I would like to see your draft of your letter of resignation.”

“Sure, so long as I can edit your terms of surrender.”

“I am curious, what this will do to Anakin Skywalker.” Yan said a moment later, ignoring the woman. “He has expressed guilt over situations like this before…what would a crime like this do to him? What is he thinking?”

Anakin wasn’t thinking much. He couldn’t think if he tried. Mostly his brain was stuck in the constant reply of the words he’d read just a moment ago.

The laws of Corellia stated that an obstruction of justice, like the one he’d committed, was a Class A felony. It could earn him years in prison, hard labor, the whole nine yards. All of it.

He would be…he could be…he had. Anakin buried his face in his hands, trying to avoid thinking seriously about what had happened.

It was so…it was too much. He hadn’t wanted to do it. He had done it. He had been a person who’d tried so hard to become back from the spiraling emotional mess he’d been just a few months ago. He’d tried to do better by himself and his padawan.

{Master Ani?}

“What is it Artoo?” A thin piece of metal bumped against his knee. The droid beeped at him.

{Are you malfunctioning?}

“I don’t feel well, I think I…I’ve done something terrible. We did it. I’m so sorry for brining you in on this Artoo. I…”

{If I hadn’t wanted to help I would not have come.} The droid buzzed at him. {You are my friend.}

“You’re mind too.”

{I plotted us a course to Naboo.}

“Why?” He glanced up at the droid.

{The doctor is letting you take an appointment at her house when we get dirt side.}

“ARToo!”

{What?}

“You can’t do that!” Anakin protested and the droid buzzed at him.

{When my motivator is broken or my photorecpector is cracked, what do you do?}

“I fix them!”

{Why?}

“Because they need to be fixed, because you’re my friend. Because…you need it! That’s a dumb
question!” Anakin yanked his cloak over his head. “Get us back to Padme.”

{Why can’t I do that same?} Artoo asked and nudged him some more.

“It’s not the same. A brain can’t be fixed like a photo-receptor can. It’s not the same at all. My broken parts can’t be replaced like that. I’m not...I can’t get fixed, Artoo.”

{People can be fixed up. Like the doctors who fixed your arm and then you’re collarbone when you broke it. A head doctor can help.}

“Artoo.”

{It isn’t polite to be late to an appointment. Take a shower and get changed. I’ll tell you when we get there.}

“You’re sounding like Threepio, Artoo.” Anakin answered, forcing himself up and hating every second of it.

{Now you’re being nasty.} Artoo beeped and Anakin laughed.

#$#$#

Helgina was not in the habit of dismissing how important droid could be. How...alive they sometimes were. How sentient they had the capacity to become. How they could be easily tampered with.

Which was one of the reasons she didn’t employ them.

Which was also why she bothered to accept the appointment from the R2 unit in the first place. The Hero and Friend of Naboo, coming to her. It wasn’t a total surprise. He could be here for information, he could be here for something else.

Helgina was just curious enough to try and find out why the man was coming here.

The ship that approached her building’s landing pad, was hideous. A clunker pulled apart and stuck back together with spit and hope. It’s engine purred, though, the ship not even shuddering even though it looked like it’d fall apart at the drop of a hat. When the loading ramp was extended, Helgina waited patiently for the Jedi to emerge.

When he did, he looked terrible. His hair was long and yanked back. His eyes shadowed and tired, his entire body seeped of energy and life. He leaned heavily on the R2 unit as he stumbled down the ramp. Considering the crime he’d just committed, Helgina bet that he hadn’t wanted anything to with it in the first place. His guilt was eating him alive.

“You don’t look well.” Helgina said quietly as the human stopped in front of her. “Sick...ill...in fact. “

“I’m here to keep my appointment.” Anakin told her and his glare was directed at the droid. “You’re Dr. Helgina?”

“I am.”

“I got your...” he fished around in his spacers clothes and handed over a wrinkled bit of flimsi. “Your card from a librarian.”

“A green twi’lek?”
“Yes.”

“Hmm.” She guided him toward the inside of her office. “And old friend of mine. He did well to recommend you.”

“I’m…I don’t have a lot of time. The council is expecting me back soon. And…Artoo told me that you’re confidential.”

“Doctor-patient confidentiality is a very serious matter. I would not divulge information on you to anyone should they ask.”

“What about a mind-trick? A lot of people.”

“No fear for your files and secrets, Skywalker.” Helgina said, leading him into the usual room and gesturing to the couch. “Though your droid may need to leave if you like. I cannot guarantee his secrecy if you invite him in.” She didn’t need to speak further, the droid buzzed at them both and rolled away. “Now I can.”

Helgina limped over to own seat and took a deep breath from her respirator. Skywalker, stared at her for a moment and then paced the room. He seemed caged and terrified and nervous.

“Did you see the news today?” He asked, glancing between her and the door.

“I did.”

“You saw what happened on Corellia?”

“Yes.”

“I’m…I did that. I did that. I did it to get Obi Wan out of prison. I don’t…”

“How do you feel about that?”

“About what?”

“Letting Obi Wan have a way out of prison. A way back to…the jedi.”

“I don’t.” Anakin stared blankly at him, “I don’t think I wanted him to come back.”
Conference- Day 2

Chapter Summary

The conference meets a bit of snag. Anakin arrives on Naboo. Leia meets a crossroads.

Chapter Notes

Yo. My story updates will be a lot slower in the next few months. I'm taking a very difficult summer course that needs my full attention. Do not fear. I will finish every one of my WIPs.

Ryloth was just as hot as Obi Wan remembered it. Still wallowing under the festering sun and the reflective surfaces of the cities. Still teeming with hundreds of citizens on every level. Each on, building and creating upon the other.

It burned with the force glow a million people.

“Master?” Luke whispered, tugging on his sleeve. He was staring outside the speeder viewports, his eyes wide. “Master?”

Obi Wan didn't reply for a while, his attention focused on churning out ideas on what to do about the re-emergence of Padme and the capture of Anakin Skywalker. He was so unfocused that it took Luke jabbing him in the stomach for him to look up.

“What is it, Luke?” He asked, rubbing sleep from his eyes.


“After the war, young one, not many planets recovered as easily.” Luke glanced at him and Obi Wan felt his chest tighten. They were the same blue eyes that had been so close so long ago. “Luke,” he snapped and the boy reared back, “what was done to Ryloth was not the fault of the Republic.”

“I didn’t say.”

“It was done by the Separatists who wish to take the planet now. The Jedi protected and aided Ryloth as best we could.”

“Master, I didn’t think. I was just.”

“It is nothing, Luke.” Obi Wan said firmly, “Ryloth is not your concern. You are only here to observe how a treaty is done and signed and the proper procedure of diplomatic meetings.” He didn’t look down to see Luke’s wide-eyed expression that eventually turned away. He glanced up at the distant sky and then frowned. Appearing like some long-aged specter, were a dozen ships. All of them painted in the distinct green and red of the Separatist Fleet. Luke grabbed again at his master.
“Master!” Obi Wan ignored him, closing his eyes and forcing himself to focus on the Amidala shaped problem. “MASTER!” Luke yanked him down and pointed out the window before the man could yell at him. “LOOK!”

“What?” Obi Wan gaped and then yanked out his commlink. “Masters, Masters, come in.”

“I’m here,” Windu said, “we don’t know if they’re going to attack. They just appeared.”

“Where is the fleet?” Obi Wan asked, watching the capital ships that began to create a concerning cordon in the upper reaches of the atmosphere. He could feel the malevolent, hideous, stained presence of Count Dooku.

“We’ve summoned the Light Fleet from Naboo,” another voice cut in on the chatter. The Jedi in the parade all strained to look out the windows of their personal speeders, ignoring the bored crowds below. The escorts on animals all ignored the spectacle overhead. “Taa’s men did not know that they were bringing a whole kriffing fleet!”

“What do we do? If they attempt to kill us!”

“Remain calm,” Yoda interjected, “we must.” His aged voice crackled over Obi Wan’s comm unit. Luke, still staring at the distant ships didn’t pay attention. A dozen or so ships began to descend. One, a personal cruiser with crazy looking solar panel that flared in the front. Which began to fold as the pilot began the descent. It was followed on all sides by a ring of B-Wings and X-wings. The entire escort and the ship flew overhead, sweeping toward the tower in a roar of engines and wind.

Obi Wan gripped Luke’s shoulder, “keep calm, my padawan.” Luke stared and declined to mention that he had been calm the entire time, just curious. If anyone had been panicking it was Obi Wan.

#S##S#

“You are a full-tilt diva.” Kitster said, glancing out the window at the parade of Jedi speeders below. The ‘parade’ was in full swing and it looked like no one was willingly participating. “Why do they have a parade? Ryloth does not like the Jedi.”

“I am sure that is Taa’s way of managing things,” Dooku said and held a datapad to his right.

“Who are you holding that out for?” Kitster asked and Yan swallowed down the sudden lump in his throat.

“No one,” he replied, “are you ready?”

“I presume you’re broadcasting Pure Evil down the Jedi Hotline?”

“I am. The Sith artifacts your wearing should help do the same.”

“I do look quiet evil.” Kitster agreed. He smoothed down his black robes and produced the smooth metal mask from the seat next to him. “What do you think?”

“The Jedi will be frightened and fearful.”

“Good.”

“Remember, they are under the…” Dooku blinked as his datapad blinked at him and message popped up. “Hmm. It seems that the Jedi do intend to betray us. Two jedi are on the planet with
Padme Amidala. Looking for Hera Syndulla or Amidala to find the location of the Syndulla ancestral home. Our agent surmises that the Jedi plan on keeping Ryloth. Probably by destabilizing the proceedings and kidnapping you. Oh, this just got interesting.”

“I don’t like the way you’ve said that. I don’t want to get kidnapped by the Jedi.”

“That’s understandable.” Dooku said, “Come, we’re landing soon and I want to look suitably intimidating for them.

“Fantastic.”

#$#$# As soon as the Separatists procession had passed overhead Obi Wan had given the droid piloting the speeder to break formation and rush to the landing pad. They were followed quickly by the rest of the Jedi council and many of the senators. Luke spent the last few minutes adjusting his clothes and making sure he looked the proper image of a padawan.

His master was beginning to turn pale, his eyes taking on a curious sheen. Luke watched the man grip a datapad tightly between his fingers before storing it away. It was the same datapad that Luke had seen his master handle quite a bit since coming from a meeting with the Council. But he’d never seen Obi Wan turn it on.

“We need to be ready to greet them, Luke. Do not be intimidated or frightened. They are Sith but unless the conference is derailed by either side they should not attack.” Obi Wan glanced at him.

“Are you sure I should go meet them? I mean, won’t they be able to tell that I’m a Null.”

“Luke, you are not a Null.” Luke stared blankly at him and Obi Wan ran a hand through his hair.

“Luke, one day you will be the most powerful Jedi in the galaxy and you need to be present for this meeting. The future of galaxy depends on it.”

“Alright.” Luke said as the speeder came to a halt. Just across the landing pad he could see the Separatist ship waiting. A few more speeders landed beside them but Luke and Obi Wan were already dismounting, making their way across the landing pad to wait at the bottom of the boarding ramp. They were soon joined by Yoda, Windu, and a few others. A couple of the Senators and then the procession of twi’leks that announced that Orn Free Taa had arrived. Luke leaned closer to his master as a dozen beautiful twi’leks, all wearing slinky outfits and plastic smiles, became clear. They were all surrounding the increasingly oversized senator and silent.

“Kenobi! It is good to see that you are here! The best Jedi to handle this! And Yoda, such a pleasure.” Taa laughed heartily and smacked Obi Wan’s shoulder, “I see you have brought a small child. Eh, that is bad pool. We do not discuss business in front of children.”


“Hmph.” The blue twi’lek cast a stare a Luke who stared back and before either one could speak; a deep hissing noise came from the nearby shuttle. Steam and fumes began to depressurize the ship. Smoke began to boil out from the ship as the walk-ramp was finally lowered. Luke covered his nose to filter out the stink and watched two men descend.

They were both in black robes. One, taller and older, carried a long cane and wore a blood-red cape. His face was heavily wrinkled, his eyes were solid gold, and an elegant lightsaber swung at his hip. His clothes were handsomely embroidered with silver and black thread. Sometimes forming
complicated sigils, he didn’t understand. Count Dooku looked every inch the terrible Sith Lord that
the reports had told him about. The second man, shorter but stout, wore a nearly blank mask. Only
marked by two crooked lines of white that ran from the forehead, over the eye-holes, down the
cheeks and ended at the jaw. He didn’t carry a lightsaber but he moved as if he didn’t really need
one.

“Jedi.” Count Dooku’s voice was deep, smooth, almost genteel. Though, the aggressive stance and
gold eyes negated anything he might have said. “Good afternoon.”

“Dooku,” Yoda stared calmly at the man from his hoverchair, “welcome to Ryloth, we do. A
long time, it has been.”

“Indeed.” Dooku agreed, faintly sneering at the old Grandmaster, “Emperor Yoda, I am surprised
you attended the proceedings today yourself. I would have thought you would send your favorite
attack mutt and leave it to that.” The gold eyes flickered over to Obi Wan and Luke bristled. He
stared boldly back as the judgmental expression landed on him. The man seemed to consider him, as
if assessing his value and his person before Luke was summarily dismissed. “I am sure we can get
these tedious proceedings out of the way.”

“Final negotiations, we have.” Yoda said and Dooku’s eyes tightened.

“Further negotiations? You did not see fit to inform, oh, perhaps one of my diplomates?” Dooku was
definitely sneering now. As she spoke further, more people became to removed themselves from the
shuttle. All of them wore tight but moveable armor, unlike some of the old clones that Luke knew.
Their armor looked comfortable and fit for close quarters combat. They all wore masks, some of
them only covering the top half of their face and others covering their whole face. Every single one
was armed.
Half of the dozen were women of varying species and the other half of the dozen were men. One of
the bodyguards took up a direct position behind Dooku, the one draped head to foot in tan fabric and
holding a wicked looking spear. Luke, watching the bodyguards with curiosity swiftly becoming
fascination, didn’t notice the way Obi Wan was staring at the figure in black beside Dooku.

“I don’t suppose you’ve planned for the negotiations to begin this evening?” Dooku asked and when
Yoda shook his head. “Of course, you didn’t. Well. I suppose that you cannot be blamed for your
lack of foresight, you are Jedi after all.” The Jedi all remained stoic but even someone with Luke’s
lack of Force affinity could feel the annoyance permeate the air. “Very well,” Dooku waved an
imperious hand. “Show us to our room then.”

Leia had watched her master take off on his starfighter a day ago. He’d left her with several
assignments, a dozen or so that mostly relied on her working in a library. She was planning on
studying for a project and had been; just not the one that Windu had been planning on.

“Leia?” She glanced back to see Queen Breha waiting in the entrance of the library. Technically
Leia was supposed to be using the Jedi library but the queen had insisted the Leia use hers.

“Your majesty,” Leia waved, “I think I finished my research.”

“Research?” Breha joined her at the table where several datapad were joined by piles of flimsy.
“What sort of research?”

“Well, my mastered assigned me to do a lot of assignments but I thought I should get this one done.
I’ve been working on it since I had that dream about that boy. Here, look. She shoved her datapad at
Breha, “my idea was that since I am not a good Jedi then I need to find something to do. I quantified the qualities a good Jedi needs to have and I am lacking over 40% from each category. This includes, Force Affinity, patience, lightsaber skills, piloting skills, diplomacy, and the skills at mediation. I haven’t even passed most of those basic classes. Here,” she handed off another datapad, “a paper written by the Jedi Master Tiko, he said there are a lot of way to follow the force and help the galaxy. First, you don’t have to be a Jedi to do it. Second, anyone who helps another and brings more light into the galaxy. Third, so long as you live an honorable life, a just one, and a kind one, then you’re not doing anything wrong.”

“Yes.”

“So,” Leia excitedly handed another datapad, “I came to the conclusion that to do more good for the galaxy. I need to leave the Jedi.”

Breha nearly choked on her next breath and she watched Leia beam excitedly and set her hands on her stylus. “Leia, leaving the Jedi is often considered to be…not done?”

“I know. I know! But if the old Jedi thought that you could bring light to the galaxy and do good even if you weren’t a Jedi then why don’t we? Why do we consider it a failing? Why don’t we see it as following the Force? I know, I know that I can’t be a good Jedi. I’ve tried my whole life! I can’t even do the basics. I’ve never even left Alderann. Your majesty, I know that I can do good and I can be just but I can’t do it as a Jedi. Don’t you see? Please?”

“Of course.” Breha hid the trembling in her hands by folding them in her lap and stared. Her heart was in her throat. “What would you do then?”

“Well, I have to leave first. Then. Find a school and I was thinking a degree in political science and if that doesn’t work then something like medical school.”

“Oh. That does seem wise.” Breha stared a Leia, “what about a family?”

“A family?”

“You are very young to be out on your own, making your own living. In a few years perhaps, but not now. Who will you go with? School can be very expensive.”

“Oh,” Leia deflated, “I didn’t. I’m just…I guess being a Jedi means I’ve never really had to pay for anything. I know that’s a thing.”

“Yes, well. What if you knew a family. Some people who would be more than happy to take care of you while you started building yourself a new future.”

“I don’t know anybody.” Leia said and then considered it for a moment, “well, I guess I know the junk dealers and the racers but I don’t think any of them want house guest.”

“Leia,” Queen Breha could hardly contain her excitement and her terror. She watched Leia turn a confused gaze on her. “You are thinking too far. Think, closer to here.”

“I don’t want to live with the Jedi if I’m going to be leaving them.”

“Leia,” Breha knew Bail would agree. He’d agree wholeheartedly the moment he heard. “What about us?”

“You two?” Leia’s brown eyes widened and she stared with increasing shock. “But you’re a Queen and he’s a Prince Consort! I can’t! You’re too busy. You’ve got so much to do.”
“Leia, we would be more than honored to accept you into our home.” Breha said.

“Um.” Leia kicked her legs. “That’s seems pretty crazy. You just, want to have me here. I mean.”

“We are already friends, Leia.” Breha said, taking Leia’s small hands in her own. “Do we need more?”

“I guess not but I’m…” Leia looked terrified and hopeful, the two emotions warring with equal passion on her face. Breha knew the girl was a crossroads. Standing before the unknown and trying to figure out if she ought to take a leap of faith.

“I won’t ask for you answer now but when you have decided then you can come to me at any time.”

“Oh, okay.” Leia’s hands were now the ones shaking, “okay. Okay, okay. She muttered the phrase like a mantra that might save her. Breha squeezed her hands a last time and left to find her husband.

#$#$#$

Padme’s second speech was written during a squall. The boat, heaving up and down on the water, threatened to capsize and collapse. Padme, manning one of lines and brushing soggy hair from her eyes; prepared. Pressing all of her rage and frustration as the storm and the last decade and half into the words. She took the pain from her blistering hands, the soreness in her feet and back, the headache building behind her forehead; and wrote a speech that matched it.

It was a fiery speech, one of impassioned rage and seething fury. One that equaled her hatred for those who had dismantled everything she had believed in, poisoned everything she had loved; taken everything she’d had.

#$#$

Obi Wan, waiting until they had escorted Dooku and his retinue toward the hotel, slipped away as soon as Mace Windu gestured him aside.

“What is it?” He asked, folding his arms in his robes.

“I hope your feelings on Anakin are clear, Obi Wan.”

“They are.” Obi Wan agreed.

“Dooku didn’t just bring too many body guards. He also brought a whole fleet. It’s Tang, she’s positioned her ships around the planet. I’ve called the Light Fleet up from Naboo. If Tang attacks she’ll at least be met with resistance while we handle things here.”

“Very well.” Obi Wan remembered facing Tang during the waning days of the war, weeks after Anakin’s defection. She’d been unpredictable and violent then and had only grown in skill since then. “Do you need me to join the Light Fleet?”

“No,” Mace sighed, “I think it’s just a show of intimidation but I don’t want to take chances. Tang’s manipulated planets from the Republic before.”

“She has and under the direction of Dooku, he seems…maddened since the last time I saw him. Crazed, almost.”

“He is indeed steeped in the dark side. I could feel the malice coming from Skywalker. It seems that
whatever Sith magics they’ve been practicing have only made them crueler.”

“Indeed.” Obi Wan rubbed his hands and sighed. “Do we know when we are planning to…bring Anakin back?”

“Not yet, Skywalker has to be isolated. Where is your padawan?”

“I sent him to our rooms to get them ready.”

“Very well, read over your section of Revan’s Cure and hurry. As soon as we acquire Skywalker he will need to be purged.”

“What are you planning on doing to Leia?”

“The same but we have more time with her. She is a timid child and obedient. I have full confidence she would never stray from the order.”

#$#$#

Han Solo was in the third round of sabacc with Chewie when the sensors on his ship lit up. He didn’t notice, too engrossed in trying to find a less humiliating defeat at Chewies genius paws. It wasn’t until said Wookie slapped the table did he look up.

“What’s got your fur matted?”

{The sensors are going off.} Chewie growled, moving away from the table and toward the cock-pit. Han followed him only after getting a look at Chewie’s upside down cards. He cursed at the arrangement on the table and set off after his friend. {The fleet is moving.}

“Finally.” Han grumbled, taking a co-pilots seat and flicking on his headphones, “what took them so long?”

{I don’t know.} Chewie said as the ships began to move slowly toward the jump point. {Prepare to hit they jump point.}

“Alright, alright. One day I’m going to be flying this thing proper.”

{Of course.} Chewbacca huffed and Han rolled his eyes. The ships outside the viewport vanished into Hyperspace and they shot forward to their own jump point. The Falcon shot into hyperspace as soon as the calculations were done.

Half an hour after they vanished, another fleet of ships dropped into the space. Separatists, headed by Senator Skywalker and preparing to surround Naboo, emerged with little fanfare and a near whisper of noise.

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“Your majesty.” Queen Lindala, halfway through being fitted into one of her elaborate gowns; glanced to the side to see her Chief of Staff standing in the doorway. “Senator Skywalker and the fleet have arrived. Shall we prepare?”

“Yes, my eternal apologies to the clones serving here but we must act swiftly. Begin preparation immediately.”

Across Naboo, word went out. The minimal garrison that had been stationed on Naboo since the clone war went haywire. The entire set of buildings shutting down and locking the men inside. Some
noticed, most didn’t. It was too late in the evening cycle for people too. Gas began hissing from the vents in the ceilings and the helmets of the clones outside. Slowly being drawn into identical sets of lungs and filtering out into cloned blood.

When the Separatist fleet settled around Naboo the necessary opposition was already dealt with. Set down in prisons and removed from the streets where they’d fallen.

Queen Lindala met Anakin Skywalker at the gates of the Royal Palace, surrounded by the press, the representatives from every state of the planet, both species, and as many people who could fit into the courtyard.

“Welcome to Naboo, Anakin Skywalker.” Lindala swept forward and Anakin gave a courtly bow. “We are honored by your presence and grateful for your intervention.”

“Thank you for your greeting, your majesty. On behalf of the Confederacy of Independent Planets, I welcome you as well. I know this has been some difficult decisions for you to make.”

“Citizens,” Lindala turned from Anakin to the camera’s broadcasting across the planet. “Of Naboo, we are at a crossroads. Our planetary identity, our culture, all sits in danger from the Jedi Emperors. For many generations, we supported the Republic and democracy. In recent years, in fact, in recent months with the illegal, improper and cruel treatment of our most beloved queen, we have come to realize the cruel fact. Naboo has been supporting the uncaring, callous, Imperial government of Emperor Yoda. We are a free people!” The crowds muttered to themselves and seemed to agree.

Boss Nass, nodded too. “Citizens, I can no longer allow us to be a part of a galactic government that takes our children. We cannot allow our history to become a lie, we must face our truths, as painful as they are. We must embrace our passions and our pains. With a heavy heart, I must declare the dissolution of the union between Naboo and the Republic!”

“I love it when I win.” Tang watched the holo showing the ceremony on Naboo and the screen showing the energy readings of the Light Fleet that had come out of hyperspace. Every few hours or so she’d have her guns cycled through, pretending that they were ready to fire. Fearing an attack, the Jedi would have their guns readied. Soaking up energy and fuel for an attack that would never come. As soon as they relaxed enough, Tang ordered the guns cycled again and enjoyed the increasingly frantic transmissions between the Jedi dirt-side and the Jedi closest to her.

“Don’t you think you’re being a little cruel?” She looked over, Captain Sato was waiting a few steps away.

“I enjoy making them nervous,” she answered, chuckling. “Look at this Sato, the Naboo are signing the treaty with Anakin Skywalker. The Jedi are getting all flustered just because we’re cycling our guns. Honestly, I don’t know how this could get any better.”
The Eve of Chaos

Chapter Summary

The Ryloth Conference is a powder keg. Ready to come to a head. Padawan Leia and Dume both come to a decision.

Luke meets Anakin Skywalker

Hera Syndulla hadn’t been on the team that had excavated some of the tunnels and caves. She’s been too young at the time. Now, she didn’t really want to excavate tunnels and caves, favoring the skies above her instead.

She hated tunnel and caves.

“How long until we get out of here?” She grumbled as she spread out her bedding on the chiseled-out shelf that served at her bed. To her left, Numa was glowering at Hopper as he gently rebandaged the cut on her angle.

“Until the Jedi aren’t looking for us anymore.”

“Why are they even looking for us? We’re just political leverage against our families.”

“I know, kids but apparently you’ve got something they want. We’re here until we get the All Clear.”

“This place sucks.” Hera said and Numa’s head bobbed in agreement.”

“Dad doesn’t want you to get hurt or bothered. He’ll deal with the jedi.”

“But wasn’t Plo a Jedi too?”

“He was, not anymore.” Hopper set Numa’s foot down. “Come on. I know that was a pretty long hike, you can’t already be tired.”

“I’m not,” Hera grumbled, “I just hate being underground.”

“I know you’d rather be flying, I’d rather be digging in the dirt but we can’t do what we want right now.”

“I’m not mad at you.” Hera sighed and she looked up at dark ceiling. “I just. This reminds me of Taa’s dungeons.”

“Me too.” Numa said, “I just…hate it.”

#$#$#

Bedrock was a dud. There was nothing there besides a horribly primitive hospital, a good number of bars, and not much else. He was totally ignored by everyone he saw. He even recognized a few of them, their arrest records had been on his datapad a few months ago.
“There’s not much here is there?” He eyed the self-proclaimed hospital and sighed furiously. “Why won’t anyone talk to me?”

“Do they have to?” Wolffe had taken up a spot atop of an empty barrel. He hadn’t bothered to help Caleb search the town. He was knitting. His yarn was in his bag and slowly un-spooling as he worked.

“I am a Jedi Knight.”

“Padawan.”

“I am a Jedi Padawan! They are charged to help me!”

“Ah…no they aren’t.” Wolffe still didn’t look away from his knitting as Caleb fumed beside him.

“They are!”

“ Nope.”

“But the law.”

“Doesn’t matter here.”

“You are still a citizen of the Republic.” Caleb’s speech was interrupted as Wolffe burst into bitter laughter.

“Citizen! I was never a citizen. A best I was a tool and at worst a slave. I was bought and paid for by the republic. You think I’m a citizen, you’re an idiot. I’m discarded property. You wanna know why people aren’t helping then you just need to look to history.”

“But you get along with Master Plo Koon!” Caleb protested, dropping to the ground in a huff. He looked up at Wolffe. “Right?”

“When dad first came down here I shot him.” Caleb choked. “I didn’t want to talk to him. None of us wanted to talk to him.”

“You shot your father?”

“Yep.”

“Why?”

“He needed to be shot. I was angry and he…he was here. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“But you shot him? How come you call him father now?”

“Kid, did you finish looking through the town?”

“Yeah, Master Billaba called. She said the search for either Padme Amidala and Hera Syndulla is now top priority. I just don’t know where to look.”

“I’m not surprised. It’s a nice sized planet and you’re looking alone.”

“I have you.”

“I’m here in case you get into trouble. Not anything else.”
“But I need to find them!”

“But I don’t care.” The sarcastic whining that exactly echoed Caleb’s made the Padawan blush. “Kid, you want to take that ship somewhere else yet or what?”

“Fine! Where do you think she could be next?”

“Eh?” Wolffe sighed and set his knitting to the side, “I’d check one of the fishing towns. They’re always a great place to look.”

“Ok.” Caleb and Wolffe began to make their way back to the ship. “Why did you shoot Master Plo anyway?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Because I thought you guys got along. “

“We do but every family has their ups and downs.”

“You shot him.” Caleb pointed out and Wolffe shrugged.

“Come on. If I tell you the story will stop being so obnoxious?”

“I can try.” Caleb promised as they moved up the boarding ramp and proceeded to the cockpit. “So, what happened?”

“When the clones were…discontinued they sent most of us here.”

“Yeah?” Caleb started up the ship and waited for the man to plot in the coordinates.

“Pops…he…came down a few months after the fact. The whole galaxy was in turmoil and he just… left the order.”

“I know that much. One day he was here and the next he was gone. Didn’t report in, didn’t do anything. He was just gone. We thought he was dead.”

“He wasn’t. He appeared out of nowhere. Just…came up to us and said…said the force had told him to come here.”

“Really?”

“Kid, just head out. Look, I wasn’t happy to see him. He walked out of the woods and I shot him. He didn’t even deflect it. Just…took it. I told him to get lost.”

“What’d he do?”

“He left.”

“Left!”

“Watch your flying!” Caleb hastily corrected his course. “Yeah, he left. He went off into the woods and just…lived for a while. I don’t think he had any supplies. I don’t know. He just…stayed there and one day I got…curious and went to him.”

“What’d he have to say?”
“Not much.” Wolffe watched the passing trees and water with a frown. “Dad was…ashamed. I guess. Of everything that happened during the war. He…wanted to apologize. He said he was led here by the force.”

“But following the force led him just to a farm.”

“It led him to us.” Wolffe dug into his bag for his knitting. “Keep your eyes on flying, kid.”

“Right, sorry. So, um what happened?”

“We were used kid. Do you think we wanted to go back to being friends with someone who was responsible for it?”

“But it was Master Plo Koon!”

“So?”

“So…” Caleb glanced nervously at him, “following the force?”

“It meant he went where he was supposed to be and do go off on the line of complaints that he’s only a farmer. There’s nothing disgraceful about being a farmer. You know, I bet you’re the kind of person that makes fun of janitors and cleaners.”

“I don’t!”

“Yeah, sure. You haven’t shown much indication that you don’t. Look, Dume. We didn’t get along for a while and it took us all lot longer to even accept him here. But he cares about us and we care about him. Sides, it’s not like we’re going to be around for much longer. We’ve only got about 30 maybe 35 more years in us.”

“That’s not true!”

“Yeah, I’m only twenty-six and look about twenty years older.” Wolffe sighed, “we just weren’t built to live long lives. Dads got about a hundred, two hundred years left. A lot can sure happen between now and then.” Caleb was quiet, surprising the retired trooper. He’d expected a lot more questions. Eventually, as they came up on the fishing village that was more or less run by Corellians, he spoke again.

“Do you think it was hard?”

“Hard?”

“Yeah.” Dume didn’t look at him, eyes almost too focused on the skies in front of them. “To just… leave…everything he’d ever known? To just leave and come here to a place he didn’t know and to be with people who might not want him? Do you think…he was terrified of it?” Wolffe raised an eyebrow at the boy and sighed a bit.

“I don’t know. I mean, he must have been. I think the order’s the only thing he ever knew.”

“Well, “Dume squeezed the ship controls and took an audible breath, “do you think he made the right one? The right choice, I mean.”

“Sure. Not everyone’s supposed to be what the Jedi think they are. I like farming more than being a soldier.”

“Really?”
“Well, we have a fight night to keep our skills sharp. Growing things make me feel better I guess. I like the dirt and the water and all the little stuff that farming needs.”

The ship shuddered as Caleb set it down on the little space that had been cleared for ships. He didn’t move though, his whole form vibrating with discomfort and uncertainty.

“I think I need to meditate,” Caleb told him, finally turning. “That way, I can find one of them at least.”

“Sure thing. I’ve still got a few more feet to add to this scarf.” Wolffe watched the Padawan reluctantly detach himself from his chair and make his was from the ship. He watched him leave and returned to his knitting, know that Hera and Numa and Padme were all a long ways away.

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As soon as the sun had set, the Jedi convened in Obi Wan’s room and Luke was crowded out. He didn’t protest the banishment, instead he made of the gardens for a bit of privacy. Still, Obi Wan, Yoda, and the others were all gathered around the holo screen looking confused and annoyed.

“Dooku seemed too calm at the idea of further negotiations. He should have been in a frothing rage at this.”

“I know.” Mace rubbed his head and looked around, “what’s up his sleeve? He wouldn’t have brought his pet attack nexu without good reason. Tang is a planet thief but we’re already signing over Ryloth.”

“We’re not actually signing over Ryloth,” Obi Wan reminded him, “we’re stalling until we get news back from Master Billaba and her Padawan.”

“Even so, we can’t stall forever. We only asked to review a few sections of the accords. AT some point Dooku is going to want the planet.”

“At some point Skywalker is going to want to see his son.”

“What do we count first?” Obi Wan asked and they all waited for him to continue. Their expressions all bitter and sour.

“Explain, young Kenobi.” Yoda ordered from the place atop of the overturned fruit bowl that he’d made his seat. Obi Wan obeyed.

“The objective is to get Anakin Skywalker and to keep Ryloth. If worse comes to worse, which do we abandon?”

“We’re not abandoning either.” Mace smacked the table. “Ryloth has always been a Republic planet and Skywalker is ours. We will take both.”

“We might not be able to. Tang is above, Dooku is here, Skywalker’s been using Sith magics. Tang is obviously here as muscle, considering that is what she is best at. Still, if we show signs of treachery she would attack.”

“She might attack. Dooku would not let another galactic war be started over Ryloth.”

“He might, remember, he is a Sith Lord and Tang is…dangerously unstable. Anakin is with them too! We saw what he did to the huttss and Zygerrians! This cannot be allowable!”
“Look,” Mace rubbed his forehead some more and shook his head, “we’re leaving with both Skywalker and the planet. We won’t break the treaty, we just won’t sign it and Dooku can’t force us to sign it.”

“He can’t,” Obi Wan agreed, “but that doesn’t mean he won’t try.”

Indoor gardens were staple of living on Courscant. The planet was devoid of most natural life and even the poorest kept small planets alive nearby. It had to be a sentient thing that they all needed planets and such to live without going crazy.

Here, they were a symbol of power and money.

Which was why Luke was a little confused to see Anakin Skywalker sitting in the center of one.

Dark robes pooled at his side, his mask was in place and he looked like he was meditating. He might not have been, probably why he spoke before Luke could.

“Hello, little Jedi.”

“Um, hi.” Luke had expected his introduction to Anakin Skywalker to be different. He’d expected the force to scream in warning (as much as he could hear it) and maybe for there to be deeply ominous signs somewhere to indicate that he was meeting a traitor. There was nothing odd about the day.

Anakin Skywalker looked normal.

“Are you afraid of me?”

“No! Jedi are not afraid!” Luke walked into the view and planted his hands on his hips. He glared at the masked man. “I am not afraid of you, Anakin Skywalker.”

“No?” He turned a bit and Luke swallowed heavily. “You’re not afraid, are you.” His voice was calm and smoother than Luke had expected. “You’re terrified.” Luke shook his head.

“No.”

“Of course not. Now, are you here to meditate too?”

“I just…wanted to see them and to meditate too.”

“The gardens?”

“Yeah. Why are you here?”

“I wanted to see them as well.”

“You can’t see them when you’re sitting down like that.” Luke pointed out and nearly gasped as Anakin Skywalker moved to his feet.

“Correct.” Luke took a few hasty steps back as Anakin Skywalker turned his complete attention to him. “Would you like to join me?”

“I am a member of the delegation.” The former Jedi reminded him. “We are not fighting a war. We are at peace. I am extending a polite invitation. Though, I will not force you to come.”

“Um.” Luke knew they weren’t at war but still…Anakin Skywalker was dangerous and horrible and he’d murdered the chancellor and…it would be impolite to refuse. “Sure. I’ll go with you.”

“Only if you are willing. It would not do for me to be forcing uncomfortable social interactions. There was a bit of self-deprecating mocking in his words and Luke wondered what that meant. “Um…sure. Come on. I think there are some water features. Um, is this your first time to Ryloth?”

“Ye…no. I was hear during the clone wars. You?” Skywalker moved with grace and patience. Like a king or a statesman. His robes made nary a whisper as they brushed against the stones. He looked comfortable where he was and Luke thought he was even more intimidating walking than sitting down.

“Uh,” he rubbed his nose and tried to straighten to a proper Padawan pose, “this is my first time.”


“Oh, yes. Much. But there we have our own beauties as well. Our planet is unique in the galaxy.”

“Twin suns right?”

“Yes.” Skywalker looked down at him, a curious tilt to his head. “twin suns. Very fitting, given the circumstances.”

“Circumstance?” Luke fiddled with his hands nervously as Skywalker seemed to consider his next words. “Which ones?”

“It was always considered that Ryloth was the twin sister to Tatooine in many respects. First, usually run by so many gangs and slavers. The heat and the suffer that our peoples have suffered from the owners was near identical. Did you know that one of my childhood friends was a young woman from his planet? She was smart and clever and very beautiful, which was why the gang lord kidnapped her. He owned an enormous section of land and when his tenants couldn’t pay money he would have their most beautiful women kidnapped. It didn’t matter if they were married or even underage. If he wanted them, he got them. Many things like that happened on Tatooine.”


“Oh, she was taken to learn how to be an assassin.”

“An assassin!”

“Yes.”

“And? Do you know if she turned out okay? Is she! I know you guys have done a lot of anti-slavery work. Did you?”

“A few years ago she was sent to murder me.” Luke gaped and the man shrugged. “In the battle… she detonated her own transmitter.” Skywalker looked to the side, his wide shoulder drooping visibly. Luke could feel despair seeping from him.

“I’m sorry.” He said, feeling stupid. Anakin Skywalker crystalized, becoming something besides a legend. Something besides the boogie man that lived in the base rooms of the temple. He was almost
“I…thank you, young Jedi.”

“What did you do?”

“About?”

“About your friend, when she died? Did you…cry? Did you stop the man who sent her?”


“Cry?” Anakin Skywalker paused, “I still do.”

“But, if she’s one with the Force then at least she’s free.”

“Hmm.” Skywalker said something in a language Luke didn’t understand. “What do you do, when you lose somebody you love?”

“Oh, gee. I haven’t lost anybody I love. I don’t know if I love anybody. We’re not supposed to love, you see. We’re Jedi and that’s sort of…dangerous to us. I mean…so I don’t really know.”

“What about if you lost your teacher?”

“Which one?”

“You mean my master?” The former Jedi visibly winced. “You don’t like it when I say master, do you?”

“Should I?” Skywalker asked, his smooth mask was angled away from the young man but Luke still got the feeling he was looking at him. “I was a slave once.”

“But you were a Jedi.”

“I suppose I was and I didn’t see much of a difference.” Anakin said and Luke inched away. He didn’t think it would be polite to correct a dignitary but the habitual defense of the Jedi rose to his lips. Luke forced it down, remembering was Dilje had told him not to long ago. ‘There are two sides of every story and being wise means listening to both sides.’

She had meant it for him to listen to a bootleg radio show that was talking about the upcoming talks with Master Yoda. Luke thought it could apply here too.

“Um.” He glanced around to make sure there wasn’t anyone else in the gardens. He felt something shift in the air and he straightened properly. “I think the gardens are very nice. I heard that Senator Taa has several specimens from a now-extinct plant somewhere in here. I’m not sure what they were named.” The shift of tone and conversation made Anakin Skywalker start until Obi Wan Kenobi came storming around the corner.

“Of course, I believe it is the Juja tree. Their original valley was bombed into nothing decades ago.”

“LUKE!” Obi Wan snapped and Luke turned to him, his face perfectly shifted into an expression of polite deference.
“Good Evening, master.”

“Luke! What are you doing here?” Obi Wan stormed up and snagged his shoulder, nearly shoving him behind a tree.

“I was coming to meditate,” Luke nodded to the politician in black, “then Mr. Senator asked me if I wouldn’t mind walking with him.”

Obi Wan’s glower was fierce and deep and when it turned to Anakin Skywalker is turned downright ugly. “Skywalker,” he ground out, “spreading your lies and treason.”

“Master! He’s a delegate! You have to be polite!” Luke protested and said nothing more when Obi Wan slapped a hand over his mouth.

“Hardly.” Anakin Skywalker hadn’t moved in the confrontation. He was relaxed but still every bit as intimidating as before. “I was merely wandering about the garden, Kenobi. Considering how many people dislike the idea of Ryloth’s succession I thought it would be safer with a Jedi escort.”

“You do not need a jedi escort, Anakin. You.”

“I did not give you permission to you that name.” The senator interrupted coolly and Luke stilled in his struggles against his master. Obi Wan’s glower didn’t lessen but his voice did die down.

“Excuse me?”

“You are not excused, Jedi.” The black robes swished as he stalked a step closer. “I did not give you permission to you my name. I am a delegate. If you must address me you may use Representative Tatooine, nothing else. I will not allow you to take un-granted liberties and sickening familiarity. Remember, Negotiator,” Luke didn’t know if he’d ever heard that nickname used as an insult. “I am the ranking official here, not you.”

“I am a member of the Jedi Council and a General of the Grand Army of the Republic.”

“And still lower ranking than a servant of the people.” The man paused mockingly, “unless, your order as dropped all pretense of democracy and now claims itself to be equal to the governing bodies.” There was a political game going on that Luke didn’t understand but Obi Wan’s face flushed from red to purple and then back to red. “Your order service the Republic, does it not. As much as Yoda may which to design himself as the Emperor, you are legally bound to the same position as before the war began.”

Luke nearly whimpered as the hand on his shoulder dug painfully into muscle and bone. “Perhaps.” Obi Wan conceded and Luke looked up to see the most bitter expression of furious agony on his face. He gave a taut, ugly bow, and yanked Luke behind him as he left without another word. Luke gave a frantic wave before they turned the corner.

The man’s laughter followed them from the gardens.

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Luke felt a familiar surge of terror as his master pushed him into an empty room and whirled on him. “What?” Obi Wan seethed, a hand jabbing in the direction of the garden, “was that?”

“I was just...doing what you told me to do.” Luke said quietly, his shuffled away from Obi Wan. “Be polite to the other delegates. Uphold the image of the Jedi Order. I just found him by accident and he started talking first!”
“What did he say? What did he tell you?”

“He didn’t say anything! He just wanted to know about the gardens and the stuff. He asked me to walk with him. I don’t know why!” Obi Wan turned away from him and stomped up and down the room. His face was marred with a glare the flickering feeling that Luke got from the unresponsive force was dark and impatient.

“Did he say anything else?”

“Not that I understood.” Luke stuttered, “he said some stuff in a language that I didn’t know.” He felt heat buildup behind his eyes and knew that if he started crying now he’d be in even more trouble. In front of the room, Obi Wan was still pacing.

“Why! Why did you talk to him? You knew he was a traitor! You know he’s dangerous! He could have stolen you! Do you have any idea what you’ve just jeopardized! I told you to go meditate!” His voice continued to raise until he was shouting. “WE HAVE A TINY WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY TO FIX THIS AND YOU NEARLY SET ALL OF THOSE PLANS BACK BY A DECADE! DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU COULD HAVE DONE?”

Luke shook his head and Obi Wan stopped yelling. With visible effort he pushed back his fury and finally spoke quietly. “Why?” But still through clenched teeth, “didn’t you go to your room?”

“We haven’t been shown our rooms.” Luke leaned away as his master stopped in front of him. “And I…I like gardens and you said meditate but you didn’t say where and I…I just wanted some space to meditate. I didn’t think I’d see anyone. It was an accident.”

“An accident that nearly jeopardized this ENTIRE TRIP!”

“I’m sorry.” Luke hunched his shoulders, his voice was almost too quiet to hear. “I didn’t…I didn’t mean to. It was an accident.”

“Luke…” Obi Wan set a hand on his shoulder and Luke flinched away from him. He didn’t look up to see the heart broken expression on his master’s face. “Are you sure he didn’t say anything more?” Luke nodded, not looking up from his shoes. “Alright, well. We should get to our rooms. The other masters are negotiating with Dooku at the moment. Let’s just…let’s go to bed, alright?”

“Alright.” Luke shuffled out after his suddenly drained master, his eyes still glued to the floor. He didn’t see the tan robed figure squirm out from under a table and watch the door close behind the jedi.

#$#$3

“Tang?” Tang flicked her headpiece on as she surveyed the increasingly nervous Republican fleet.

“Yes?” The voice in her ear was Oola’s.

“Can I kill Obi Wan Kenobi?”

“I don’t know.” She leaned against a console and nodded for her gunner to cycle the weapons systems again. “You’d have to ask Dooku.”

“I want to kill him to.” Kitster’s voice joined the conversation. “Can we kidnap a Jedi please?”

“Ew.” She wrinkled her nose, “don’t we already have enough?”
“Well,” Oola sounded furious, anger in the back of her throat. “He just shouted at his little learner just for talking to Kitster.”

“He shouted at him?” Kitster demanded and Tang chuckled to herself as her cryptologist handed her a Republic transmission they’d decrypted.

“Yes, he shouted at him. And he didn’t even apologize. The little boy looked like he was going to cry. I felt for bad for him. I can’t believe that red-bearded sleemo.”

“Language,” Tang said, hypocritically.

“Oh, and he also shouted something about the boy potentially ruining everything.”

“You couldn’t have mentioned this earlier?” Tang demanded, pressing a hand to her earpiece as if Oola would feel her annoyance through the motion. “What did he say?”

“Just that the boy had nearly ruined a window of opportunity ten years in the making. He also demanded to know if Kitster had spoken seditiously.”

“Did you, Kitster?” Tang twirled the datapad around and raised her eyebrows.

“I did. The boy covered it himself. He was curious, asking about a few things and when he sensed his master he switched to an innocent conversation. Let’s get the count.”

“Alright,” there was a moment a waiting until Dooku’s voice came over the line.

“Yes.” He sounded like he was agreeing sarcastically with the Jedi. Since he was still in the meeting with them, anything he tried to say over the comm line would need to sound like it was a natural part of the conversation. There was a mischievous shift in the air as Oola, Kitster, and Tang considered this.

“They have a plan for Kitster. We can tell that much,” Tang said and Dooku gave a hum of agreement. “It appears that the little boy attached to Obi Wan Kenobi nearly ruined an operation. I don’t think the child has details but Kenobi certainly does.”

“You should search his quarters.” Kitster suggested to Oola.

“What do they want with the decoy Skywalker anyway?” Tang mused, “he’s burned too many bridged between himself and the Jedi. Do they want to put him on trial? Do they want him dead? What is it exactly that they want?”

“A stalling factor,” Dooku said flatly and there was a chorus of agreements. “I can tell your reluctance stems from your unbelievable ego and arrogance.”

“Hypocrite.” Tang muttered.

“This is happening. I will allow one more day for negotiations before you sign the treaty as is. One day, Jedi.” He waited for the Jedi to speak.

“One day!” Tang exclaimed, “why bottleneck them?”

“I think that if they have one day then they will rush to finish whatever plan they’ve been working on.” Kitster said and Tang grumbled in annoyance. It’ll be easier to get them to mess up if that is the case.”

“Oola,” Tang read another datapad and kept back her laughter only through sheer force of will,
“keep an eye out for bombs and hutt’s boobs.” There was silence down the line. Dooku stiffened in his seat, narrowing his eyes at Yoda and wishing it was Tang there to feel his displeasure.

“Hutt’s boobs! Alright, Sir Tang. Should I also keep an eye out for any of the Jedi making passionate love to one another in a closet?”

“Yes,” Kitster joined in with malicious glee. “Probably Yoda and Windu. They seem the adventurous type. Maybe some aids or a camera too. If they film.”

“We can sell that. I’m sure plenty of Republican would love to see their commanders-in-chief having a lovely petting session.”

“Of course.” Kitster sounded helplessly amused. “Keep an eye out also for any of those orgy piles of clone troopers.”

“ENOUGH!” Dooku roared, smacking his hand on the table. The Jedi jumped and Tang muffled her laughter into her arm. Kitster had no reservations about laughing out loud. Oola giggled. “One day, Yoda, no more. I grow tired of your simpering idiocy. Should you continue to stall I will have my High General remind you as to why you do not try to double cross us! One more day! Sign by this time tomorrow or I am taking that as a sign of incompetence and inability! I will wretch this miserable planet from your feeble grasp and remind you of my power! Surrender Ryloth with all due pomp and circumstance and legality or you will do so with your own blood! Anything further you wish to say can be directed to my aide who is paid money to deal with such enormously prolapsed cranial material such as yourself.” Tang snorted and her captain sent her a confused stare. She waved her off and listened to Dooku excuse himself with spiteful courtesy.

“Anyway,” Tang said, hoping to get some more in before Dooku was back in his rooms. “I have the people up here pretty rattled. I have one of their reports that says I’m a maniac on the verge of scrubbing the planet of life. They’re asking permission to start shooting. Oh, and here’s one that says my evilness has only increased. How flattering, I’m keeping that one. So far, they haven’t started shooting yet, though.”

“If they have a window of opportunity ten years in the making,” Kitster said, “and we have condensed it down to one day then there will be mistakes. I will keep safe as much as possible.”

“Agreed.” Dooku must have made it somewhere safe to talk. Tang braced herself. “I am maintaining the shroud; the Jedi should be totally convinced of my Sithliess. Kitster, do not interact with anyone who knew Anakin Skywalker so familiarly. Steer clear of the masters.”

“Very well.”

“And yes, the Jedi have favored using terror tactics to disrupt meeting before. If a bomb does go off then make it to your security teams exit. Do not get sidetracked. Oola, where is the second decoy?”

“Off, in Kitster’s room. If something does happen the switch can take place in seconds. The robes only need to be switched around.”

“Tang,” Dooku continued, "I did not jest."

“Aye.” She beamed at the Republic ships outside her viewport.

“And forget the child, he is not our concern this time,” Dooku said and they all agreed. “And not think you will not be paying for you prepubescent humor.” He warned and Tang shrugged to herself.

#$#$#$
Obi Wan left a miserable and contrite Luke to mediate in their shared quarters. He ran as politely as he could through the tower until he’d reached where Yoda was holding court. The aged grandmaster was grave and concerned.

“What happened?” He demanded and Mace looked from his hand to him.

“Dooku has put a time limit on our meeting. One day. We have a day to get our plans in order and to grab Skywalker before we lose our chance.”

“A true Sith he is,” Yoda pronounced, “obvious this was, during the meeting.”

“Yes,” Ti agreed and Obi Wan shook his head. “There is a shroud that he carries, it chokes off the force. His darkness is more pronounced.”

“I found Luke speaking to Anakin.” All eyes turned to him and Obi Wan shivered under the combined stare. “He says he went into the gardens to mediate and found him by accident. I don’t...he was telling the truth then but he ruined everything. He wasn’t supposed to meet Anakin until we were complete with our distraction.”

“That messes everything up.” Mace yelled. “That is everything! WE! We! What are we going to do now?”

“The same thing,” Shaak Ti said, “except that we now scrap the second and third part of the plan. We set off the bomb but we add several grenades to the mix. We made the distraction bigger and worse and we scramble up our men to fake confusion. In the chaos, we separate Skywalker from his guards and take them.”

“He still ruined everything!” Mace snarled, “Kenobi, when you return to Courascant, discipline him.”

“I intend to.” Obi Wan glowered at the holo-table. “When do set off the explosions this time?”

“During the signing,” Mace said, “close enough to rattle the roof but far enough away the no one gets hurt.”

“We still haven’t heard anything back from Master Billaba.” Obi Wan pointed out. “If we don’t have anything to stop Syndulla from his terrorist activities then Ryloth will be a done deal. We don’t keep it.”

“Mediated, on this, I have.” Yoda said, “acceptable loss, Ryloth is, if our lost one we gain. Attempt to hold it we will, but it is not our priority. The Chosen One is our target.”

“Fine,” Obi Wan ran his hands through his hair and fumed silently. “Luke is now useless; shall we send him back on a shuttle now?”

“No,” Shaak Ti said, “Skywalker might still sense his son through his darkness. There is hope yet.”

“Well we lost our original plan to begin with.” Obi Wan said through tightly gritted teeth. “Force! Can’t he just do as he’d told?”

“Patience, with young Skywalker you must have,” Yoda chided him. “Lost, he is. To blame, his tainted blood is. Once pure, the perfect Jedi he will be.”

“Can that happen now?” Obi Wan said and he sighed, “never mind. What is the time table for this plan of ours?”
Caleb walked under the shade of a leaning willow tree and swallowed heavily as he heard Wolffe walk out of the ship. The clone didn’t bother him though, moving away from the nervous Padawan into some distant underbrush.

He swallowed again and leaned against the tree and then slid down. Bark yanked at his robes and dragged them up. Caleb only closed his eyes and tried to focus.

“What do I need to do?” He asked. “What am I supposed to be doing? I don’t…I don’t understand anything right now. I need help. I need….to know where I’m going.” Caleb found no answer in the room and settled into the oldest meditation pose he knew.

The wind rustled the tree above, the engine ticking over was audible, and then soft breath he expelled as he waited.

“What do I need to do?” He said finally. “A force that binds that galaxy together. It just sounds…crazy…I guess when I say it out loud. I need to know. I need to see what I’m supposed to do. Plo Koon came to spend his time with the clones. I just….what about.” He dropped his head back against the tree behind him. “They keep telling me I’m supposed to be a Jedi but…then they told me that I’m supposed to be following the will of the Force. I don’t know what that even means. I thought I did but I guess meeting…Plo and the clones just sort of reminded me that…I don’t know much. I mean. It’s not like I was really questioning.” He bit his lip. “I just…I was supposed to be a really great Jedi and I just…can’t even do what I’m supposed to. I’ve been covering it up.” Caleb knew he was babbling.

He didn’t try to meditate that way the masters had showed him year ago. He didn’t think he had the focus or the care to do it. Instead, he tried to keep his mind clear. Trying to rise above the ever-increasing confusion and fear that seemed to be trying to suck him down.

There sure was a lot to think about.

Or not think about.

He focused on a blade of grass. Staring at it, memorizing the details. Trying to see the faint veins that ran along its length, judge how it would dance in the sky. Hyperattention took his focus from the single blade to the bunches around it. They were so different and so similar and so…interesting.

Caleb leaned forward and flopped onto his stomach. Propping his head up on his hands, he continued to stare at the grass.

Caleb reached out and yelped when he reached, not for grass, but for a gray boot that had appeared. He jerked back and stared up at the enormously tall and recognizable form of Qui Gon Jinn.

“Master Jinn!” He scrambled to his feet, gaping. Caleb wrapped his arms around himself and felt his heart jackrabbit.

“Hello, young Dume.” Jinn smiled, warm enough to hold hands over.

“I…what are you doing here?” Caleb asked, he pressed himself against the tree. “No one’s seen you since the Clone Wars are you…um…you’re still dead right?”

“Yes.” Qui Gon settled into his own meditation pose but he was so tall that he reached up to Caleb’s hip.
“What are you doing here?”

“You are…distressed and confused. I am here to help. If you would like me to.”

“I…but…I was. You heard me?” Caleb blushed furiously.

“There is no need to be ashamed of your concerns or fears, Caleb.” Jinn blinked, “I shared them once myself.”

“You did? But you were the perfect Jedi! Everyone who ever knew you still talks about you. A good Jedi wouldn’t be so afraid! A good Jedi wouldn’t think like this! They’ve be like you! Perfect!”

“A martyr doesn’t choose how the living paint with their blood.” Jinn told him. “I was never a perfect Jedi, young Dume. I tried very hard to be. I failed often and spectacularly. Caleb, there is no such thing as a perfect being.”

“But you.”

“I am sure the decades have given me quiet the saintly glow,” Jinn said and Caleb pressed his forehead into the tree, groaning, “and yet I am still the same person who tied his master hair to the bedpost when he slept.”

“You did that too?”

“Oh yes, I set a small family of idnin ducks to live in our bathtub while my master was gone on a solo mission. I have…many times broken the rules of common decency and kindness through manipulation and lies. Several instances come to mind that were very close to my death day.”

“Hmm.” Caleb wasn’t sure what he should be doing. “You know no one’s seen a force ghost since…forever I guess.” This time Master Jinn’s smile was sad.

“I am aware. Please, sit down.”

“I…alright.” Caleb did as he was bid and stared at the blue outline of the long-dead Jedi. “Um.”

“What is on your mind?”

“I…what am I supposed to do? I’m supposed to be a Jedi but I’m getting all of these mixed signals and I just…I’m so scared because I’m not using the force like I’m supposed to be. I….if I’m not careful I’m going to be a bad of Jedi as Null.”

“Null?”

“You know…Luke. Master Obi Wan’s Padawan. He’s really…not great. He can’t even levitate a rock.”

“I see.” Jinn pursed his lips, “why is that?”

“I don’t know…I guess he isn’t trying hard enough. I mean, they wouldn’t have brought him to the temple if he didn’t have the sensitivity. He’s really bad. I mean, he’s still in the most basic saber forms. He doesn’t know anything about flying or droid maintenance. I think he’s…a little stupid.”

“That is not very kind.” Jinn pointed out and Caleb blushed.

“Come on, he’s really bad. Every Padawan in the temple knows it!”
“We are not talking about him, we are talking about you and your fears and concern. It does not do for you to make yourself feel better at the expense of someone else, young Padawan.” Caleb’s face tightened into a frown but he nodded.

“So, what do I do?”

“I don’t know.” Jinn told him and Caleb blinked rapidly.

“I thought you were going to help me!”

“I will but I am not here to give you a roadmap and send you on your way. I am here to help you… discover what you need to do.”

“I thought you were going to help me?” Caleb exclaimed and Master Jinn shrugged. “Come on! I’m right in the middle of my first(ish) solo mission and I have no idea what I’m supposed to do. First I’m supposed to be the best Jedi ever and the best Jedi obey the will of the Force but Master Plo is following the will of the Force and he’s karking farmer!”

“And.”

“I want to do something! I want to do what they told me what I was meant for! I want to change the galaxy! I want to help people! I want…” his voice trailed off and Caleb sighed, “I want my destiny.”

“You desire the destiny that has been manufactured for you by lies and false promises.” Jinn said, his voice as deep as thunder and nearly as soothing. “Your promised destiny may or not be to be a Jedi. You may be called to elsewhere, to be a father.”

“I can’t ever imagine falling in love.” Caleb looked surprised. “I mean…I don’t even know how to. I guess, I love Master Billaba…don’t tell her that.”

“Caleb, there are a million way to listen to the force. Where you expect yourself to go may not be where you are needed or where you even want to be.”

“Did you ever figure it out?” Caleb asked and Jinn shook his head.

“No. I tried to do as I am trying to tell you to do now but I am. I was afraid though, of what I was told. Terrified even. I convinced myself that I could do it as I decided and my own way. That I could walk two paths at once, my idea of what I was meant to do and what I was really supposed to do. Had I…” Jinn seemed to take a deep breath and painfully admitted, “I am sure the galaxy would be a much different place.”

“Why were you so scared?” Caleb swallowed heavily and tightened his arms around himself. “Was it…bad?”

“No. It was different. So very different than anything I’d anticipated. The visions they…rocked me to my core.” Qui Gon looked off into the distance, “I failed horribly and when I faced Darth Maul, I knew I was facing the consequences of my inaction.”

“Me messing up could bring about a Sith!”

“The council’s inaction and action is what brought about the Confederacy of Independent Planets.”

“No, they didn’t! they tried to stop them, not give them money and power. They had nothing to do with Anakin Skywalker’s defection! That was not their fault.” Qui Gon didn’t waste a second, he burst into rumbling laughter that made Caleb flush with annoyance.
“If you do decide to follow in Plo’s example, then you know that you will be scared. It is strange and frightening but necessary.”

“I am scared! I don’t want to be scared! I won’t want to have to hide from my master and lie to her and be so frightened of everything! I’m sick of being scared! I don’t want to be scared anymore. I’m so tired of lying and feeling so sick and wrong all the time! I want to feel better. I can’t even release my emotions the way I’m supposed to. Every time that I try I just feel even more sick!” He covered his eyes with trembling hands and forced back his tears. “I hate feeling this bad.”

“Why do you feel bad?”

“I DON’T KNOW!” He shouted and refused to look at Jinn. “I just feel bad. I feel bad and I lie about feeling bad. I lie about not being sad and being unhappy and I just…I don’t want to feel bad. I want it to go away! Just to go away!”

“Does it hurt?”

“Sometimes,” Caleb admitted clearly despite his heaving chest and blinking away tears. “I just…when I’m most scared. When I just…remember what happens if I don’t do well or if I fail. I can’t stand the thought of it.”

“You are afraid and hurt, young Caleb.” Qui-Gon held out a hand and Caleb reached back, surprised past his silently falling tears. He grabbed a solid hand and gasped as Qui-Gon proceeded to very gently pat the back of his hand.

“You’re solid.” He stared. “You’re solid!”

“For now.” Qui Gon told him. Caleb look at him and then around at the trees.

“Where you really scared?”

“Terrified.”

“I’m scared.” Caleb said and he tried to stem the snot running down his nose with his free hand. “I’m so scared and I…please help me. Please.” Qui Gon said nothing else. With eternal slowness, he pulled Caleb closer to himself until the boy was leaning against him; trembling. “Please don’t let me fall,” Caleb gasped, his eyes were wide and sightless, focused on the distant horizon. Nerveless, pale hands came up to grasp at Qui Gon’s cloak. He shivered against the solid chest, his own rising and falling in rapid bursts. “Please.” He begged, “I don’t…I’m…”

“Breath little one,” Qui Gon advised, his deep voice all but rattling his bones, “breath.”

“I can’t.” He exclaimed, “I can’t. I can’t. I,” tears oozed down his face as he tried to force air down into his lungs. All he managed was a series of increasingly desperate heaves.

“You can.” Something electric, like brushing a hand over wool and then touching metal, punched through his panic. Caleb felt something his heart snap, breaking off and falling away into nothingness. Shocked by the sudden sensation of nakedness and the total chill that followed, Caleb’s mouth opened and closed once…twice more, before he buried his head against Qui-Gon’s shoulder can began to cry noiselessly.

Qui Gon Jinn said nothing else, simply holding the distraught Padawan.
A hundred different swear words raced through Luke’s mind as he carefully lifted the lid off of his dinner. A few of them directed at the food but most of them directed at Obi Wan.

Contrary to what most Jedi thought, not being a strong force sensitive didn’t mean he was an idiot. He could tell when he was in trouble and he could tell when his master wanted him to be in trouble but had no tangible reason for him to be.

Like now.

Instead of the delicious food that was being set in front of his master, Luke was presented with something that more or less looked reheated five times over. I didn’t look appetizing for a rancor.

“Something the matter, Luke?” Obi Wan asked, the steely edge to his voice hadn’t softened all day, only sharpening as the evening had gone on and their enforced walks around the tower seemed fruitless. Luke stared at the rancid looking soup and forced his temper down.

If he was in trouble then why didn’t they just come out and say it? Why did they have to snub his silently like this?

“No, Master,” he said dutifully and picked up his spoon and then he picked up his bowl. “I think I’m going to eat in my room.”

“That would be wise, that would keep you out of trouble tonight.” Luke bit his lip and marched the short distance to his little room and pressed the door shut. There, he thunked the bowl onto the floor and plopped beside.

“That would be wise.” He sneered under his breath. “Keep you out of trouble. Sure, like it was all my fault. I didn’t ask Anakin Skywalker to talk to me.” He glared at the food for a moment before picking the bowl up and digging his spoon in.

His first thought was that someone in the kitchen has made a huge mistake. No doubt Obi Wan had instructed him to be given the Ryloth equivalent of In Disgrace food but…Luke took another bite and frowned. This soup was delicious. The thick chunks of gunk that had looked rancid were… watercress? There were vegetables that had fallen to the bottom with the meat, seasonings that floated to the top that gave it it’s separated, aged look. The smooth broth that thickened as he stirred it, disturbing the vegetables and meat.

“Wow.” He savored his next bite and the next. He was supposed to be in disgrace, food was supposed to taste bland or bad. He’d been in disgrace planet of times at the temple, it was pretty routine for him. His running in the lower levels of Courascant and the public library had given him a whole new perspective on food. But there the food tended to look delicious and taste delicious. He’d never seen food look bad but taste amazing. He blinked and scarfed down his food as quickly as he could before his master could possibly come in and take it. He looked at the empty bowl and inched out into the little room where his master was still eating.

“Yes, Luke.”

“I’m finished.” He said. The good food had lifted his mood but he couldn’t let it show. “Um, do you want me to take the dish to the kitchens?”

“That will not be necessary.” Obi Wan told him coolly and Luke glowered at the ground and set his bowl on the floor next to his door. He retreated to his room and decided his master could fetch it if he really wanted to.

#$#$
“Why were you in the kitchens?” Dooku asked Kitster as the man emerged from the hidden door in the wall.

“I wanted to see if we were being poisoned.” Kitster replied, only partly facetiously.

“Kitster.” Dooku rubbed his forehead, “what were you doing?”

“I made soup,” he told him and hefted the tureen in arms and nodded to the robed Oola who was carrying enormous loaves of bread. “I didn’t want to eat food made by slaves.”

“Of course.” Dooku understood immediately.

“And in doing so I discovered that the young Padawan in apparently in disgrace. This means his meals are…disgusting or bland. I fixed this. He now had something delicious for supper. His teacher should be well fooled.”

“Obi Wan might have found out.” Dooku pointed out and accepted the proffered tureen and moved to set it on the table beside himself. “What do you say to that?”

“He does seem unhinged.”

“Yes, I did sense that.”

“He shouted at the little boy,” Oola said, disgusted, “I hate him.”

“I do not blame you. Kenobi has disappointed me in more ways than a few.”

“We need to eat.” Kitster pulled down his mask and veil and smiled. “I made Dune Soup.”

“Excellent.” Oola and the other security guards off duty all gathered around the table too, crowding the count out. He sent a frown to Kister who shrugged pleasantly.

“Very well.” Dooku retreated to the far side of the room, sulking. “I will wait until I am wanted.”

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Plo Koon felt something shift. It wasn’t an enormous one, it didn’t yank on his attention or give him paused. Instead, it was tiny. A small shift but even small shifts were enough to threaten the structural integrity of a building.

“What is it?” Depa looked up from where she was meditating and frowned at him. Plo didn’t reply, instead he covered his momentary inattention.

“Remind me,” he asked to the Jedi, “to tell Wolffe that he still needs to repair the fencing down by the pond.”

“I didn’t land near a pond.”

“No, that does not mean there aren’t very heavy and very stupid herbivores wandering around the planet.” He held up the vegetable he’d been chopping, “if I recall correctly, you enjoy leeks.”

“Your memory seems to be failing, Master Plo.” Billaba said past thin lips. “I cannot abide leeks.”

“Ah.” He moved the chopped pile into the soup, “my mistake.”

#$%%$
Leia set her hands on her hips and looked at the enormous mess that had been made of the shared common room between all padawans. She stared at the door where her compatriots were and pursed her lips.

“Why aren’t any of you helping me?” She demanded and there was some muffled giggling.

“We don’t have to,” someone said finally and Leia’s glare deepened. The door didn’t budge. She marched up to it and smacked the release.

It didn’t budge.

“HEY!” she yelled, “I need help!”

“No, you don’t.” Someone said, “you could get all of that cleaned pretty easily with the force.”

“I can’t do that. You know I can’t use the force!”

“Oops.” Some more muffled giggling and Leia’s patience snapped.

“FINE!” She shouted. “GOOD RIDDANCE YOU BRATS!” She looked frantically around for a pair of scissors. Finding them, she yanked on her Padawan braid and held it taut and attacked it with the twin blades. It fell away in her hand and she threw the scissors at the closed door and stormed into the oversight masters room.

Master Illo yelped and tried to hide the green mask covering his face. “LEIA! GET OUT!”

“I am getting out.” She snapped and held out her Padawan and dropped it to the floor. “I, Leia, formally resign from the Jedi Order. I am leaving.” Master Illo stared past his fingers as Leia stormed from his room and through the empty halls of the Jedi side of the palace until she reached the conjunction point. She looked up at the two guards and nodded. “I am Leia, I am not a Jedi. I am here to speak with the Queen and King.”

“Alright.” They waved her through. She heard Master Illo shouting and running down the halls and turned as he skidded to a halt in front of the guards.

“Let me through.” He ordered and the guards didn’t budge. “NO! This is official Jedi business.”

“Then it doesn’t concern her.” The tall one said, “she’s not a Jedi.”

“YES SHE IS!” Illo’s eyes were wide and frantic. His green mask had cracked and was beginning to fall over his bedclothes. “She is! Leia, you turn around right now and get back here!”

“No,” she turned around again and began walking away. She left behind a frantically shouting Master Illo and ignored the guards that rushed forward to help the others. Once she was in the main wing of the palace, she looked around.

“Leia!” Queen Breha, in her bedclothes, rushed into the hallway closely followed by her husband. “Leia! Are you alright?”

“I’ve had it!” She stomped her foot. “I was right. I am not meant to be a Jedi. I am not supposed to be made fun of and disliked and teased just because! I am supposed to be happy and…doing something more useful than cleaning up after a bunch of jerks.”

“Leia.” Breha didn’t wait a moment before sweeping across the corridor and engulfing the trembling teenager in a hug. “You are so brave.”
“I’m mad at them,” she declared, “I’m mad at all of them! I… I came to you because I thought you… would help me.”

“Of course,” Bail agreed instantly, “anything you need, Leia. We will always help you.”

“I just.” She leaned unconsciously against Queen Breha, returning the hug. “I don’t know where to go now but I’m going to… figure it out.”

“We’ll help you,” Breha promised, leaning away a bit to get a better look at Leia. “Oh, little one. Do you need something to eat?”

“No, I had dinner.” She bit her lip, suddenly shy. “Um, I was hoping that I could get a hotel room somewhere cheap and then.”

“No, not acceptable. You must stay here. We’ll give you a room.” Breha nodded firmly. “You can stay the night and we’ll discuss your future plans in the morning.”

“Did I wake you guys up?” Leia asked and Bail shook his head.

“No, we were already awake.” He smiled at her fondly, “you were very brave, Leia.”

“I don’t feel brave. I just feel… angry and… mad and all those other dangerous emotions.” Leia stared at the royal couple. “You’ll let me stay? You don’t have to.”

“I insist.” Bail said, “we insist. We love your company and we’d be glad of more of it.”

“Okay.” Leia nodded and held onto Breha as the queen stood. “Hey!”

“You are not a Jedi any longer,” Breha said, “you need new clothes! I believe one of my handmaidens’ ward could lend some pajamas.”

“Okay.” Leia agreed. She looked over at a brightly beaming Bail as she was carried into the royal quarters where a few handmaidens descended upon them.

“Oh, Leia.” The first one, with white hair and a stiff bun held out her arms in a gesture of solidarity, “Is it true?”

“I left the Jedi Order,” Leia proclaimed and was met with a number of gasps. “I am now… I don’t know. I guess that I’m just me now.”

“Are you happy, being you?” Asked the second one, her dark skin and hair was offset but her bright yellow dress. Leia nodded, a bit hesitant and Breha waved for silence.

“My friend, Leia is in need of some sleep clothes and a bedroom.” They scattered and Leia looked after them in surprise.

“They sure move fast,” she said and squirmed to have the queen set her down. Breha did as prompted but did not move away. She seemed fascinated and overjoyed to see the former Jedi standing in the room. Her hands kept distractedly patting Leia’s hair and shoulders as if she needed a reminder that Leia really was there. Prince Consort Bail seemed more shocked. He kept staring as if she’d vanish in an instant. His eyes were focused on the door, anticipating an attack from the Jedi that would never come. “Aren’t you guys tired?”

“No, would you like some tea or hot chocolate called for?”

“Um, some hot chocolate if it’s not too much trouble.” She glanced between the Queen and the
Prince Consort, “do you think Master Windu will be mad?”

“I do not know,” the queen lied easily. “But you have found for path and if he supports you then he will not begrudge how you follow your happiness.”

“What if he does begrudge me? I can’t go back. I can’t. It’s impossible for me to. If I go back it’ll be worse than before. They’ll all be worse than before. I just...I just want to do what I’m supposed to but I can’t do that and be a Jedi at the same time!”

“Leia, we will support your separation from the Jedi. We are you friends. We want to help you.”

“Why?” Leia demanded, suddenly overwhelmed by her split-second decision. “I’m going to cause a lot of trouble. They’ll break down the palace walls! They’ll try to stop me.”

“We will not let them.” Breha knelt beside Leia who was furiously trying to dash away her tears, “Leia, we will sponsor you.”

“But how? I don’t have anywhere to go! I never had anything outside the Jedi Order! I mean, I don’t know what to do! And I just walked out like an idiot! Without a plan or money and.”

“You did have people outside the order, Leia.” Bail joined Breha, he took her hand gently. “You always had us. We want to help you.”

“But I don’t have any money! I don’t have a way to pay rent and I don’t have any skills to barter for it.”

“We are your friends which means that we help you without expecting favors in return.” Bail exchanged a look with his wife.

“But what if they want me back and you have to.”

“If you don’t want to return then we will not let them make you. If you’re worried about the legality of the situation, we can always offer you our legal protection.”

“How?” Leia’s voice was watery and despairing, “they’re the Order, they run everything!”

“If.” Breha took a breath and reached over to take Bail’s hand to steady herself, “if we were to offer to take you one as a legal ward then the Order would have no reason or ability to take you.”

“What do you mean?” She rubbed at her dripping nose and glared at the snot; silently blaming it for her distress.

“We would...adopt you.”

“Adopt?” She blinked away tears and stared at the nervous pair. “You can’t adopt me.”

“Why not?” Bail asked in a rush.

“Because I can’t be...I don’t know. Doesn’t that man I’d be a princess?”

“Yes.”

“If you’re not comfortable with it then we can do fostering for now. Until you decide that you might want to become our daughter or if you’d be happier somewhere else. We don’t want to pressure you to do anything out would not like to.”
“No, I” She stared, “do you think that would work? Would that stop them from trying to take me?”

“If that itself is not enough then we have far more tricks up our sleeves. What do you think?”

“I mean...ok. But I’m not...can I be fostered instead. I don’t.” She kicked at the carpet beneath her, “I don’t think I’d be good at the other stuff.”

“Of course, as long as you are comfortable.”

“Her room is ready, your majesties.” A handmaiden entered the room, bowing. “And a set of pajama’s has been sent for. The necessary toiletries are also ready.”

“Thank you, Autu, I will take this from here. Have my lawyers set up the necessary documentation needed to foster an ex-padawan of the Jedi Order.”

“Very good, milady. Is there anything else?”

“Is the hot chocolate sent for?”

“Yes, it is also waiting.”

“Thank you, Autu. You may retire for the evening.” Autu bowed and retreated. Leia brushed away the last of her deeply reluctant tears and followed the royals from the parlor room, down the hall, and to an unfamiliar door. “This is your room for the time being. Now,” there was a whip-like turnabout to excitement, “what do you think of having a hot chocolate and pajama party?”

“I’ve never had one.”

“Would you like too?”

“I guess. Um, what do you do?”

“You get into your pajama’s and get some hot chocolate and then you spend time with people you love.”

“I’ll try it.” Leia agree and she took a nervous step into her room. “Are you sure...it’s okay for me to be here?”

“There is no place we’d rather have you be, Leia.”

“Okay.” She took a deep breath and marched in.

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The day of the signing dawned bright and clear. Usual Ryloth weather in full swing and the ceremonies had been prepared for since two in the morning. Both parties and schemers were deep in last minute preparation.

The Jedi Masters were fussing over robes and timing. Obi Wan hastily trying to fix Luke’s miraculously rumpled robes. Yoda spent the morning grimly muttering to himself and denying breakfast. Mace Windu likewise spent the morning trying to clear his head.

Dooku had more fun in the morning, perfectly secure in his faith of his companions; and spent extra time applying his make-up. To look properly intimidating to the Jedi, he used a toner too pale for his
skin. His eyeliner was applied heavily and then smudged. He applied trace amounts to lipstick and then artfully darkened his eyebrows.

When he stepped out of the refresher Kitster grinned. “You look properly terrifying.”

“I should hope so. I didn’t spend an obscene amount of money on eyeliner to look trashy.” He looked back at the mirror. “I am holding a shroud over the entire tower, this should confuse and frighten the Jedi enough that they do not hold any edge over us.”

“I do not know what a shroud is.” Kitster reminded him and Dooku sighed.

“It is confusing your force signature with Anakin’s. They believe it is you making this horrible shroud and casting darkness over them.”

“Your sense of dramatics is terrible.” Kitster positioned his robes and frowned at Dooku, “where did you pick all of this up?”

Dooku glanced back at the mirror, a tired smile on his face. “An old friend.” He said. “Now, my granted time limit comes to an end soon. We must go to the signing. Oola, where is his decoy?”

“Standing by. Our ships are also ready to fly should be need them.”

“Excellent, keep the engines hot. I have a feeling we’re going to be ducking out of here very quickly.”

“Really?” Kitster made a face at Dooku, exaggerating his feature and sticking tongue out. “Oh no, what do we do? We’re going to be betrayed!”

“Anakin is a bad influence on you.” Dooku said impatiently. “Now, come. To the signing.”
Chapter Summary

Obi Wan's trial for war crimes is a matter of public debate. Rex appears for a bit. Poda has some fun. A council meeting is had. Dooku grumbles a lot. Anakin suffers. Trust me, some not very nice things happen to Anakin. There is nothing horribly explicit but please note the new tags. It will make you sad.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Clone War

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“Why wouldn’t you want Obi Wan to return?”

“I don’t know.” Anakin glanced at her and then at his hands. “I just… I didn’t want to do it in the first place. I didn’t want to be the one who let him out. I wanted to…. I wanted him to stay there. In prison.”

“Interesting.” Helgina tilted her head to the side, “you said you didn’t want to go on the mission. Why?”

“I just…it didn’t seem right. I just…I thought…” He went quiet and sat on the couch, his back to her. His shoulders hunched enough that his head vanished between them. “I thought they were right?”

“Thought?”

“I guess, I think they were right. I still do.” He appeared to run a hand through his hair. “I don’t think Obi Wan should be leading troops or clones into battle. He shouldn’t be fighting. I shouldn’t be fighting. None of the Jedi should be fighting. We’re not supposed to take sides in things like this.”

“The war?”

“The war.”

“Tell me, Mr. Skywalker,” He perked up enough to look over his shoulder, “Who is ‘they’ and why do you think that ‘they’ are right?”

“I…Obi Wan’s guilty of all the stuff they accused him of. He was…the one who kept falsely surrendering. He was…” He clenched his hands. “They were right. They being the Separatists. Dooku was right. He didn’t…doesn’t deserve to be in command of the clones. He ought to be in prison. How many people are going to die because of me?”

“Mr. Skywalker.”

“How many of the clones are going to die doing stupid things? How many are going to be sent into a hopeless battle just to die? How many people did I put in danger? How many civilians will die in the crossfire of his battles now? How many officers and Jedi and… what have I done?” He buried his
hands in his head. “This is all my fault.”

“It is not, Mr. Skywalker.”

“How can’t if be my fault. I’m the one who destroyed all that evidence? When I’m the one who… he.”

“Mr. Skywalker,” Helgina paused, “tell me of the Jedi.”

“The Jedi?”

“Yes,” the woman watched Anakin turn around, “the Jedi. Please, take something to drink. I would like you to tell me your story. From the beginning to now. Tell me about you, Anakin Skywalker. What makes you…you.”

“What does it matter? Can’t you…give me a pill and fix me?”

“You misunderstood, Mr. Skywalker. This is help and advice. I am your councilor and your therapist. There is no magic pill to ‘fix’ you. To suggest is rather rude.”

“I’m sorry,” he moved until he was facing Helgina. “I’m…Artoo told me that its important to come here because…well.”

“What did he say?”

“He’s my friend and…like I fix his equipment he wanted to find someone who could try and do that same for me. Except this is different. I don’t think I can be fixed at all. I…I’m not…”

“Are you afraid? Rather, were you afraid to come?” Helgina waited as Anakin Skywalker buried his head against his knees.

“Yes.” His voice was too soft. “I was.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“Hmm. Mr. Skywalker, I have my own confession to make. This is not the first file I have on you.”

“What?” He looked up, blue eyes blinking away tears.

“Some time ago I was commissioned by a distant relative to give you a partial profile. Specifically, to determine if you were a danger to yourself and others.”

“Commissioned by whom?”

“My distant cousin, Yan Dooku.” Skywalker’s eyes darkened. He stood, looming dangerously over her.


“Nothing. I only have your files, the reports taken by those you encountered.” Helgina was too old and too tired to be intimidated by him. “Sit down, Mr. Skywalker, there is no need to be alarmed. No information and none of my diagnosis has reached him. I was simply asked to give a professional evaluation.”
“Did you?”

“It is not finished.”

“Then what are you going to do?”

“Nothing.”

“Why not.” His temper seemed to cool. He sat back down.

“You are now my patient. I’ve accepted payment from you. Anything I tell him would be a violation of many many laws that I would not break under any circumstance.”

“Can you tell him that I’m your patient?”

“No.”

“Then…what will you do when he wants that evaluation?”

“Give him nothing.”

“Oh…I guess you already know a lot about me already then.”

“Hmm, a little. Would you like your drink, Mr. Skywalker?”

“Er..yes.”

“Then we can begin.” Helgina watched Skywalker fetch himself a drink and leaned back against her specialized chair.

“Do you want a drink?” He asked. She pursed her lips, or, what remained of them.

“No, thank you. Please, take a seat.”

“Why did you tell me about him?”

“About my cousin?” Skywalker had chosen the chilled blue milk she kept on hand for her younger patients. It was in a small glass, looking delicate in his metal hand. “I told you as a matter of honesty. Secrets are useless in this setting. It is just as important for me to be honest as it is for you to be honest with me.”

“Honest?” He looked down into his cup and then up at her. “I don’t….I can’t…I think I’ll have some trouble with that. This is really hard.”

“You have done many difficult things in your life, Mr. Skywalker. I have faith you will prevail here.”

“I. I guess so.” He worried the cup between his hand some more. “Dooku’s the one who…pointed out therapy might not be such a bad idea.”

“Hmm.”

“When I got captured by pirates on a mission to Florrum and then I got.” His voice seized up, “tortured. The chained me and Obi Wan to Dooku and then just left us there. I guess…I woke up and then my filters fell and I had an episode.”
“Due to your hypersensitivity?”

“Yeah.” He took a drink. “Dooku rebuilt them. He, I guess he lectured me on safety and taking care of a problem instead of letting it destroy me. I was afraid he was going to use the information to hurt me or later in the war but he didn’t. When I got captured by Wat Tambor I...I don’t know. Doc, I don’t know anymore. I mean. I was so sure that I was okay with just sitting on this and doing nothing and pretending and pretending. But the longer I look at this and the longer it goes on the less...okay I am. I know I’m not okay. I know there’s something wrong with me. Lots of somethings. I just...how is it that Dooku, my enemy and the man who cut off my hand, isn’t going to use my...weakness.”

“Disability.”

“Well,” he, “I know I need help and...but...how is it I know my enemy won’t use this against me but...I know that Obi Wan would?”

“Mr. Skywalker.”

‘Where do I start?’ He finally looked from his milk to her. ‘I mean, I don’t think he’d do it to be cruel but I think that’s what would happen anyway. It would become all that defines me. That disability, my struggle, everyone would know. The Jedi and the whole galaxy. Which is why I...hide it. I mean, Dooku never ever did anything to make my...problem worse. He even went out of his way to help me when I was in prison. It was so weird. I got the same prison clothes but they were...nicer. They didn’t chafe as much as these do. I, you wanted me to start at the beginning. That’s where I should start, right?’

“If you feel ready to start.” They’d already begun, technically.

“Um...I.” Anakin Skywalker drained his glass in a single gulp. “I can’t talk like this.” Helgina didn’t speak, she tilted her head to the side. “Can we go somewhere where I can work on something?”

“What would you like to work on?”

“Um, I can fix something or...can I use your kitchen? I can talk while I cook.” This would make this a very interesting session but she’d had odder. “Please.”

“Certainly.” Helgina moved slowly to her feet, taking care to set her cane out properly. “The kitchen is this way.”

“Do you need help?” Anakin asked and she shook her head. “Okay, um. What do you like to eat? I mean, if I’m going to be cooking then I’ll make you something you like.”

“I will eat anything.” She said, “I would appreciate your efforts with anything you prepare.”

“Alright.” Anakin followed her into the kitchen and seemed to find some measure of calm. “Alright.”

#$#$3

Yen’s fury washed over every single officer on Corellia, every low-level thug she encountered, the officials of the prison that had been charged with containing Kenobi, and the Jedi Master’s of the Corellian temple.

Yan plug his fingers in his ears as another recording of his sister blistering fury was played. If she couldn’t have Kenobi on the grounds of raiding the Jedi temple would violate their constitutional rights, she would make them pay dearly for it.
“What did she do?”

“She’s angry.” Poda told him unnecessarily and too calm for his own calm. “Exceedingly so. She’s got the prison warden and a dozen of the guards in their own prison under the accusation of corruption and accepting bribes.”

“They did accept bribes.”

“I left evidence for her teams to locate. Give her something to eat while she gnaws on her anger over not getting Kenobi.”

“Truly, if my sister force sensitive she would make an excellent Sith.”

“If she ever finds out we are responsible for this then we are both dead. I do not expect to survive long with such anger after me.”

“No,” Dooku agreed, “but the wrong evidence locker was sabotaged. What could this potentially mean for Kenobi?”

“They still have the files and the records to destroy him. All the High Court would have to do is summon Kenobi back to stand trial. If he doesn’t then he would in be in contempt of court. Having a Jedi Master in contempt of court would be an ugly PR debacle.” Poda trailed off, dangling the prize before him with much less grace than she usually would.

“A PR debacle?” That did sound intriguing. “How big?”

“Hmm, how does twenty points down in the polls sound?”

“It sounds…..” The Sith savored the small victory, “like justice.”

“Now Anakin Skywalker.”

“Leave him be.” Dooku ordered. Poda’s dark eyebrows shot up. “I believe my sister was correct. Anakin Skywalker is…not a Jedi. Not in the sense that we know them. He is much different and much…better. You’ve red Tenner’s reports?”

“Sir, just because he has a temper doesn’t mean he’d defect from the Jedi. It doesn’t mean he’ll come over to the Confederacy.”

“He might.”

“Be corrupted to be a Sith? Like you? Sir, the probability is…very slim. Skywalker is.”

“A liar, a consistent liar. To his masters and his council. I am sure to his own Padawan. He is not what a Jedi should be. He is a warrior, you know this.”

“He might become a Sith. The probably won’t. You’d be more likely to convince him to go AWOL from the Republic. I’m not joking. He’s not fond of the Jedi and as far as he seems to be concerned, the Jedi are the Republic.”

“That is a frightening thought.” Dooku mused, “if Skywalker did defect it would be very, very useful.”

“I don’t think he will.” Poda said again, “and I don’t want him and Tang meeting anywhere except the battlefield.”
“However, even as slim as the possibility is…we should not target him as we are planning on targeting Kenobi. Do not have him brought up at all. Let no one know that he was involved in this mess.”

“The Jedi know.”

“They will keep quiet. When the new scandal breaks they’ll want to look innocent as they possibly can.”

“They won’t say anything to make them look worse.”

“Of course.” He admired Poda’s smug expression, “are you so certain you can convince the High Court to issue summons for a Jedi master?”

“I can get them to shout it to every single sector loud enough that the silence following the ‘convenient’ cover-up is going to echo like a motherkriffer.”

“Such a delight to have you on board, madam. Truly I have not lived until I have been assured by the likes of you.”

“Flatterer.”

“You assume there’s going to be a cover-up.”

“Of course,” there was a dangerous tilt to Poda’s eyes as she turned her head toward the Sith. “You ordered me to have Skywalker and Kenobi released. Now…I wonder who might have ordered you.”

“You are too intelligent for your own good,” Dooku warned her, “it could very well get you killed. Keep these observations to yourself.”

“I intend to, Count but you have to know. In troubled times like these,” she made finger blasters at him, “the carefully positioned stage lights might…shift. Who knows what sort of interesting back-stage work we might see.”

“Oh dear. You’ve been reading too many cheap mystery novels.”

“My mystery novels are all full price, sir.”

“Of course. Now go, see to my sister’s…consolation. She is much distressed.”

“Yes, sir.” Poda removed herself from his office, whistling too cheerfully.

#$#$

Captain Rex was confused. He was a little more than confused the longer he stared at the space before him.

“What’s this?” He asked the enormous woman next to him. Her dark eyes flashed and he gave a concerned glance to her enormous biceps that looked bigger than his head.

“Your room.”

“I.” He didn’t want to admit ignorance but he was pretty confused.

“We had to get these things built before we let you boys move in. Up to code and everything. Sorry about those little tents you all ended up getting. But you’ll all be getting real rooms and beds and
“Huh.” Rex clutched the few sets of prison scrubs he’d been alternating wearing. “How come I’m alone?”

“You’re an officer. Officer’s get private quarters.” The woman replied.

“I don’t want private quarters.” She rolled her eyes.

“You can have one of your men come join you if you want. There’s room and you’ve got a bunk bed in there. You just let us know who it is.”

“Alright.” Rex wished he’d been able to escape years and years ago. “Nice place.”

“Sure is. All in accordance with the rules, little man.”

Rex ignored the insult and proceeded into the room. It was nice. It had a small desk, a comfortable looking bunk-bed that sure looked like it beat out the cots they’d been given. There was a box too with his name and rank embossed on the side. There were even pale blue curtains over the window. A window that looked over the distant hills

“All this is for me?”

“Sure is.” The woman had waved off her guards and was now leaning against the door. “I figured you boys might like something…a little more accommodating.” She watched Rex wander from the window toward the bunk-bed. He felt the fabric of the blanket.

“It’s soft.”

“Blankets are supposed to be. “

“Huh. I want to write letters.” He faced her, “I want to be able to send a letter to somebody. Can I do that?”

“Sure, can but we reserve the right to look over your mail to see if there’s anything that doesn’t agree with us. Meaning, no secret messages.”

“I’ve been out of the war long enough that any intel I’ve got is useless, ma’am. I just want to let my…pal know I’m okay.”

“You’re pal?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, you know that big building you saw on your way in? We’re making that into a prison library. How-to books. You boys want to learn how to sew, craft, cook, farm, write, languages? It’ll be there. Plus a few other things. It’ll be nice for you.”

“Huh, seems like a lot of effort for some Seppies to go through just for some clones.”

“Orders came down from High General Tang.”

“Huh.” Rex paused, “what’s the catch?”

“The catch?”
“Yeah, you want something from us. What is it??

“Nothing. Making you work is against the rules of high war, unless we pay you and you agree. Sure, this a little better than the laws call for but we want you to have a place that you’re not escaping from. “

“It’s every officer’s duty to escape.”

‘Sure, you can try.” She pursed her lips, “I get that you’re pretty nervous and such but don’t be. This is a POW camp, we’re not going to hurt you.”

“Huh.” The clone set his clothes down. “What’s the box for?”

“Your stuff, your clothes. Whatever you want it to be. I’m heading off to check some stuff. I need you to get your brothers into their rooms and make a list. We need to know who is sleeping wear.”

“Alright.” He stared at the room a bit longer. “Alright.”

“I’ll send down your paper soon.” The woman removed herself from the door. Rex swallowed hard and turned to find his brothers.

Clones were beginning to file into the hallway, some checking out the rooms and some making a beeline for Rex. Most of his brothers looked alright, their wounds taken care of and all looked pretty well-fed.

“Alright.” Of the dozen people that were crowded around him and the others that were down the hallway, all turned to look at him. “Here’s the deal. This isn’t a joke, it’s not a trap. We should be okay but be vigilant. WE don’t want those seppies thinking we’re going soft!”

“What about an escape!” Shouted someone from the back. Rex considered.

“Mass escape may not be possible anymore. From what I can tell they’re building a lot but not a spaceport. The heads of the escape committee will meet tonight. Until then find a bunk and a brother you don’t mind bunking with! Then, put your stuff up and organize it. We’ll go back to our scheduled practice after everyone is settled alright?” There was an answering roar of agreement, Rex nodded. “Alright, I’m going to get everyone’s room number at the end of the night. Dinner is at the usual time. If a brother needs help, help them!” The clones scattered, some claiming rooms. A few fights broke out over ones with a more scenic view. Each settled pretty quickly.

When the 501st and parts of battalions began getting set on the planet, there was almost nothing. A lot of tents but not much else. Construction had begun on the dorm buildings and the other officers that the prison needed only after they’d been there a few weeks.

Rex had been far more concerned with his injured brothers. A lot of them had been injured in that last fight, a good number of them had lost limbs, vision and hearing. Doctors and nurses and droids nearly equaled the number of clones right after their capture.

They had had a pretty good tent town up until the dorms were finished. The new mess hall had been completed first, then the hospital which was probably better staffed than some places. So well-staffed that nearby planets had begun bringing some of their critical patients to recover here.

Rex wasn’t sure how the war was going but he had a feeling they’d be digging and building more places like this. He had a feeling a lot more people were going to be joining them.

It wasn’t until late that evening when he finally made it back to his own room. There were still a lot of empty rooms but ones that were occupied always two or more clones.
Except his. Rex frowned at the empty bunk sitting there. His open-ended offer to any of the brothers to take his room had been refused.

Odd.

Except there was a packet of paper. Honest to the stars paper. With a beautiful ink-pen on top of it.

“That big armed lady brought those by for you. What are you going to do?” Rex glanced from his brother to the paper.

“I’m going to write the Commander.”

“Will they let you?”

“They should.” He wondered if the letter would reach the commander. He hoped it would. Well. No time like the present to start.

Except. He stared at the desk, realizing for the first time that it was his. It was the first thing he got in his short life that made him stand out as an officer besides a painted shoulder plate. It was…his. Rex tried to imagine himself as the sort of person who worked at a desk. To have enough paperwork and enough time to use one the way it was supposed to be.

His fingers tapped against the wood and he sat down.

“Cap?”

“This is a pretty nice desk,” he said quickly to cover up the discomfort.

“What are you going to say to her?”

“Not sure yet.” It was real paper on top of a real desk. He looked from his desk to his bed and then to his brother. “Go get some shut-eye, we’re still working out in the morning.”

“Sure thing.” His brother left and Rex wondered still harder what he could write.

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Ahsoka Tano had never received a piece of mail in her life. There had been times she’d had a bomb lobbed at her with someone mockingly calling ‘delivery!”. Still, she’d never had a piece of mail.

“It’s for me?” She stared at the droid that had dropped it in front of her’s and Anakin’s room. The droid beeped back an affirmative. “But I’ve never gotten mail.” It beeped some more. “Come on, pal. I don’t know what that means. This isn’t normal! Who is it from anyway.” Ahsoka turned the paper over hands until she saw the name. “THIS IS FROM REX!”

“What is it, Tano?” Mace Windu turned the corner and Ahsoka held her letter out.

“This is from REX!”

“Rex”

“Captain Rex! Captain of the 501st! He was captured when Skyguy was! He just sent me a letter!” Mace stared at her a little longer.

“What does it say.” He blurted, surprised as well but not sure what to do next.
Ahsoka ripped the letter open and beamed as she read it. It wasn’t very long, shorter than she expected but she hadn’t been expecting one at all. “He’s says he’s okay. His brother are okay too. Most of them, he said a lot of them got hurt in the last battle but the seppies sent them a bunch of doctors. He said he wrote this letter on a real desk. He doesn’t know where he is but he doesn’t want me to worry.”

“He wrote you a letter?” Mace wondered again.

“He said he hopes to see me soon. Oh,” she deflated, “there’s someone else’s handwriting. They say he can hope but it’s not happening. Huh, that’s rude. I guess someone else read this.”

“I guess.” Mace seized the letter and began moving toward the council chamber.

“Master! That’s my letter!”

“No single Jedi has possessions, Padawan Tano.” Mace told her.

“But Rex wrote that letter to me! It’s mine!”

He didn’t listen to her and when they reached the council chamber he had the doors slammed shut in her face. She stared at them and then at the sentinels guarding them.

“You are not needed here, Padawan Tano.” One intoned. She shot them an angry look before turning to stomp off. Halfway back to her quarters she saw R2-D2 rolling down the hallway.

“Artoo!” She shouted, running to catch up. The droid paused enough to let her before continuing rolling. “Hey! When did Anakin get back?”

[An hour ago.]

“I hope he’s okay. He said he was going on a mission but he didn’t say where. Was it successful?”

[I think it was.] Artoo beeped. Ahsoka laughed.

“So where is he?”

[Taking a bath.]

“Really?” Her master hated baths. Well, maybe he just hated getting dunked in freezing cold rivers while they were out on missions. “Can you tell me where? I want to see him.”

[Down in the cave.]

“The cave?” She’d never heard of any place in the Temple called the caves, “what?”

[I’ll show you.] Artoo rolled away and Ahsoka followed. They went deep into the Temple. Deep enough that when they emerged from the turbolift she was astonished to see natural rock.

“What is this place?” A few soft lights lines a smoothly trodden path that took her away from the metal of the temple and onto something that looked a lot like an old mountain face.

[This was once called the Du Mountains. The ancient Jedi considered it a well-spring of the Force and built the rest of the Temple on the top of the mountain.]

“Huh, where’d you learn that?”
“You clever droid,” she patted his dome. “It feels weird though, like, thousands and thousands of years ago I would be on top of the world and now…” She looked around to see the support beams all stabbed into the mountainside. A forest of duracreet. She imaged that she could see the lights and the speeders that were speeding by a few hundred yards away, far enough outside the temple district that these support beams had buildings built around them. “How did you find this place?”

[Anakin did.]

“Huh,” she pulled her cloak tighter as a breeze gusted by. It smelled and tasted stale. There was nothing past the lights on the cliff except support beams. It was empty. “How much further?”

[Not far.] Artoo promised and they rounded a curve to see the entrance of a cave. [In here. Just go all the way bacl.]

“Thanks,” Ahsoka gave him another pat before wandering down the cave until she found water and noticed a shelf carved into the side of the mountain. She followed the shelf until she found the cave open into an enormous chamber. The water looked deep and glowed a bright blue and yellow. Rocks beneath reflecting the bioluminescent slime attached to the ceiling. Stone had moved so that the pool was separated into five different little pools, like cups. The shelf extended over the far wall and then dropped into steps that joined a long chunk of stone that looked more like a beach than any chunk of stone had the right to look. “Wow.”

“It’s impressive, isn’t it?” Ahsoka turned a bit, careful of her montreal, to see her master sitting on the rock lip above the pool. Anakin looked…well...he looked great. He looked way healthier than he normally did and even his force presence seemed lighter. “Hi, Snips.”

“Da…..Skyguy.” She swallowed down a her sudden emotion and hurried along the ledge until she joined him. As soon as she was within reach, Anakin yanked her into a hug. Her ear settled over his heart as his arms wrapped her tight enough to protect her from the universe. She could hear his heartbeat in a way she could never hear hers, deep and resonating in the tender cage. “I missed you,” she said against his tunic. His metal hand traced the back of her head, paternally.

“I missed you too, Snips. I’m sorry my mission took me so long.”

“It wasn’t that long.” She said, “it just seemed like forever.”

“Hmm.”

“Did you do well?”

“I think I did.” Anakin pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

She loved meeting him like this. Away from the rest of the masters who would lecture about attachment, about every single fault they shared. Away from even Obi Wan who would complain about their connection and then criticize Anakin’s way of teaching.

“So what did you do?”

“That is classified.” He told her and she grinned.

“It doesn’t have anything to do with the screaming that’s been coming from Corellia, does it?”

“Screaming? I hadn’t noticed.”

[Master Nu doesn’t lock her databanks.]
“Well, apparently someone broke Master Kenobi out of jail.”

“Huh,” he glanced down at her, “I did not break Obi Wan out of jail.”

“Mmm,” she could sense he was telling the truth but only half of it. “Do even know what happened?”

“Not really.”

“Well,” she leaned into him, “someone tried to sabotage the evidence the Seppies have on him.”

“Tried?”

“Oh yeah, some idiot messed it up. They got the locker next to Obi Wan’s. Isn’t that hilarious.” Anakin had gone very still.

“Really and apparently some officials took a big enough bribe to let Obi Wan go. “

“Oh….” Anakin leaned away, “Ahsoka, does anyone know where Obi Wan is?”

“I overheard the masters talking this morning. Apparently he’s holed up in the Corellian temple.”

“Holed up? He’s not back yet?”

“Nope. Still had nothing to do with it?

“Stars,” he rubbed at his head. “I’m going to get into the water.”

“A bath? Can you really take a bath at a time like this? We need to go get Obi Wan and while we’re at it we need to get Rex.”

“Rex?” He pulled his cloak off and began to undress. “What about him?”

“He sent me a letter today.” She wondered why it had taken so long to reach this. “I…Master Windu confiscated it.”

“A letter?” He looked equally surprised, “I…okay?”

“He says he’s okay and he told me that he’s seen a doctor and so have the rest of the 501st.” She felt nervous, “did he send you a letter?”

“No.” A few months ago he would have been offended. Now, he only frowned. “Could you sense any lies?”

“No, he seemed calm but I only read the letter once. I guess the council is going over it for…hidden messages and motivations. I don’t know what they’re going to get from my letter.”

“Ahsoka?”

“It’s my letter! They shouldn’t do anything to it! They shouldn’t have taken it! It was mine! Rex wrote it to me!”

“I’ll try to get your letter back,” her master promised, “do you want to take a pool?”

“I guess.” Ahsoka shucked off her robes and her boots and socks along with a few of her heavier articles before she slipped into the water. It was warm but not hot. It enveloped her like a hug. “This
“It is.” Anakin seemed amused.

“How did you find this place?”

“Hmmm.” He didn’t look at her as drew off his outer tunic off but kept the under one on. “That’s not important.”

“You tell me all of your other exploits.” Ahsoka pointed out, paddling gently over to the edge where her pool connected to Anakin’s, “come on! What’s so wrong with it? This looks like it’s been here for eons. It’s super cool. I even love how the lights isn’t killing my eyes like normal human lights do.”

“Snips.” He turned from her and ducked into the water. When he came up he sighed. “I found it when I was trying to run away.”

She stared. “What?”

“I was trying to run away.”

“From who?”

“Who do you think?”

“You were trying to run away from the Jedi?” Her eyes were wider than they’d ever been. “But why?”

“Snips, if I tell you the story, you have to keep this quiet. Don’t tell anyone. Don’t even think about it. Just…don’t think, alright?”

“Alright.” Something was wrong. He sounded wrong. Anakin swam into the center of his pool and looked away. “Skyguy?”

“I was brought to the Temple when I was nine years old. I was attached to my other and I was…scarred but a lot of stuff when I was a kid. It was right after Qui Gon Jinn had died. He was the Jedi who trained Obi Wan. I found this place by accident. No matter how many times I ran away, Obi Wan never noticed. He just…didn’t seem to be all there for the first year. I found this place one night when I tried to see if I could go down from the Temple, across and then back up.”

“Can you?”

“Yes.” He hunched his shoulder. “But the night I found this place I was…crying. And I found it by accident. There was just so much water in the middle of a mountain that was just…built over. There’s something sick about it but this place just became my little refuge from the universe when I really needed a break.”

“I thought it was underground speeder races?” Ahsoka wondered.

“Sometimes, I’m actually surprised Artoo showed you this place. He’s always redirected traffic that’s looking for me.”

“I just asked,” she shrugged. “Um, Skyguy, if you ran away then how come you didn’t…run away?”

“Where would I have gone? I didn’t have money, I didn’t have contacts. No place to go, nothing to
eat. They took everything I came into the temple with. I didn’t have anyone. Snips, if you had to leave the Jedi tomorrow, where would you go?”

“I’d go…” She paused, “I guess. I’d go to Padme!”

“Padme?” He finally turned around, astonished.

“Yeah, she’s really nice and she’s loaded. She’d let me crash on her couch, right?”

“Most definitely.”

“Yeah! She’d be awesome to live with. I stayed with her while you were in the seppie prison. She…” Ahsoka looked away, “she was really nice about it. I was…crying and stuff.”

“Crying?”

“I was afraid they were going to hurt you! I was worried!”

“Oh. Well, thank you for coming to get me.”

“No problem,” she shot him a cocky grin. “You’d come for me, right?”

“Always.” He looked at her for a moment, “are you going to write Rex back?”

“Absolutely! When I get enough info I’m going to go get him!”

“As long as you’re careful!”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be just fine!”

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“Curious, this is.” The direct members of the council all stared at the folded paper with varying degrees of suspicion. It didn’t do anything and intense searches for hidden messages and meanings had come up with nothing.

“I’m more worried about what this means.” Mace Windu bit his thumb, worried. “They let a clone prisoner send a letter to a Jedi commander. His Jedi commander. That is…odd.”

“What sort of reasoning could they have?” Asked Eeth Koth, “what sort of manipulation do they have?”

“It could just be a letter,” Obi Wan said, attending his first Council meeting in months via hologram. “But knowing the manipulations that Dooku has in place I doubt it.”

“Technically prisoners of war are allowed to write letters home. Or letters in general. He could be simply complying with the laws.”

“No, Dooku had showed great ease in breaking laws,” Obi Wan sighed, “there is an ulterior motive behind this.”

“We have heard rumors from our spies that the Separatist are preparing the clones for something. Perhaps brainwashing?”

“Brainwashing that many men? Hardly seems possible.” Yoda chewed on his gimmer stick but did not add to the debate that was raging around him. He waited, meditating, as he considered potential
motives.

“Perhaps it is a chance to gain information. If Tano writes him back she might let something slip.”

“Ahsoka Tano will not be returning his letters at all. Attachment like this is obscene, the clone should have known this and had the decency to not do anything.” Mundi grumbled. “Why is it always her or Skywalker.”

“I am deeply grateful for Anakin’s creation of the destruction of my files. That whole trial business was tedious.”

“It’s not over,” Mace rubbed his forehead, “Skywalker messed up.”

“What?” Obi Wan blinked.

“He destroyed the wrong evidence locker.” The ginger Jedi continued to stare. “Only the files got destroyed and those can be re-made.”

“Oh dear.”

“Irksome, this has become.”

“I knew that the harpy had ordered that no flights take off or land in the Temple and that planetary traffic has slowed to a crawl.”

“Not just that but the Corellian government is demanding that you leave the Temple.”

“I knew that much.”

“Stand further trial, you cannot.” Yoda announced, “on the war front, you are needed.”

“The only reason I haven’t been arrested is because I am in the temple. Invading the Temple would violate constitutional rights. However, that doesn’t mean they haven’t been trying to smoke me out.”

“Surrender, do not.” Ordered the Grandmaster.

“Yen Dooku is out for my blood.” Obi Wan reminded them. “And I can’t go back to the war front with impunity until the trial business is over. The whole thing is mass hysteria anyway.”

“With enough evidence to hold up in a long court battle,” Windu reminded him. “Which would have been handled if Anakin Skywalker had done his job right.”

“I am sure he did his absolute best,” Obi Wan pointed out, “if Anakin had been spotted on Corellia there’s not a chance he would have made it off-world. There is still a standing warrant for his arrest.” Obi Wan paused and looked to the side, he vanished from the hologram and reappeared with a tired expression. “It appears, fellow masters, that I have been summoned by the Corellian High Court, failure to appear would put me in contempt of Court.”

There was a deep, collective groan. Yoda rubbed at his forehead and Mace began to curse under his breath.

“Well,” Mundi stated with false cheer, “one problem at a time. Let us handle something easier first.”

“Like what?”

“We put Anakin Skywalker under a full review for his failure to destroy the evidence, first. Second,
we go to our friends in the Senate to help with the problem on Corellia.”

“There is no guarantee that they would help. Ever since the sensationalist media started writing about the trial our public opinion numbers have taken a toll.”

“Perhaps we should issue a statement instead of letting the rest of the galaxy form baseless opinions on the trial. We should begin to control the narrative.”

“Easy, this will not be.” Yoda said, “speak to the Chancellor we must.”

“Why should be involved the Chancellor at all?”

“Influence he has. Help us, I am sure he will.” Yoda bit on his stick. “Issue an evaluation for young Skywalker. Failed he has, a most important mission.”

“An evaluation is a little strong, don’t you think.” Obi Wan asked and the rest of the council looked at him. “Very well, if you think it wisest Master.”

“I do.” Yoda pondered how he would word this to the Chancellor. Hopefully Palpatine would be willing to listen.

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“For those just tuning into tonight’s news we’ve received an update on the Kenobi War Trial story.” An overly cheerful news anchor turned her chair on the cue and beamed at the camera. “As you know Obi Wan Kenobi, a master of the Jedi Order and a General of the Grand Army of the Republic, was captured several months ago. His infamy on the battlefield prompted the CSI to have the man set to trial for war crimes. Though the trial was only partially completed when an unknown party broke into the prosecutors office to destroy the files of the trial. An subsequent attack on the evidence locker of the planetary police revealed that the invader managed to destroy the wrong evidence. Evidence of Obi Wan Kenobi’s crime has been, reportedly, moved to a secure location. At the exact time Obi Wan Kenobi was released from prison by several bribed officials. He is currently residing in the Corellian based Jedi Temple. The High Court has issued a summons to Master Kenobi to continue to stand trial for alleged war crimes. Should Kenobi fail to appear he will be considered in contempt of the High Court. If this is the case and the trial is not settled quickly, Master Kenobi could be considered a dangerous criminal entity by the Republic as well as a war criminal as he is considered by the SCI. We’re going to our political analyst outside the Corellian Temple now.”

One various screens around the system and the galaxy, another face appeared. An older twi’lek woman in a sharp red suit, gave a tight smile to the camera before her. “Et, we’re live with Corellian News Network audiences. Given the most recent scandal around the Jedi what do you think their reaction to Kenobi’s summons are going to be?’

“Well, the Jedi haven’t issued a statement about the trial of Master Kenobi. They’ve been silent on the subject. The only thing we’ve heard about it form them is from their own lawyer who is also not speaking to the press. From previous evidence I don’t think the Jedi are going to react at all. We’ve discussed the behavior or Jedi Master Kino, the lawyer, in the court and we’ve noticed the total disregard for common law in recent history. Master Obi Wan is probably going to end up in contempt of the High Court. I think it is very possible that Kenobi will have a long-standing warrant issued for his arrest in the Corellian system. As you know, the Republic-Corellia Treaty of 120 states that any arrest warrant issued in the Corellian system must be upheld and honored by the Republic as well.”

“Why might this cause trouble for Obi Wan Kenobi?”
“Well,” Et sighed into her microphone, “he’s a Jedi Master and he vowed to uphold the laws of the Republic, among other things. An arrest warrant is something he ought to be honoring.”

“Goodness!” The first woman exclaimed, “this seems like a lot of trouble for him. If he does not appear before court and he does not honor any arrest warrant, what could happen?”

“Very likely nothing. Obi Wan Kenobi is a well-trained Jedi Master. He has experience, enough so the even the best bounty hunters may not be able to subdue him enough to collect the bounty. There are very few people outside the Jedi Order with the ability or skill to stop a Jedi Master. Which, viewers, this is interesting because the only people who could are Jedi themselves. The Jedi, who vowed to protect the Republic and the galaxy. Who would not be at all inclined to arrest a member of their own order. Given the political power of the Jedi they would be more inclined to have the entire mess covered up. And really, there aren’t a lot of sanctions against them to prevent stuff like this happening.”

“So, Et, if Kenobi doesn’t appear and has a warrant issued but that warrant isn’t honored; what does this say?”

“Well, it says a lot. First, is says that the Jedi get to do what they want without proper repercussions. As viewers might remember from Dooku v Jedi order, this is only the second time the Jedi have been taken to court in hundreds of years. At all….in the galaxy over. Only the second time. So that means there’s not a lot of historical precedent to hold them accountable.”

“Et, we’re going to go to viewers and see what they have to say. Hello,” the picture of Et was replaced by a heavy-set pilot holding a toddler. “Sir, what do you think of the recent Kenobi debacle.”

“’s not good.” The man grunted into the mike, “all messed. I mean, the guy could get away with it but we’ll know. We’ll all know. They’re just gussied up jerks like the rest of the politicos in the Core. Doing stuff and not having to pay for it. Sheesh, Annabella knows better than that.” He hefted the toddler a bit. “Knows she makes a mess with her toys she cleans it up. Right, baby girl.”

“YEP!” The toddler exclaimed, trying to leap from her father’s arms and toward the reporter. There was a brief scuffled over the falling baby before the image was replaced with a handsome woman in a shopping center.

“Oh I followed the trial all right. I always follow the Jedi stories. You see, my son was taken by the Jedi when he was a baby. I always want to know if he’s hurt or in trouble.”

“Yes, ma’am, but what does this mean to you?”

“Well, it seems to mean that they get to do what they want, when they want, and whenever they want.” The wealthy woman sighed, “what is the point of monks who say one thing and do another. The Jedi don’t even seem to take the case seriously.”

“Thank you, ma’am now we’re.”

“Hold on a moment,” she said, tapping the reporters shoulder, “I want to get a message to my son.”

“Of course,” the reporter awkwardly held the microphone to her. She accepted it.

“Caleb Dume,” she said quietly, “if you are still alive even. Should you ever want to come home to your family we will always welcome you back. I am your mother, Trina Dume.” She handed the microphone back and waved a hand. “I always get whatever letters I send to him, sent back.”
The image changed back to Et, “thank you, viewers. Now, we’re going to switch over to our partner station on.”

The screen was switched off and total silence reigned in Chancellor Palpatine’s office. The man steppled his fingers under his chin and wondered what could possibly be done.

He needed Obi Wan Kenobi. Kenobi was vital to his plan. The man needed to help destroy Anakin Skywalker. Palpatine glanced at the Jedi in his office. Yoda was serene, Windu was fidgeting and Anakin, Anakin seemed totally checked out.

“Master Skywalker,” the annoyance the flared from the other Jedi amusing. “What do you think of this?”

“Err.” For the first time since he’d arrived at his office did he seem to pay attention “It sure seems like a mess.”

“A mess we need fixed.” Windu cut in.

“I just don’t know how I can help.” The Chancellor said. “The treaty signed by the Republic and Corellia are true, we would have to honor the arrest warrant if Master Kenobi does not show up to court.”

“Kenobi is one our best generals. We need him in the war if we’re going to make any headway against Tang. He’s already captured hundreds of our troopers. We need him stopped.”

“Hmm,” Palpatine gave them a considering look, “I was under the impression that young Master Skywalker was your finest general.”

“Knight Skywalker,” Windu managed passed gritted teeth, “is under Evaluation.”

“Is that bad?” He glanced at Skywalker and found, to his surprise, the boy had an utterly blank face. Not a single emotion on his face.

“It means we’re evaluating his competency.” Mace continued and Palpatine chuckled at him.

“Why bother? Master…I mean Knight Skywalker is clearly far more skilled. He has not managed to get himself put on trial for war crimes.” The sith chuckled at the stony silence. “My dear, Master Yoda, I simply do not know how to handle something like this. True, Master Kenobi is a very competent but surely not worth such a political mess.” Political mess as an understatement. Dooku would be punished. “Surely Knight Skywalker would take his place. He is suitable.”

“He will be otherwise occupied.” Mace said past gritted teeth. “Kenobi is our best bet. Dooku has it out for him, a failed Grand-padawan. Or someone he considers to be failed. To continue to lose to Kenobi would be justice.”

“I do not think that getting rid of Skywalker is going to help the war effort.” He deliberately ignored Skywalker. “Kenobi is competent but not that competent.” Yoda and Windu stared silently at him. A message of stubborn idiocy that reached more than one person. Skywalker had clearly picked up on the dismissal of his skills and the blatant favoritism. “Very well, I will do my best.” It would be obvious to anyone looking that someone had manipulated Kenobi out of trouble. He’d have to cash in too many favors for that to go unnoticed. Unless he put a silence on the story. Hmm. He wondered if it was still worse.
“Thank you,” Windu said, standing. Skywalker followed behind Yoda, his face blank and his hands tucked inside his sleeves the way they were supposed to be. He didn’t look anything like Skywalker who had started the war. He looked beaten and miserable. Conforming against his will. Still, even if he didn’t get a private meeting with the boy, it was a very successful meeting. Reminding him of his knighthood. Showing how little the masters trusted and making him think of his failed mission. Having him leave, knowing he was headed for the most humiliating punishment the Jedi could offer.

It would be difficult to have Obi Wan set free. Yen Dooku would never agree to it but there were hundreds of people around Yen Dooku who were not as strong as she.

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Et found a single flower in her dressing room. A soft blue tio flower from the valleys of Alderann. There was no note attached, no sign as to who it could have been from.

Still, she picked it up and smelled the delicate petals as she thought of Poda.

It was an adequate enough thank you gift.

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“So guess who is contempt of the Corellian High Court?” Dooku set his attention on Poda. She was helping herself to his coffee.

“Obi Wan Kenobi.”

“He had a week to prepare himself to go.” Poda pointed out as she sipped the drink. Dooku took a seat at his desk and sighed.

“I presume someone is trying to hush it up?”

“He’s trying alright, certainly. A lot in bribes is going around right now. I had to put a lot into delaying the thing.”

“And it worked?”

“Of course. The hush up is only going into place after the news breaks of Kenobi’s….insolent behavior to the justice system.”

“You look too pleased with yourself.” Dooku admired as he pulled up the news of the day. “Go report yourself for grave incompetence.” Poda ignored him. “When will the news break?”

“Hmm,” she looked dramatically at a bare wrist. “Any minute now.”

“I see.” He watched the story pop on the news site and sighed. “Truly you are a despicable person.” Poda wiggled in her seat and grinned. “How much further do you intend to antagonize the Jedi?”

“Until their temple is burnt and tributes are offered in my name.” Poda gave a preening smile and shook her head at him.

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Padme Amidala watched with a bemused frown as her handmaidens continued to hand her update after update on the Kenobi situation. More and more files were being added to the pile as the moments passed. She watched the holo-news for a moment longer before switching off the Holo device.
“Milday?” Captain Panaka stepped closer to her, her handmaidens following and dismissing the other staff.

“When Anakin is released from his evaluation,” she took a deep breath, “please send immediate word that the Queen has requested him on Naboo.”

“Has the Queen requested him on Naboo?” Eie asked and Padme nodded.

“She will. Please have my ship prepared. We go to Naboo tonight.” There was some muttering off assent. “And please have an audience scheduled with the queen.” Some more muttering later and the room was cleared.

There hadn’t been a single message from her husband since he’d left on his mission. No call, not a letter. Nothing. She wasn’t sure what to do. Except she knew that he’d been to Naboo before he’d returned. Money had been drawn from one of her accounts to pay for a series of sessions with the woman Helgina.

She didn’t mind the money. She only hoped that Anakin was getting the help he needed.

When they landed on Naboo a few days later, Padme made directly for the Queen. The younger woman had admired her immensely but still, their different positions was always clear. In respect of her wishes, she met her alone.

Padme wore her most simple senatorial gown as she knelt before the Queen, staring at the floor.

“My senator and friend, what do you need?”

“My queen, I believe a grave injustice has been done.” There was silence in the throne room until the Queen rose, her heavy gowns brushing against the floor.

“What?”

“Anakin Skywalker has been put under a Jedi evaluation.” She knew the protocol of the evaluation. She knew what he would be suffering. She knew the pain was in.

“I am heard.”

“I feel, my queen, that his is a direct insult against Naboo.”

“I see.” The younger girl set a hand on her shoulder, drawing her up. “As a former Queen of Naboo you still hold the titles of every queen of the past. I know that the old belief is that every queen inhabits part of the living soul of Naboo. I want to understand, as your Queen, how the Jedi have insulted you?”

Padme sighed and raised her eyes to the girl-queen. She recognized the tiredness in her eyes and the strain on her shoulders.

“Anakin Skywalker is my husband, my queen.”

“By insulting his competence and punishing him for actions that were not directly his they have insulted you and thus all of Naboo,” Padme nodded. “What do you wish me to do?”

“Please, given the political unrest about the Jedi I wish to have him drawn from the spotlight. I know that you are taking a sabbatical celebration in a few weeks. If you would please invite him along. As he is entitled to as a Friend of Naboo. It would pull him from the public, away from the negative
view of the Jedi.”

Queen Jamilla stared at her kindly and gave a single nod. Against every protocol, Padme yanked the younger girl into a hug. “Thank you,” she whispered, “thank you so much.”

“I feel like it could be a lot worse.” Ahsoka managed, her voice waverering and her eyes too-shiny with tears.

“It could.” Given the immense pain her master as in it was amazing he could talk. “A few centuries ago I could have been flogged.”

“But you’ve been whipped,” Ahsoka cried, her voice finally cracking and the tears overflowing. In the dimness of her room she could make out the raised welts on Anakin’s back and shoulders. “By our enemies and the slavers and the crazy people who want to kill you! You should have never been hurt by people who were supposed to help you! To protect you!”

“Ahsoka.” She stemmed the tears with a heavy towel and tried to cry quietly. “It’s a part of the evaluation. It’s a punishment, remember?”

“It’s not fair,” she sobbed, “you didn’t do anything wrong! They’re hurting you because they don’t like you.”

“I’m sure most of them like me fine.” He tried to reason, his voice bit off in a strangled gasp.

“Snips.”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she cried, fumbling around for the thick blue pot she’d smuggled into the room. It held the last of an ointment that they’d made on a mission a year ago. “I’m so sorry.”

“Ahsoka, I’m fine. Really, it doesn’t even hurt so much.”

“Yes, it does,” she unscrewed the lid and dipped trembling fingers into the goo. A few tears trickled down her cheeks as she held them over the largest and nastiest looking welt. “It does hurt! I can feel it! Please, don’t say that it doesn’t.”

“Alright,” Anakin agreed past gritted teeth, “it hurts and its going to hurt more when you put that stuff on.” Ahsoka continued to cry, biting her lip and doing her best to keep her hands steady as she began pressing them against his tender back. He hissed and groaned, the muscles bunched up under her fingers.

“You know no one’s been evaluated by the council in years.” Ahsoka blubbered quietly, “no one. For years. You’re the first one in years and years and years. Just because they don’t like you.”

“Maybe I messed up too much?”

“It’s not fair!” She rubbed the tears from her eyes and continued. “That all of them against you! All of them hurt you. They just stood there and thought that caning you was going to make everything better. They think that making you retake all those tests and do those extra chores is going to make everything better!”

“Little one.” Anakin didn’t say that he was sorry, even though he was. Sorry that Ahoska ever had to see him like this. Sorry that she was the one who was administering to him after, possibly, his most humiliating punishment since Gardulla. Sorry that she was a part of this at all.
“Well, at least it was just the council. I think I might kill the other padawans if they saw what happened.”

Sorry that this was their world.

“An evaluated Jedi is not to make a complaint.” Anakin quoted reluctantly, “and to accept the sentences of the Council and Grandmaster.”

“But what if they were evaluating me? What would they do? I mean, they’ve gotten all mad at me before.” She dug more medicine from the pot.

“They would tell me to…” he seemed to struggle to speak as she covered the small of his back. “To punish you and then do the rest.”

“What do you mean?” She paused.

“Something physical, painful.”

“They’d tell you to cane me?” The togruta gaped, her eyes wide and terrified.

“No,” he groaned, finally maneuvering himself off his stomach and trying to sit up. “Never, ever. Snips, I would never hurt you like that.”

“Then?”

“I would very easily,” Anakin smiled and she finally noticed the tears of pain that had been dripping from eyes, “take you into another room and pretend to spank you.”

“Why did you think of that?” She clutched the jar closer.

“They…they told me that if…they told me that they might.”

“Evaluate me?”

“Because of me,” Anakin sighed. “Don’t worry, I wouldn’t let that happen to you.”

“I don’t…master, they just hurt you because they wanted to make a point. I don’t think they care what you think.” There was a flash of hurt in his blue eyes.

“It doesn’t hurt as much as bad as you think.” Anakin assured her, shifting the conversation. “I’ve had worse and a lot of the nerves on my back are dead already.”

There were several minutes of horrified silence. “Really?”

“Well, not all of them.”

“Anakin.” Her breathless cry was enough to make him wince. “And to think, a couple of days ago we were taking a relaxing soak in a secret bath. This isn’t fair.”

“No, I guess not.” There was a concentrated look on his face that told her she needed to get clear and find something else to do. He needed some space. “Snips.”

“I’ll go get your dinner,” she promised. “just sit down a breath and let the medicine help.”

“Alright,” like a mountain crumbling, he slowly lowered himself back to the floor. “I’ll wait.” Ahsoka hid the medicine again and extracted herself from the room. For a moment, she looked back.
to see the bright light of the hallway shine on his back before the door slid shut again.

Anakin cracked an eye open as a small mouse droid emerged from the tunnels. He smiled when it rolled up to his side.

“Hi.” He whispered, a shaking hand on its case, “what are you doing here?”

[Friend Ani. Alright?]

“I’m okay.”

[Friend Ani. Lying.]

“Yes. It’s not like they all went to town at the same time and like crazy. I know you were watching, little one.”

[Friend Ani. Run away?]

“I don’t know.”

[Friend Ani. Requires maintenance?]

“A little.”

[Boss R2-D2. We must watch out for you.]

“Good old, Artoo.” He pet the little droid again. It rolled closer. “How is your new chassis working?”

[Little One 134. Optimal functioning reported from diagnostic. Friend Ani. Requiring new chassis?]

“Not right now,” he sighed, “don’t go telling everyone else that I got tied down and beaten until I was bloody. That’s not true. It was two from each of the masters and they were very easy to deal with. You tell the rest of them that, you hear?” One of the side effects of fixing every single broken droid in the temple meant that he had a mini-army that beeped for blood every time they thought he’d been wronged. Droids were like Jedi. They were influenced by commands and by nice people. Not by history or the aura of respect. Which was why Yoda and Windu had to replace their robes and cloaks the most often. They got shredded in the wash a lot.

[Little One 134. Hates them.]

“Hate?” He was too drained since his therapy sessions to feel much. Feeling oddly empty since talking to Helgina. “I can’t feel much right now.”

[Little One 134. Love you. Will search for help.]

“You do that.” Anakin chuckled, fading into sleep. Little One 134 followed this advice and took his re-makers permission. It rolled back into the maintenance tunnels and toward the spot where Intruder Funny 11 hung out. There is beeped out a short message, exchanged a file, and then began to roll back to its pre-programmed cleaning route.

Intruder Funny 11, following the dire threats of Little One 134 and the request it had made, sent a message to its handler back in the CSI. The handler sent the encrypted message up the chain until it reached the hands of Poda.

She read the message. Re-read the message and then fanned herself with it. After a moment
considering she marched into Dooku’s office.


“More interesting than this truly blistering editorial about the Jedi?”

“That’s not the only thing blistering.” She said. Dooku finally looked up. “Are you aware that part of
the Jedi evaluation, one of the most humiliating and terrible things to happen to a Jedi, is a physical
punishment?”

“Yes.” Dooku nodded, “it is supposed to be more symbolic than anything. Enough to hurt but not
enough to damage. Each of the council masters only strikes the offending Jedi twice. They are not
supposed to do too much damage.”

“They left welts.” Poda seethed. “Welts on Skywalker. Enough that he is currently laid up.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Dooku told her, “but I am not surprised. He is not permanently damaged.
Though, I am sure they did not consider the rest of the toll that such a thing would bring about. They
do not seem overly intelligent.”

“His little droid, named, you’re going to love this Little One 134, asked my spy droid to send a
message to someone. It wants to know if Intruder Funny 11 has people who can help him.”

“I see.” Disturbed, more than he wanted to be, Dooku pondered the situation. “If they are at this
stage of the evaluation, since it probably began two weeks ago, there are only two weeks left. The
cover-up of Obi Wan was just effective enough that they released him this morning. Tell me, what
sort of trouble do you think you can stir up in two weeks?”

“Unless Skywalker had other plans, a lot. Enough to get him away from the temple for the rest of…
eternity.”

“Good, go ahead. We will grant the desire of this…Little One 134.”

"Do you ever think that the people you left behind are messed up?" Poda asked, "I'm just
wondering."

"Yes." Dooku replied sadly, "most definitely."

Chapter End Notes

So. Should the next chapter be about what happens directly after this or should it be
about the Ryloth Conference?
Conference Blues

Chapter Summary

The Ryloth Conference goes down not as expected by either party.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“What do you mean he’s gone?”

“I mean, Mr. Solo is that Anakin Skywalker isn’t here. He is out on a diplomatic mission.” The stiff looking manservant or aid or whatever he called himself, glared at the enormous box that Han had set on the floor. “Please remove the package.”

“Look, buddy, I don’t think you realize. This thing is from my employer to Anakin Skywalker. I got to turn it over to Anakin Skywalker. No one else. Sure, as hells, not your prickly ass.”

“Mr. Solo. Senator Skywalker will not be returning to the capital senate building until the completion of the Ryloth conference. There is nothing to do except wait.” The dismissive glance directed at his clothes and then at the Falcon was almost as infuriating than knowing that his employer could be talking to Skywalker right now.

“Where is he?”

“Where is who?”

“Senator Skywalker! Obviously! That’s who I’ve been trying to get this stupid thing too.” Han smacked the container. “Where is he?”

“He is out on a diplomatic mission!”

“So, he’s on Ryloth?”

“I can neither confirm nor deny that.”

“Come on!”

“I cannot tell you where Senator Skywalker is, Mr. Solo. If you would care to leave the package in the hands of my men.”

“Man! How long has he been gone?”

“Three days. Mr. Solo,” the man was gritting his teeth, “if you would please.”

“Alright fine but make sure he gets this, and no one else opens it. I’m very serious.”

“Very well, Mr. Solo.” He was visibly excited to get rid of Han. “I will sign whatever needs to be signed to indicate that you have successfully delivered your package.”

“Fine,” Han glared at the man, “but this is for Anakin Skywalker and only Anakin Skywalker. Don’t
anyone else open it.”

“Very well, Mr. Solo. Very well.”

The Night Before the Signing

“We have a problem.” The assembled members of the council all sighed deeply. Mace rubbed his forehead, and Obi Wan looked back at his glass and wished it was full again. “Padme Amidala is still broadcasting seditious speeches. We don’t know where she’s broadcasting from or where she might be. Worse still, Caleb Dume has also dropped off the grid. Master Billaba cannot locate him. She says she sent him off on his own to locate Amidala or Syndulla; he has not found either.”

Obi Wan sank further into his seat, groaning in annoyance. “What else could possibly go wrong?”

“Well,” the young knight delivering the information shrank under the collective glares of the council. “Um, we have also received information from the Alderann temple.” Mace glared even harder. “Padawan Leia has…left the Jedi Order.” The silence that followed the proclamation could have been used to smother a geriatric patient.

“What?” Mace Windu stared blankly.

“I mean, she just left. The report indicates that during the cleaning phase of the evening training, Padawan simply left. She told the master in charge she was through with the Jedi and left.”

“Who. Was. In. Charge.” Windu growled. He glanced at Obi Wan whose face was ashen.

“Master Illo, he claims not to understand what may have pushed her to leave.”

“Where is Leia now?”

The knight trembled, “currently staying with the royal family. Queen Breha and Prince Consort Bail Organa have rebuffed every effort of ours to speak with her. They also refuse to discuss the matter.”

“I see.” Yoda’s croaking voice oozed malice and annoyance. Every eye in the room turned to Windu.

“How? She was. I don’t understand how she could have made this choice.”

“Really?”

“Of course! She was obedient, timid; she had no friends outside the Order. She had no friends in the Order! I don’t! How could this have even occurred to her? This is ridiculous.”

“Maybe it’s the blood?” Suggested Shaak Ti, “her parents are currently causing great difficulty for us. Perhaps the force inhibitor was not enough. Perhaps she was still able to communicate with her father.”

“There is no way she could have spoken with Anakin.” Obi Wan smacked the edge of his seat. “I know how much those chips keep them from the Force. Luke is hardly able to touch it at all. There is nothing she could have done within the Order to indicate that leaving was ever an option.”

“Except for the history of Skywalker and those that have left.” Someone pointed out. “We have told every child in the order the history of Skywalker’s treachery. He is the most infamous Jedi turned Sith. Aside from Dooku himself. Still, I would have thought she would have been raised with proper
critical thinking skills.”

“She was!” Mace snapped. “I do not know what went wrong! Skywalker might have influenced her from a distance.”

“Maybe. Or maybe it's those speeches her mother is giving! We haven’t managed to shut down the broadcast signal, and if they fan the flames of dissent, then we will have more of a crisis on our hands.”

“When I get back to Alderaan.” Mace glared out the window at the dusty Ryloth landscape, “she will regret every moment until then. We take the children and Skywalker, and we use the Cure on all of them.”

“Agree with Master Windu, I do. When arresting Amidala, the time it is to rid us of her treason.”

“You don’t mean…to kill Padme Amidala.”

“Treason enough, she has committed. Destruction of the Republic. Destruction of the Order. Disobeying the commands of the Order. To our laws, death this demands.”

“If we kill Padme Amidala…” Obi Wan swallowed, “Anakin Skywalker will rain hell and death upon every inch of Republic space. We will swim in our blood; it will water the fields of stars and then…Only then, will he salt and burn the planets we commanded. We cannot kill Padme Amidala.”

“What choice do we have?” Shaak Ti asked. “14 years ago everything we ever held dear was destroyed because of them. Our Republic became a farce. We have been painted and portrayed at the villains for over a decade. When will we finally take our stand, Kenobi? Will we continuously allow ourselves to be beaten into the dirt without making a stand.”

“We are taking a stand. You know as well as I do that the meetings we’ve advertised for those citizens interesting in questioning Master Yoda are a farce. We will rid ourselves of our most vocal critics in just a few weeks, but I’m telling the council now. Killing Anakin Skywalker’s wife will only invite total destruction on our heads. We still have several prisons she can be relocated to; the Ghost prison, the Citadel.”

“Perhaps,” Yoda chewed on his gimmer stick, “the family is too far gone? Young Luke has shown to be…”

“Master Yoda, Luke is a child. He is a force null child surrounded by force, sensitive children. It is very possible that he’s only been difficult because of his surroundings. Besides, we have Revan’s cure. Once we’ve administered it to both of them, we can finally remove his inhibitor ship and have the Jedi he was meant to be. The same with Leia. Once they are all helped, then we do not need to worry about Padme Amidala.” Obi Wan looked from each of the masters, “We cannot underestimate Anakin again. If any reparations are taken against his wife, then we will all suffer immeasurable pain.”

“She’s already in prison.” Mace pointed out. The other masters muttered in agreement. “We haven’t faced any yet.”

“Focus on the word ‘yet.’ Remember just how furious she was when we had Anakin evaluated? We lost our political support from Naboo a year before Skywalker even defected. We were at the mercy of the Senate for an entire year before the Chancellor was murdered!”

“What do you suggest, Kenobi? Allow one family to make a mockery of us? Allow them to use us?”
“I’m saying,” Obi Wan pulled on what little calm he could. “That this is not a few angry teenagers throwing paint balloons at the gates of the Temple. These two are not a few editorials that we can erase. These two are a pair of very powerful and very angry people who have responded to every problem that has ever faced them with complete and total over-reactions! When we take Anakin, we have to tread very carefully because we know Padme is currently beyond our reach. If she ever makes it to Confederate space, then we will have Amidala, armed and over emotional, backed by a government that paints her as a martyr.”

“Perhaps.” Yoda conceded. “Wise reflections you offer, Master Kenobi.” There were a few minutes of silence as the Jedi considered what might happen if they failed. There were those who didn’t consider Obi Wan’s warning to be true threats. Yoda among them. Master Windu though, considered what had happened in the aftermath of Anakin’s evaluation.

“There is little that they could do that hasn’t already been done.” Adi Gallia finally said. “I suggest that we seize Skywalker, the elder and the younger, and retreat to the depths of Taa’s palace. There, we administer Revan’s cure. That way we can leave with Skywalker, and he will not make any sort of a fuss. He will not fight, and then the Confederacy cannot claim that we forced him to defect… back. Defect back to the Republic.”

“We will need our most powerful members,” Mace warned. “All of our training against him.”

“Luke will be easy to handle. All I have to do is tell him to come with me. It is Anakin I’m concerned with. He had over-reacted when we spoke in the gardens. Though, as I reported earlier, Luke was only speaking to him to keep up the most basic manner to show to a member of an opposite delegation.”

“We have everything planned for tomorrow.” Another master interrupted, “the longer we sit here with the details and fussing over them, the longer stand to ruin them through that very fact. Our plan is set. We planned for this even before we touched down on Ryloth. We can discuss what to do with Leia after we’re all done with Skywalker and Ryloth.”

There were mutterings of agreements and the Masters dispersed.

Obi Wan wandered back to his room. He still hadn’t read his section of Revan’s cure. He hadn’t been able to work up the courage to do it. He was still frightened of what would happen and what would go wrong. The proposals to deal with Padme Amidala permanently. What they would do to Leia, he didn’t know., Probably evaluate her as they’d done her father and then use the Cure on her. Something to humiliate every inch of her existence until she was wiped clean.

Like a droid.

When he opened his room, he found it trashed. Flipped upside down and sorted through. Searched. Obi Wan gritted his teeth and set about looking for the likely culprit.

Luke was sleep and had been since Obi Wan had ordered him to go to bed. In all likelihood, it was the work of a bitter and eternally immature Anakin. Who, upon being scolded, had retaliated the only way he knew how.

Why had he left Luke alone? Hadn’t he recognized his own son? Hadn’t he seen the same blond hair and blue eyes? What about the truly pathetic force signature that Luke exuded. As powerful as Anakin was, he should have sensed it.

If he even had recognized him. He might be too entrenched in the Dark Side to recognize his son.
Obi Wan cursed at the mess and flipped on the lights. Only one turned on. He squinted at the ceiling to note that all of the light sockets were empty except one. Muttering foul swear words, he moved around the room to see his datapad lying exactly where he’d left it.

“Curious.” It didn’t turn on. He smacked it against the wall, accidentally chipping the paint. It still refused to turn on. Cursing, he pried open the back to see the battery pack was missing. The battery pack was also missing from every other data pad in his rooms, including the one Luke was sleeping with underneath his pillow.


“What’s wrong?”

“Has anyone else been in these rooms?”

“Just you,” Luke muttered. His pale blue eyes were slivers of light in the darkness of his room.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, little one.” He said and patted Luke’s head. “Go back to sleep.”

“Okay?” Luke immediately did as told. The older Jedi frowned. Luke usually never slept that deeply. Certainly not enough for someone to break into their rooms and start trashing them. The staff hadn’t drugged the padawan. Had they?

###
The next morning

“You drugged him?” Dooku asked. “Kitster, I believed you to be better than that.”

“We had to get into the rooms without arousing suspicion, and it wasn’t drugs. It was a natural sleep aid. He just slept well last night.”

“We stole all the lights, the battery packs, and every single one of Kenobi’s socks.”

“Oola!” The twi’lek shrugged.

“The battery packs, the lights, every sock in the room.” Dooku picked through the box. “Goodness, he must have been frustrated. Kitster.”

“I thought it only fair, and the little boy was sleeping the entire time. We didn’t disturb him.”

“Except to get the battery pack out of his datapad.”

“We’re all supposed to be preparing for treachery. Tang!”

“Here.” The familiar voice echoed through his head. “We’ve got runners in case somethings goes wrong. This all depends on what the Jedi do. You’re going to be playing most of this by ear. What happens is going to affect if you get hurt or not but not dead. We’ve got Naboo and Ryloth no matter what. Kitster.”

“I’m here.”

“If you get your veils yanked off, don’t panic. Remember your story. Oola, don’t kill anyone. Remember, we’re playing the victims today instead of the totally aware people who are bracing for an attack. We get befuddled, confused, and then angry. Boss, just make sure that you sign those accords and so do the Jedi. We force this planet from their grasp; we leave, and then we release the
news that Naboo is ours. A nasty double tag team move.”

“Force, you’re devious.”

“You’re sweet.” Tang said demurely, “have fun ruining the Jedi!”

“Now, again, to the signing. We’re really leaving this time.”

Anakin sat beside the Queen and the rest of her handmaidens as the throne room filled steadily with high-ranking, low-ranking, and average well-wishers. Everyone who wanted to watch Ryloth finally leave the Republic. Everyone who knew that this would be a good show for everyone involved.

“It promises to be interesting.”

“It does. If breaks out today then it will all depend on Tang.” He grimaced, “she is usually reliable at winning them.”

“Indeed.” There was some hushed whispers as Anakin smiled at a few others in the room. “What will you do if it does happen?”

“Hopefully, for as much as Tang enjoys waging war, she will use her not insignificant political acumen to keep it from happening. I am not sure what I would do if the Republic declared war on us. I certainly do not want to take people back into battle.”

“No?”

“War is glory when the truth is removed.” Anakin’s brief smiled vanished, “it is the hells unleashed otherwise.”

“I have never faced that battle.” The young queen murmured, “only the one to preserve my people as we are and have been. To keep the history and culture of my planet alive. Ah,” She looked up as Boss Dass entered with his entourage. “They have arrived. Tell me, how was it signing with them?”

“It was fine. Their cities have become even more beautiful and elaborate in the last decade.” Anakin stood alongside the Queen as Boss Dass got closer. “Boss!” He nodded, and the scrawny Gungan laughed cheerfully.

“Greetings! Issa how you says it!”

“Oh.” Queen Lindala waved at the holo-screen which now showed the waiting image of Count Dooku and the lanky and presumed form of Anakin Skywalker. “Oh, it’s staring. Yes, welcome Boss Dass. This is a very exciting day, isn’t it?” The Gungan agreed and took the seat on the other side of Anakin, so he was sandwiched between them. “Ohhh, I love these sorts of things.”

On screen, Dooku examined his fingernails and was waiting for Yoda and Windu to show up. He looked bored and very dangerous. If looks were anything to go by then, he’d be a corpse, walking from the depths of hell to antagonize the living. Anakin thought he looked very regal.

Kitster looked pretty good too. He wasn’t one for standing around looking intimidating. This time, though, he did look properly frightening. His feet planted apart, shoulders squared, hand folded in front of him like he was just waiting to spring into action. It was amusing if he thought about it.
“Running late, Master Kenobi, you are.” Yoda and the assembled Jedi all turned to look at the sheepish Master who was finally standing behind a bored Luke.

“I couldn’t find any socks. It was the oddest thing.” Obi Wan frowned at his padawan, “I hope you don’t mind, I had to borrow some of yours.”

“How did they even fit?” Luke looked from his feet to Obi Wan’s. “You’ve got big feet.”

“Not that big.” He said.

“Enough,” Yoda tapped his stick to the ground. The Jedi fell silent, all giggles echoing into silence. “Late we are, for the signing. Come, all.” He limped his way from the hall and through the double doors that gestured them into the enormous meeting hall.

Orn Free Taa and his ilk were assembled there. They stood to the right of Count Dooku, Anakin Skywalker, and the guards they had brought. An enormous crowd of onlookers stared up at the two groups with expressions varying from excitement to hatred. Between them, was the space for the Jedi to assemble. Yoda, as the head of the Republic, was to be the first to sign. It took them a few minutes to gather on the stage.

Luke, more preoccupied with his rumbling stomach than the goings on of the politics above him. Focused on staring at his shoes and waiting until it was over. Obi Wan had long since moved to stand in front of him.

Dooku and Yoda were exchanging bitter glares. Taa was smirking at Skywalker. Kenobi looked dead inside. It was as anyone expected.

The short blond covered up his yawn and rubbed his stomach. It hurt. His whole body hurt. His head hurt. He hoped it wasn’t food poisoning. He had really liked that food. Yoda was speaking slowly. Luke couldn’t see either sith. He didn’t really want to.

“Luke.” He glanced up at his master. “Stand up straight.”

“I don’t feel good,” Luke muttered. The pain that had been bothering him all morning was getting worse. He felt shaky. Sweat beaded on his brow. “Master, I don’t feel good.”

“Luke,” Obi Wan hissed, “stand up, a Jedi does not give into the pain.”

“I don’t.” Luke whimpered. Yoda had finished speaking, Dooku had taken over the conversation. “Master, something’s wrong.”

“Luke, you’re going to make a scene.”

“I don’t.” He crumpled into his master's side, shaking. “Something’s wrong.”

“Luke,” Obi Wan glanced from and then at the proceedings. If he ran Luke to a placed where he could be ill in peace, then he could be back in time. “Kriff.” He hauled the boy up and scurried from the room. Every curious eye in the room on them as he pulled his shaking padawan from the room. Luke was shaking; his hands were almost painfully gripping onto his shoulders. “Luke! MEDIC!” The lounging resident medic jumped to his feet as Obi Wan rushed into the ambulance ship. “Something is wrong.”

“What is it?” The medic asked stupidly and then glanced at Luke. The boy was now doubled up
completely and crying. He was past the ability to form words. “Shit, get him on the bed!” The other medics jumped to attention, all of them working to help unwind the padawan from his master.

Obi Wan was pushed back as soon as they had him. Luke immediately surrounded by concerned medical professionals.

He would miss his cue. He would miss his cue.

“Master!” Luke called desperately over the people talking over him. “Please, please.” Obi Wan glanced at the medic was holding the oxygen tank.

“You aren’t going to stay with him.”

“I have business to attend to.” He said gruffly, wishing that he could stay with the boy. “Tell me when he’s better.” He was gone, sprinting back to the audience chamber just as Dooku finished off the signing of the treaty.

He had missed his cue.

Desperate to salvage the situation, he plunged his hand into his pocket and jabbed the detonator button.

#$#$#

Whatever commotion that had pulled Obi Wan and his little padawan from the room hadn’t appeared to be enough of a deterrent from their attempted betrayal. Dooku braced himself as the force flared a bright warning just as Kenobi came stomping back into the room.

Whatever had called him from the room had to have been important. Important enough that Dooku had managed to finish the signing. Hopefully important enough to derail whatever plans the Jedi had.

He hadn’t been blind to the muttering and shifting of the Jedi. All of them waiting for something. All of them hoping for something.

The explosion that followed just moments after Kenobi rushed back into the room.

He followed Tang’s orders and threw himself onto the ground as dramatically and realistically as he could. Kitster followed behind. It was a controlled detonation; there were probably no casualties. There was a lot of smoke and rubble appearing from nowhere. There was also some of the worst faked panicked shoutings and running around he’d ever seen outside his grand nephews class play.

“Can’t see anyone on the screens.” Tang’s voice echoed in his ear. He filtered out the smoke from his eyes and mouth and looked around. The Jedi were frantic in their pretending, but he couldn’t see Kitster.

“Who has eyes on Kitster?” He heard shouted by Oola. There was a buzz of static as a comm went dead.

“Find him.” He snarled. The Jedi would find their intended victim to be a stand if but still. There was no excuse to allow the Jedi to hurt Kitster or to traumatize him. He had Ryloth and Naboo either way. He could not lose his friend.

#$#$#3

When the bomb went off Kitster, an experienced and well-appreciated actor, dropped to the ground.
He had expected the first hand to grab him to be one of Oola’s troops. Though, he had been warned that the Jedi moved faster than regular beings. Also that he might end up kidnapped despite his security teams best efforts. When he found himself hauled into the indomitable arms of an unknown Jedi, Kitster wasn’t really surprised.

He did the required thrashing and panicking. His voice rising in his mounting annoyance as someone of indeterminate sex and species dragged him out of the trampling conference center.

“Skywalker.” The voice of Mace Windu was in his ear, sharp and dangerous. “You’ve done enough damage.”

“Have I?” He dropped the false accent that could have been but wasn’t quite Anakin’s. “Master Jedi, I think you have gotten something mixed up!” The Jedi dropped him. Kitster, tall enough that even that wouldn’t have bothered him, stumbled deliberately. Enough that his veils and mask all came loose. He savored the gasp that followed his intentionally slow turn back to look at Mace Windu. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Surely trying to rescue you from the bomb.” Dooku sauntered into the room, his eyes on the Jedi around them. They hadn’t dragged him very far, probably far enough from the scene of the crime to feel comfortable to begin threatening.”

“What are you doing, Dooku?”

“That’s count to you,” Master Jedi. I have not given you permission to use my name.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” Dooku came to a halt directly under a light; it cast frightening shadows around him. Darkness clung to him, sickening and threatening. “You must have been rescuing Representative Tattooine from some truly frightening explosions. Certainly not kidnapping him for some nefarious reason.” Oola and her guards slipped into the room behind him, taking up flanking positions. With their barely concealed weaponry and their short tempers, it was obviously what they thought of the Jedi taking their representative.

“Representative?” Windu looked from Kitster to Dooku. “You said, senator.”

“I do not remember introducing my young friend as Senator Tattooine. I believe I could recall such a blunder. This young man is not Senator Skywalker. This is Representative Banai. An old friend of the Senator, to be sure, but not Skywalker.” Kitster straightened with every air of offended geniality he could manage.

“Honestly!”

“You couldn’t have been trying to find Anakin Skywalker, could you? No?” Dooku sauntered closer, his cane swinging back and forth as he lazily let its pendulum. “Certainly not…trying to kidnap Anakin Skywalker?” Windu was the only Jedi who didn’t fall back in frightened annoyance. They parted in front of the former sith. “Certainly not trying to betray,” he pulled the word long, “your word. Your own authority.” Kitster busied himself with providing the necessary drama to frame Dooku’s regal fury.

“I was manhandled.” He proclaimed, looking at Dooku as if expecting an outpouring of sympathy. “The bomb!”

“Indeed. What sort of ship are you running, Windu? To have a bomb so brazenly planted and detonated at one of your most important conferences of the year. Do not worry; I will find those
responsible. I am setting my chief of security to investigate the chaos.”

“There is no need.” Windu managed past gritted teeth. “Our own teams will look into it.”

“The same way you investigated the temple bombing?” His voice dropped to a low growl. “I think we all remember how well that went.”

“Dooku.”

“You don’t suppose the trouble could have started with the boy? A convenient excuse to distract people from the impending trouble?”

“Dooku.”

“You realize that among my people, it is disgraceful for anyone ever to have their mask removed by anyone not given express permission? This is such an offense!” Kitster said. Dooku nodded sympathetically. “This is a dueling offense. Be assured, Master Jedi, I will be filing a complaint.” He slipped the mask back on and replaced the folds of his clothes.” Dooku set a hand on his shoulder.

“I do not understand why you might have thought to kidnap the representative? I wonder,” Dooku raised an eyebrow and began to steer Kitster from the room. “Surely not under the assumption that Skywalker was present. Not when I made no indication that Skywalker was even coming to the conference.”

“Not any indication.” Kitster agreed as they sauntered from the dark chamber. The Jedi flocked among themselves and fussed quietly. Mace Windu continued to glare at them from the sidelines.

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Anakin wasn’t at all surprised to see the conference get disrupted. Instead of getting of frustrated, he settled into his seat to see how it would play out. There were a thousand and one ways it could go wrong. A million problems that his team on Ryloth could encounter.

Tang was a brilliant woman, but even she could fail. The Jedi could be dangerous. His former master was probably out for blood. Out to destroy him and gain his version of revenge.

He surveyed the drink in his hand and wondered what would be happening behind the smoke and chaos.

“Senator.” He turned to the Queen.

“Majesty?”

“What, if I can ask, what about Queen Amidala. I cannot imagine that you have missed a single broadcast?”

“No,” he smiled. “I have seen her speeches. They are as inspiring and fiery as they had been before she was arrested. More so, even.”

“Do you think that the Confederacy will manage to secure her release?”

“I do think so.” Anakin mused back to Tang’s previous conversation. It wouldn’t be so much of a release as it would be a spectacular jailbreak. He feared, more than anything, her rage and hatred. If Padme desired never to see him again, then he would relent. If she hated until he died, then it would be a problem he would willingly deal with.
“She did have a message,” Lindala said, “one for you.”

“Yes,” he remembered how her eyes had glowed on his datapad. How even lashed by a torrent of rain, her voice had remained steady and clear. “I saw.”

“Hmm, you are must calmer than I thought you’d be,” Lindala observed. “I thought you would have exacted your pound of flesh already. Consider the most grievous crime against you.”

“Given my past, with the Jedi, it is difficult to categorize their crimes,” he sipped at the drink and smiled at the young woman. “I find them all difficult to deal with.”

“Ah,” she seemed to want to press for more answers, but she relented. “What about the conference? There was a bomb.”

The holo-screen used to play the proceedings still showed the cheerfully obnoxious sign that told the views they were experiencing technical difficulties. It was an improvement of seeing smoke and hearing screaming.

“I don’t think anyone was hurt.” Anakin paused. He was a little annoyed that the Jedi would ever think to take him back. What would they do with him? What would they have planned? What could they even want with him? “And my representative should be fine.”

#$$#34

“WHAT HAPPENED? KENOBI! WHAT HAPPENED?” Obi Wan paused in the middle of trying to add a new battery to his datapad. He still hadn’t read his information on Revan’s Cure, and they were trying to bring Anakin down now.

“What?” In his surprise, he’d dropped the data pad. The other members of the council all shifted uneasily as the towering master stomped up to him. “What do you mean?”

“Skywalker,” Windu seethed, “was not Skywalker. It was…A body double.”

“A what?” Obi Wan frowned at the man and his expression cleared. “You think I had something to do with that? I couldn’t possibly have known that they’d bring a body double. The real Anakin must be around here somewhere!”

“SKYWALKER’S NOT ON RYLOTH!” Windu roared. There was a ringing silence as the other council members all stopped breathing. “He was never here. Representative Kitster. That’s who signed the paper. Not Skywalker, not a body double pretending to be Skywalker, a whole other person!”

“I don’t understand.” Obi Wan looked around the room for support, “Anakin should have been here. There was every indication he would be.” The others remained silent and judgemental.

“Every indication.” Yoda proclaimed carefully as he hobbled in, “no evidence.”

“None of the guest's lists included Senator Skywalker. They all said Representative Tatooine. Which, apparently, is not the same person!”

“Oh.” It was a brilliant double play. Brilliant. It stank of High General Tang. It was covered in her oily fingerprints. All but signed in her hand.

“What happened?”
“What?”


“I.” Everything was wrong. Everything was going wrong. They should have had Anakin by now. He should have studied Revan’s cure. He should have left Luke at the Temple. He should have.

“Luke…something happened. I don’t know. I haven’t spoken to the medics.”

“Medics?” Adi Gallia finally spoke. “Why does he need a medic?”

“I don’t know. That’s part of the reason I gave him to medics when he started doubling over in pain and crying!” Obi Wan glared at him. “You are not his master. I know Luke. He was in pain, and it was dangerous.”

“Dangerous enough to jeopardize the whole mission?” Someone demanded. Obi Wan didn’t see who. What he did see, was his anger. He felt his entire body go cold.

“We sound like the Sith!” He snarled. With a whirl, he turned on the rest of the council. “Luke is a child! He is the future of the Jedi! Do you want to penalize him for something beyond his control? You want to make me the fool for trying to care about my student?”

“Your student ruined the entire mission!”

“The mission was ruined from the beginning!” Obi Wan shouted. “Anakin’s not even on the planet. He’s probably sitting back in some leather chair, drinking! And laughing at us! We nearly kidnapped a genuine representative of a state we don’t want to declare war on us. We set off a bomb at our own conference! We were hosting! There was no way this could have worked for us!”

“You don’t know that,” Windu said furiously, “even if we lost Skywalker.”

“We still would have had war declared on us. You saw Dooku!” Adi Gallia muttered, “he knew what we were planning. That story he spun was our line to get out a potentially messy political scandal. If we don’t take it, we will have a problem.”

“We are not being held hostage by Dooku. Especially not now and certainly not through something like this.”

“Risking fallout is dangerous.”

“Command the Republic, we do. Exist this fallout will not.” Yoda seemed to consider the angry Jedi carefully. “Enough. Failed, this mission has. Return to the Temple; we will. Another try for Skywalker, we will have. Again, until he is returned.”

“We need to leave Ryloth,” Windue growled. “Before the Separatists have a chance to give us even more trouble. We lost Skywalker. We don’t even know what’s going on with the little one.”

“I need to check on him.”

“Don’t even think about it, Kenobi.” Mace snapped. He looked to Yoda. “Just leave him. He’ll go back to the Temple on a different cruiser. We all need to get going. We still have about three million more problems to deal with.”

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“Are you alright?” Tang moved quickly down the hallway, brushing past her aides and officers in her rush to reach her friend. When she reached Kitster, she seized his shoulders and yanked him close. “What did they do to you?”

“Nothing, my friend.” He smiled, “less than they might have done to Anakin. Nothing happened.”

“I can’t believe we sent you into a pit of vipers like that.”

“I had faith in the Count and in Oola. She protected me.”

“They still grabbed you.”

“We expected them to grab me.” Kitster set his hands on her shoulders and took a breath. “Have they left the system?”

“The Jedi and the Republic are off Ryloth. Yes, there is a party going on outside right now. Like a huge party. Taa is under house arrest until further notice. Naboo is ours. You can go back to Tatooine while Dooku and I clean up the mess.”

“You’re not going to go back with me?”

“Not to Tatooine. I don’t like that place much, but I will see about visiting.”

“I do have to go shopping for my sister-in-law.” He smiled again, “Would you like to come with me?”

“Beru, the little woman who threw a shoe at me?”

“You startled her. You’re lucky she didn’t have her blasters with her. That would have made things a little worse than that visit already was.”

“It was bad.” Tang agreed as they walked, arm in arm, for the exit. Oola and her troops trailed them carefully. “Not as bad as I reacted. Still, I like someone who can throw a shoe at someone covered in blood.”

Kitster laughed. He paused in front of an enormous window that looked out over the city. The Jedi had only been gone for a few hours, and the rebuilding of Ryloth was already underway. They had promised to free the slave of Ryloth. A promise that had first come to the planet only after Tatooine had finally thrown off its chains and the Hutt.

“I did not realize,” he said quietly. Tang had stopped beside him, “just how much of a difference we made at the time. What sort of seeds we had helped blossom.”

“I can tell you all about the political unrest and riots and the boycotts and everything that went done on Ryloth after crazy blond sword guy finished with the Hutts.” Tang said, her own gaze focused on the distant image of a few dozen twi’lek men being loaded into prison trucks. “I could show the reports on the slave riots.”

“I’ve seen them.” Dark eyes closed in a moment of grief, “I still do not understand how they could have let this happen. So many people died. So many slaves risked everything they had, and so many perished.”

“I know.” Tang rubbed a spot on her arm were Anakin had once bruised in the middle of one of their
more epic fist fights. “10 years of unrest shows. Look at this city. Look at the people. Twenty credits on the fact that Taa was way more focused on riot control and trying to keep the ‘peace’ than doing anything effective about why everyone wanted to kill him.”

“Why are we betting on this?” Kitster asked, finally opening his eyes. “You know this to be a fact. We have discussed this. In detail.”

“And that fact that the Jedi were….allowing this.”

“Tang.” He reached over and set a hand on her shoulder. “We have helped. We will continue to help, but we must allow Ryloth to rebuild Ryloth. You and I both know that an army from on high only rarely works. We have brought the power back into the hands that deserve it and know what their planet needs. You cannot, Tang. You cannot try and fix this yourself. You are an outsider to their entire culture and way of life. Help, if you are wanted but do not interfere.”

“I know. Don’t assume that I can fix it. Let those that know the problems deal with it. I remember.” Tang snorted, “I tried that for half a second before you and Anakin knocked me on my ass. I don’t need a reminder.”

“You had just insulted us.” He reminded her. “You did deserve it.”

“Can you believe this?” Tang snorted. “When I met Anakin properly for the first time I was fine being a mercenary general. I had power and money and ships and a war to play with. I hate you both for unfolding the big book of ethics and morals.”

“If morals and ethics were the only clothes that people wore.” Kitster’s eyes twinkled as Tang continued to glare at the skyline. “You would have been naked.”

“I’d’ve had something.” She replied. “Maybe a little bikini.”

“Hmm.” His suppressed smile pulled a cry of outrage from the High General. She continued to argue her case until Count Dooku swept down the hallway with an expression of deep concern.

“TANG! KITSTER!”

“What?” Tang demanded as they turned. The count didn’t seem too annoyed at her attitude. Or he didn’t care.

“We need to get to Serreno! NOW!” He stopped just before Tang; wringing his hands in agitation. “How quickly can our ship be ready? Do we have any teleportation technology?”


“Anakin returned from Naboo this morning. Right after the broadcast and signing was over. He received news.”

“What kind of news?”

“NEWS!” Dooku yelled. Both general and representative leaned away from him. “News! We have to get to Anakin. He needs us!”

“We haven’t reached his wife yet.” Tang pointed out yet. “Our ship hasn’t left with her yet.”

“We can coordinate Amidala’s rescue as we leave.” The count’s expression bordered on volcanic. “We must get to Anakin. Now!”

“Why don’t we let them wait and see if they’re going to notice. With everything that happened today, they might not even notice that Naboo is no longer communicating with their Republic. Let them notice it on their own terms.”

“That would be hilarious.” They began to move toward the ships that were now preparing for take-off. Their flight crews having already been on the receiving end of Dooku’s concerned panic. “They’ll look at Naboo one day and wonder when that had happened.”

“We can release the broadcast within the Confederacy,” Kitster said. Dooku only nodded and wrung the cane between his fingers. “They don’t appear to pay much attention to our news.”

“Okay, we won’t even drop the poop on their doorstep! We’ll just wait for them to come out of their house to see the crap covering their yard! Excellent. I have to get in touch with my staff. Let them know. Do we know anything about what happened to Ani?”

“I am concerned,” Kitster admitted as they boarded the ship. He gave the required bows as he wants. “Last time that Anakin hides something from me for an extended period it did not end well.”

“I don’t know,” Dooku said as he paced through the loading bay and refused to head into the sitting areas. The security teams for all three officials were all packed in with each other and exchanged confused glances. “I can feel something in the force. Anguish. Pain. Suffering. Something is wrong. We must get to Anakin.”

Chapter End Notes

This isn't actually the climax chapter.
Luke woke up alone, surrounded by the buzzing noises of an empty med-bay and the comfortlessness of blank white walls. He watched the walls for a while, trying to recall the dream he’d had. He wanted to remember the unfamiliar voice that had been so nice. The song, sung by an older woman with gray hair and the saddest smile he’d ever seen.

Most of all, he wanted to the feeling of being with someone. He didn’t want to be alone anymore. She had been so nice and so kind it had almost hurt.

“Padawan Luke.”

“Master.” He didn’t bother with niceties. Master Windu could handle it, he figured. Luke stayed beneath his blanket and wallowed in the low-level pain that made his entire body ache.

“You’re finally awake.” Windu tucked his hands into his sleeves and loomed over his bed. “Welcome back.”

“What happened?”

“You don’t remember?” A gray eyebrow rose, and Luke shrugged. “Apparently a very sudden onset of appendicitis. They had to operate quickly.”

“I remember pain, I think, and then I was alone. What happened with the conference? Did it go well?”

“It went,” Windu pursed his lips, “poorly. Someone set off a bomb.”

“Oh.” Luke blinked, “my master is very good at finding out information like that. He could investigate.”

“No.” Windu shook his head, “he’s going to be…young Luke, how do you think you’re training is going?”

“Um, slowly but I promise I’m trying my hardest and my hardest is always my best!”


“Teaching? NO! He does a very good job! I’m just not a very good student. I mean, you can blame me for not being able to learn!” Luke exclaimed, and he sat up quickly and then fell back, hissing.

“Padawan, in the interest of…perhaps training more padawans, we’re going to be assigning him to another student.” Luke blinked and then tilted his head to the side.

“But he’s my teacher.”

“He’s not anymore,” Windu said firmly.
“What’ll happen to me?” Luke asked as his hand came up to cover his mouth. “Will I go to the agri-corps?”

“Erm, no.” For the first time, he seemed uncomfortable. “We’re going to wait and see who would be a good fit for you, Luke. For now, you’re going to be attached to the temple. There are several tasks you can undertake to prove your worthiness for a new master.”

“But what about Master Obi-Wan? Is he going to be alright?”

“Why wouldn’t he be?”

“Well, he doesn’t do very well on his own.” Luke felt like he should have had more of a reaction to be separated from Obi-Wan. Maybe he should have been depressed or scared or angry. Maybe he should have felt something besides a sense of absolute relief. Luke wondered what it meant. “Um, what about my stuff. Where will I stay.”

“That will all be handled when we return to the temple,” Mace said. “You only need to focus on recovering right now.”

“I can’t believe my appendix nearly burst. It hurt so much.” Luke set his hand over his stomach and shivered. “I’m sorry for making such a mess at the Conference. I hope that none of the Separatists were hurt when the bomb went off.” He looked up at the council member. “Did you get hurt?”

“I’m fine,” Windu said after a long moment. “You just recover, you’ll be moving out of hour master-padawan quarters as soon as we return to the temple.”

“Okay.” Luke watched the Jedi master extract himself from the room and then he turned back to the wall and wondered if he could count the specks of dirt.

“How did he react?” Obi-Wan peered at Mace Windu from between the buzzing bars of his cell.

“He didn’t.” Someone must have punched him in the face. Yanked his lungs out with nothing but a rusty spoon and a bent fork. Someone might have…killed him.

“What?” Desperately hoping that Windu was lying, he tried to stand upright. “What?”

“He didn’t react, Kenobi.” Mace seemed almost victorious, pleased as he paced in front of the bars. “At all. He asked if you would be able to live alone. That was all.”

“Luke didn’t react.” Obi-Wan slid down the wall and cradled his head in his hands.

“It seems,” Windu said finally, “you managed to teach a Skywalker proper detachment.”


“Isn’t going to miss you and if you ever want to be considered a Jedi again, you’ll want to not miss him. You don’t speak to him again, ever.”

“You’ll never find another person to teach him. He’s…hopeless. He can barely lift a rock. What are you going to do with such a null?”

“Skywalker is past our grip. If we try to take out the inhibitor now, we’ll alert Skywalker to his son’s
presence. So we’re keeping him at the Temple. I hope you enjoy the Agri-corps, Kenobi. It’ll be your home for the next few years.” Obi-Wan gaped.

Qui-Gon. He’d been so close to the agri-corps the last time. So close to being shipped off to be some stupid, muddy farm and then Qui-Gon, had saved him.

He couldn’t.

“You can’t be serious,” he gasped, helpless before the total, encompassing power of the council. “You can’t. Not the Agri-Corps.”

“Considering what you’ve done, Kenobi, it’s the only place left for you.” Without another word, Mace Windu turned on his heels and stalked from the brig, leaving Obi-Wan in his solitude. For a while, he did nothing but stare at the exit. Nearly uncomprehending in his bafflement. When he eventually felt the small ship complete its turn and hurl itself into hyperspace; Obi-Wan went limp. He covered his face and wondered if he still remembered how to cry.

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“He’s back.” Queen Breha Organa watched the distant sensor light up with a ship.

“Windu?” Bail Organa took her hand and watched her, “what do we do?

“Leia will not go back to the Jedi. We will send her off-world if need be. We agreed to take care of her and to protect her.”

“My love, he will want her back. We know they’ll want her back.”

We won’t give her to them.” They both turned back to the palace where they knew Leia slept peacefully. As one, their gaze turned to the Jedi section of the palace. “Allowing them to stay was a mistake,” Breha said finally. “Allowing them to make a temple in our home was a mistake.”

“We did what be believed was right, Breha.”

“We have endangered ourselves and our citizens as well as our government by keeping them so close to a seat of power. We saw what they did to the Republic, how did we miss it, Bail?”

“I don’t.” Bail bit his lip, “perhaps we were also blinded by the crumbling republic, too startled to notice the root of the cause.”

“The useless senate and the corrupt Jedi.” She was too dignified to hold herself, but she took a careful, shuddering breath. “We may soon be under martial law, Bail. We need to prepare.”

“I have…a contact in the Confederacy I can speak to about Leia. They may be able to protect her.”

“They ought to.” She sighed, “she won’t be happy if we send her away, but even that heartbreak is even better than a return to the Jedi.”

“My love.”

“We will have to speak with her before Windu returns to the palace.” She said quietly, “come, my love.” They left the veranda and hurried back into the palace to Leia.

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Caleb felt cold and shivery, holding onto the blue form of Qui-Gon Jinn and contemplating his next move.

“There’s no real point in finding Hera Syndulla is there?” he asked, and Jinn shook his head. “Then I should.” He found himself, inexplicably saying, “find her. “

“Really? “

“Yeah.” Caleb stared at the distant trees and shivered. “Find her. Don’t know what I’m going to do but I’m going to find her.” Caleb eventually pulled away from Jinn and staggered back. His eyes were red, his expression exhausted and drawn. “I just…will you stay close? Please?”

“Yes.” Qui-Gon smiled faintly, “I’m always here when I’m needed.” He vanished a moment later. Caleb stared at the spot he’d been, and he hugged himself. For a moment that stretched into eternity, Caleb wallowed in indecision. From this moment he’d be against the Council’s wishes. He’d be against his master's wishes. He would go against everything he knew. Everything he understood.

He took a step forward.

And another.

Caleb Dume kept moving.
Prince Skywalker of Naboo

Chapter Summary

Anakin is a royal prince through marriage.
Ahsoka gets kidnapped.

Chapter Notes

During the Clone Wars.

“Given the recent threats against Naboo, for their position on the war, I believe it does make sense that the Queen is summoning a Jedi.” Windu stared at the icily worded demanded from the Nubian Queen, “Skywalker though?”

“He’s the only one the Queen wants.” Obi-Wan seemed tired, and his face was pulled downward. “He’s also being invited because he’s a Friend of Naboo.”

“An official title,” Plo Koon said, “they have every right to request his presence.”

“Skywalker is needed on the war front.” Windu reminded the small gathering of masters. “Tang is taking Onderon; we’ve been requested to provide aid and training to the rebels there.”

“Onderon left the Republic a year ago.”

“These rebels have been fighting ever since, but they’ve been fighting someone who usurped the king. Not necessarily pro-Republic.”

“We could send Anakin and Ahsoka to train these rebels.” Obi-Wan mused, “the might be more successful than…or, we could send Ahsoka and send Anakin to Naboo.”

“Is Tano trained enough to handle a mission like this?”

“She is,” Obi-Wan nodded, “insulting one of our greatest political allies may be a foolish idea. Senator Amidala is one of our strongest supporters. With the recent downturn of our image and the souring of public opinion, it may be wise to at least pander to the Senate.”

“Fickle, the public is.” Yoda limped into the room; the assembled masters fell silent. “Send Tano to Onderon; we shall. Skywalker, to Naboo.”

Later, Anakin Skywalker stared at them. “Ahsoka cannot train a group of rebels enough to reclaim their planet.”

“If you’ve trained her properly then she will have little trouble,” Windu pointed out and Skywalker, despite his brutal evaluation, didn’t seem dim in the slightest.

“I know what my student is capable of. This is beyond her.” Anakin glanced around, “If you send
Ahsoka to Onderon alone, she is going to die. Masters, listen to me. She cannot train these rebels alone. Even if you send a group of clones with her, she still can’t.”

“You have so little faith in your student?” Obi-Wan stared at him, the dark eyes focusing on Anakin’s blue. “When you were fourteen, you managed to do something similar.”

“My apprenticeship has lasted a lot longer than Ahsoka’s; she’s only been my student of a year.” He shifted broad shoulders beneath his cloak, looking unsettled and vaguely petulant. “She’s only fourteen, you can’t send her into a situation like this without her master.”

“Naboo has demanded your presence, the queen has invited you as her protection.” Windu’s irritation was mounting. “You’re dismissed, Skywalker.” Anakin stared at them and turned around to storm from the room. It wasn’t a council meeting, he didn’t have to offer any sort of apologies for being rude.

Outside the room, he was ignored and snubbed the same as he’d been under the evaluation. The Jedi at the Temple had seemed to jump on the chance to snub and mock him. To make him suffer for his mistakes of the past. To make him feel like a slave again. It shouldn’t have surprised him as much as it had.

To think, once he’d been the hero of the creche. He was careful in his maintenance of his shields and filters, knowing that if he had a fit at the Temple, he was done for. He slipped over to the training room where he knew Ahsoka was.

“Snips.” She was alone, none of her fellow padawans were with her. Not even the insufferably perfect Barris. Ahsoka turned and deactivated her lightsaber and lunged for him. “Hey there.”

“How do you feel?” She demanded, looking him up and down for injuries. “Master, are you okay?”

“I’m getting better,” he said, “Snips, we have a new mission.”

“Good, I’ve been dying to get out of the temple.”

“No,” he swallowed painfully and led her to a chair across the room. “Snips, the council is sending us on different missions. You’re…going to Onderon. The rebels there have requested assistance.”

“Okay? I can train some rebels.”

“Yes, but this is deep in Separatist territory. You have to help them free their king, restore the government, while keeping the Seppies off your back.”

“I can do that!” Ahsoka grinned, suddenly buoyed by excitement. “I can! You’re the best teacher, Master.”

“You’re going to have clones with you.” He paused, “Snips, you have to be careful. I know that you’re capable and strong, but this is still very dangerous. I want you to please be careful, alright?”

“I will, Skyguy, where are you going to be.”

“Escort to Queen Jamilla, she’s taking a celebratory sabbatical and has requested me.”

“Oh,” she paused, “you’ll be okay. The Naboo like you. They won’t let anything happen to you.”

“I’m not worried about me, Snips.” He set a hand on her shoulder, “I’m worried about you. This is a dangerous mission and even with the best training, it could go sideways quickly. You will be careful,
won’t you.”

“You worry too much,” Ahsoka punched his shoulder softly, “I promise, Skyguy, I’ll be the most careful. You should pack for your trip to Naboo.”

“I know,” he stared at her, “I’ll see you again, Snips.”

“Of course.”

“You’re mission information will be where it usually is.” Anakin stared at her with such a piercing, unsettling gaze, she shivered. “I’m going to pack, alright. If anything goes sideways, you know how to contact me.”

“Yes,” she looked at the carpet and then at Anakin. He wasn’t moving, his hand on her shoulder trembled. Slowly, with visible effort, he began to pull himself away from her and in stumbling, unsure steps, he finally exited the training room.

Anakin was torn between Ahsoka and Padme. On the one hand, attending to Queen Jamilla was going to be a vacation. Yes, the Naboo queens did tend to like him. He’d been to every coronation since the Trade Federation invasion. Queens tended to send him gifts they thought he could use. Some of them interesting and some of them simple little rocks they might have found on a walk. Usually, it was to show that they were still thinking of him.

Still, the Council would send Ahsoka to a war front without him. It was reckless and stupid, and…he paused in packing. He glanced at the small bit of his mother he still had, A simple strip of blue cloth, once part of her dress. She’s made it into a little bracelet for him when he had been little. He didn’t take it outside the Temple, too afraid it would ruin it. He considered it and then lifted it to his chest.

In a language he hardly remembered, the word forming on instinct and desperation rather than memory, he prayed. Not to the Force, so fickle and abused, but to the gods of his childhood. To the spirits of Tatooine who’d endured the shame of slavery.

He could hardly stand to pray for himself, instead, focused his attention on Ahsoka. That she’d be safe through her mission and return safely.

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Poda’s plan for Skywalker’s vacation was suddenly abandoned when the next bit of news reached her. Instead of heading to a new front of the war, or to help some desperate folks, he was already being sent somewhere.

“Where is he going?” She leaned over the shoulder of an intel officer, “what is this?”

“The ship was marked with the symbols of the Naboo Royal Court,” the man replied.

“We don’t have much intel on Naboo. Too many ethical politicians, well, except one. We have literally no intel in the Royal Court. A secretive bunch.”

“As a former Queen, Senator Amidala is entitled to the use of royal vessels.” The officer said, “and one of Skywalker’s official titles is Friend of Naboo.”

“Hmm,” she glanced down at the man, “right. This doesn’t mean anything to me. What we do know is that the Jedi is headed to one of the most secure planets in the Republic. There, he will be very safe. Do we know what his mission is yet?”

“No, sir, but Ahsoka Tano was just assigned a new mission.”
“Do we know what that is?”

“No.”

“Wonderful,” Poda shook her head. “Wonderful, find me a list of the recent places on the front and in the Confederacy that seem to be in danger. Anything that might need a Jedi’s attention. Fine them and start putting together the statistics for the list and send me the top ten.”

“Sir!” The rest of the officers in the room began to work quickly, and Poda rubbed her nose as she moved onto the next problem.

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“You’re late.” Anakin smiled at Padme but didn’t move forward or hug her. The Naboo delegate watched them carefully.

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m joking, Ani.” She stepped closer, pressing her hands onto his arms, “you’re right on time.”

“Erm,” he glanced to the rest of the delegation of handmaidens and guards and politicians, “what are you doing, Padme?”

“Anakin, I…” she bit her lip, “Anakin, I asked Queen Jamilla to invite you for a specific reason.” He stared, horror mounting in his chest.

“Padme.” He breathed.

“Please, before you get upset, listen to me! Talk to the Queen, please. Just a conversation. Please.”

“Did you?” He swallowed, and Padme seemed to be teetering on fear and worry. “Tell her?”

“Yes.” Anakin paused and looked from her to the rest of the people assembled, “oh…you.”

“A conversation, Anakin. It will explain everything.” She pulled on his mechanical hand, “just one.” As always, he followed Padme. From the landing pad and to one of the private sitting rooms. There, Queen Jamilla waited. She wore the typical ceremonial make-up, but it was lessened.

“Your majesty.” Anakin bowed slowly; he kept his hand in Padme’s.

“Anakin Skywalker, Friend of Naboo,” the sonorous tone calmed him. She was not angry. “Please, sit down. I am sure your long journey tired you.”

Anakin sat, “not really, majesty. I understand,” he glanced from Padme to Jamilla, “there is something you wished to discuss with me.”

“Yes,” Jamilla waved her hand, and he felt the guards leave to new areas, out of earshot. “My friend and Senator, has informed me of your marriage.”

“Yes,” Jamilla waved her hand, and he felt the guards leave to new areas, out of earshot. “My friend and Senator, has informed me of your marriage.”

“Yes.” He felt fear tighten in his chest. Horror oozed down his spine, and he didn’t dare look the young queen in the eye.

“I have also been informed of your evaluation at the hands of the Jedi order and what that entails.” Anakin flinched and nodded wordlessly. “Anakin,” her voice seemed softer, despite the official tone, “Senator Amidala has explained this to me.”
“Majesty,” Padme spoke up suddenly, her hand tightened on his, “may I explain?” Curious, Anakin peeked through his hair to stare at the two women.

“Yes.” Jamilla leaned back in her seat and Padme turned to him.

“Ani, as a former Queen of Naboo, there are certain beliefs. First, that every queen inhabits and is inhabited by the spirit and soul of Naboo. We are part of the soul of Naboo, we love our people, and we care about them in every way possible. Anakin, when we married, you fell under a…sort of protection of Naboo royalty. The evaluation of you was a direct insult to me and to all of Naboo. It was unjust and vicious and cruel and never should have happened.”

“Padme,” he stared at her and then at the young queen.

“You are my husband as much as I am your wife.”

“What do you want to do then?” He asked, bowing his head.

“We will have the sabbatical to discuss it.” Jamilla said slowly, “Anakin if you would please join my procession. Not as a Jedi, not as a citizen of Naboo or the Republic, but as a Royal Consort of Naboo?”

“The Jedi,” he managed.

“There are none in my retinue that would dare expose a secret of Naboo. Not even to the Chancellor.”

“Oh,” Anakin knew immediately that she was telling the truth. “Well,” he looked at Padme, “alright then.” She beamed and kissed his cheek, “but, I have some concerns. The Council is sending Ahsoka away on a mission to Onderon. This is going to be a solo mission, I’m afraid…she may be danger. I’m confident in her skill, but I don’t,” he looked back at the floor, “I worry.”

“I will have my aides keep you updates on any developing situation,” Jamilla promised.

“Would you like to have Helgina attached to the procession?” Anakin stared at them both, feeling as if he was missing something important.

“We could invite her,” he said quietly, “please.”

Jamilla beamed, Padme seemed to be squirming in her seat, excited. “Of course,” she promised. “Anakin, we know Ahsoka, you’ve trained her well.”

“I know,” he leaned against Padme, “but I feel, concerned.” She kissed his hair.

“We will do our best, Anakin. Meanwhile, you can consider this a vacation.” There was a desperate hope in her eyes and voice. “We can discuss some other business.”

“Like what?”

“How to make the Order pay for this,” Jamilla said, they turned to her.

“But the Jedi.”

“Have insulted Naboo and her people. Prince Anakin,” he felt a blush crawl up his cheeks, “this is not a simple snub or a veiled insult in a tabloid. This was a grave insult. I will not stand for it. Senator, no longer will Naboo publicly or privately support the Jedi.” Padme nodded briskly. Anakin wasn’t sure what he was feeling, but he was sure he didn’t pity the Council.
“Anakin,” Padme stood, pulling him up too. “I ordered clothes for you. These are wonderful clothes. Please, would you wear them?”

“I packed some clothes.”

“Anakin,” she sighed, “for a just…a little while. Can we pretend? Can you have some time away from…the Jedi. You don’t need to wear the robes; you don’t need to be…”

“A Jedi?” He stared at her, one hand coming to cover hers.

“I just want to give the chance to…come home. To me, when we’re not wrapped up in this war. When we’re not…a senator and bodyguard. When you’re not the knight of the Jedi. You’re just…Anakin, my husband.”

“A separation?” He asked dumbly, and he stared down at Padme, his expression soft and hardly daring to hope. He nodded and bowed his head until it rested atop hers. She hugged him carefully, as if he was going to break in her arms, like a glass figurine.

When the queen graciously dismissed them, Anakin discovered just how enormous a queen taking a sabbatical was. As he rifled through the racks of clothing for a proper outfit, Padme explained.

“I never took one because of the unrest at the time of the Trade Federations attack,” she smiled at him as he held out a pale pink shirt. “There is a jacket and pants to go with that.” He put it back.

“Anyway, usually a queen takes at least one. It’s a time for them to get away from the palace and the stress. They get the chance to strategize and relax, a change to be a real teenager. Jamilla is much looking forward to hers.”

“Do you wish you had taken yours?” Anakin asked as he shed his cloak and lifted up a complicated looking suit.

“A little to Core looking. I chose that for formal functions, not for a week long sabbatical. Try something comfortable, relaxing,” she winked, “sexy.”

“Padme.” He blushed put look around the racks for something he knew would please his wife.

“We could always try page 53 of that book,” Padme told him, rising from where she’d been lounging. Her delicate dress looked like it might fall off if she sneezed too hard. It was beautiful, and as she reclined on beautiful cushions, the neckline had become a mere suggestion of a stopping point for her chest. The slit up the side had become scandalous when it showed a little too much thigh. She sauntered to him and set her delicate hands on his chest. “Do you remember?”

“I remember,” mesmerized, his own hands rose to grasp at her elbows. “An odd choice if we’re going to be sitting for a procession.”

“I know,” she winked at him, “part of the…charm…of the page.”

“I’m going to kick Artoo next time I see him.” He said, carefully drawing her closer. “No wonder he makes Threepio spark.”

“Oh? Artoo? He is Naboo make,” Padme shrugged just enough that one tiny strap of her gown slid down her shoulder. Anakin swallowed heavily and freed a hand to push the strap back into place. “Maybe it’s the planet.”

“Oh?” He pressed a kiss to her forehead, “really?” He kissed her ear, “what,” just below her ear, “does that say,” he kissed down her neck, hands coming around to grip her torso just beneath her
arms, “about Threepio?”

“Much what it says about you,” she answered, her voice calm and her expression clear despite Anakin’s attention to her neck. “So…stiff.” She leaned against him, voice dropping to a sultry whisper, “strict.”

“Hmm,” he hummed against her shoulder as he nuzzled the strip back off her shoulder, “I can be.”

“And fussy, sometimes,” she said when his kissed trailed down her shoulder, “Oh, wait, are you up for this?”

“Hmm?” He looked up.

“Your hypersensitivity? Will you be up for sex?”

“Oh,” Anakin paused, “I’ve been on a new medication that Helgina prescribed. On my way here I was able to finally find a cool, dark place and relax. I brought my nice towels and my nices sleeping clothes.” He grinned, “I wanted to make sure I was okay before I got here because I finally had some time to decompress. It’s not so bad when I get a chance to shed the stress and stuff and like you said, to find a place where I’m not a Jedi. To be more comfortable,” his smile turned a bit dopey and Padme nearly melted against him. “To be home.”

“Does this mean? That I can…?” His blush deepened, but he nodded.

“Excellent,” she reached for his tunic, but Anakin caught her hands.

“What?” She pouted.

“Page 53,” Anakin said seriously, “cannot be disrupted.”

“Oh, dear,” she pretended to swoon against him, “poor me!”

“Tut, tut,” her husband, “you shouldn’t have chosen such a page. I know for a fact that we’re going to be sitting and if you wanted,” his smile turned impish, “to be so uncomfortable for the procession, you really should have chosen page 45.”

“Ani,” Padme scolded, “that is not appropriate!”

“Oh? I will be enjoying watching you squirm.”

“You,” Padme said as he ran a hand along the slit of her skirt and then up into it, “will not see me sitting down at all!”

“Really?” He raised an eyebrow, “care to make a bet?”

“I win, I chose your outfits the entire trip.”

“I win, you change into a pair of pants.”

“Ani!” Padme thought about the specifics of page 53, “do you want to see me?” She watched him grin, and she rolled her eyes. “Of course you want to see me writhing in agony.” There was a particular glint in his eyes, and she felt his mechanical hand finally hook around her underwear and began to pull them down slowly. Her entire body went hot as she felt the metal digits over her skin and shivered when Anakin squeezed gently.

“You are perfection,” he kissed her neck again, “in every state, my wife.”

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Ahsoka shivered in the miserably cold downpour of Onderon’s rainy season. Her troopers were pulling out the weapons they’d brought with them. Most of them seemed to be working. She wasn’t sure what to be doing at this point.

They’d made it to the planet unscathed. Hardly even noticed. They’d landed and begun unpacking their supplies.

“We need to find Saw Gerrera,” Captain Toms, one of the first of the new generation of clones, stood at her side. He was a little unsure of his position, having to take the place of Rex. His personality leaned on the soft side, he was easy going and had seemed more interested in the culture of Onderon than it’s defenses.

“How do you think we should do that?”

“We need disguises,” Toms told her, “and…we should go shopping.”

“Rebels need food too,” Ahsoka nodded, “they’d have to pick up food at the market and then head back to the base. We know what they look like, we just need to find them there.” She beamed up at Toms, “Good idea!”

“Thank you, commander,” he nodded slowly. Ahsoka felt a little better about the whole mess. As much as she wished Anakin and Obi-Wan were with her, she was pretty pleased that the Council thought she could handle a mission like this.

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“It really is a procession?” Anakin stared at the long line of hoverwagons pulled by shaaks, and then at the enormous hoverwagon that housed the Queen. It was covered in curtains of fabric and seemed almost as opulent and indulgent as the rest of the caravan.

“The Senators accommodations during the journey,” Padme nodded to a wagon smaller but no less elegant than the queens. “Prince Consort,” she winked at him and pulled him closer. “Take a look.”

“A look?” He felt a little dazed; the whole display felt shamelessly hedonistic. He stepped up into the wagon and surveyed the interior. It was meant for relaxation and comfort. “Wow. This is,” he settled on the pile of cushions and wondered when he’d stepped into a daydream.

“Ani?”

“I…a week ago I was under evaluation.” He leaned back and stared at the draping fabric above him. Padme felt the familiar burn of fury and hate. She remembered who she’d felt when news of his evaluation had come through. How much she’d wanted to march into the Temple and burn it down. She hadn’t though. Deciding her revenge would be best as she slowly suffocated the entire order.

She knew her weaknesses and counted Anakin in that number. She knew what she couldn’t do and what she could do. Padme would willingly admit to being perhaps a little too possessive, and Anakin would no doubt blame her background of power.

But she’d been Queen! She’s lead her nation through the Trade Federation invasion and then out of its shadow. She’d gone to the Senate and lead from there! She was a ruler. She was the soul of Naboo’s goddess. Even if people thought this was over-reacting or foolish; she didn’t care. Every bit of Queen’s Lore indicated that what the Jedi had done was one of the gravest insults that could be offered to her husband. Many she’d tolerated before but no longer.
“Ani?” She laid down beside him, running her hands over his chest and then to card through his hair.

“I know Helgina said she could make it out at least once but,” he sighed deeply, “I’m tired.”

“Alright,” she watched him roll onto his side and close his eyes. “Erm, do you want a nap?”

“Yes.” There was something heartbreakingly depressed about the way he closed his eyes. At these moments it felt more like they were complete strangers than a married pair. She looked at the line of curtains of the palanquin and sighed.

“Padme?”

“Yes?”

“Would you?” He turned over just enough to hold out his hand. She beamed and settled beside him on the cushions. When they were snuggled close together, he seemed even more tired as he looked over her face and eventually closed his eyes.

“Do you want to play anymore?” She asked, their game of amusement and slightly scandalous entertainment was easily derailed at a single word.

“Cocoa,” he muttered soft enough she had to strain to hear it. Padme nodded.

“Alright.” She stared at him. His breathing was steady.

“Everything’s changed,” he said lowly. Padme waited for him to elaborate. “Ever since I was on Florrum. I didn’t think about stuff before them but that fit I had. I had to consider what I was doing. What I was…having as a priority.” He opened his eyes. “I kept going and thinking and I…”

“What?”

“I think we’re….I’m not…doing this right.”

“Anakin!” Her heart constricted, but Anakin simply nuzzled her hands and massaged them with his. She felt the palanquin move forward.

“I need to be a better husband. A better…I’m not doing anything right? Why can’t I do it?” He waited, “I’ve been giving this a lot of thought, Padme if anything happens to me during the war.”

“Ani.”

“Just,” he blinked, “If anything does then will you take care of Ahsoka?”

“Ahsoka?”

“I don’t want her to be sent to the Temple or assigned to another master.” He paused, “I want her to be with someone who I know will take care of her. Please?”

“Of course,” Padme nodded slowly, “I will take care of her.”

“Thanks.” Anakin smiled, “how does your bottom feel?”

“Sore,” Padme snuggled against her husband, desperate for the attention and touch. “You have hard hands.” He muttered something in her ear she didn’t understand as he released her hands and draped a heavy arm over her shoulder.
“I’m sorry,” he muttered.

“I would have used my safeword,” she reminded him, “I didn’t mind.” There was something almost obscene about the situation. Both of them, elevated on a hovering palanquin, surrounded by luxuries and comforts that no sane person would ever entertain. For a solid week, if they so chose, they would be pampered beyond the realms of ordinary understanding. As a surprise, Padme had sent a good number broken droids and things for him to fix. She’d ordered spicy food to be prepared, the strong teas he liked, and the clothes she thought he might like. Right now, he wore the outfit she’d chosen. It was beautiful on him. Transforming his enormous frame from a weapon of war into something soft and snuggle-worthy. Of course, she always wanted to snuggle Anakin.

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Poda usually settled for drama and over the top antics when she was working on something spectacularly illegal. Now, pulling the supposed-to-be-sealed documentation on Palpatine; she pretended to be falling asleep at her desk, even as she read the pages.

“Sir!” She groaned and pushed the pile of illegally obtained information to the floor with a sweep of her arms.

“What?”

“We found Tano!”

“Good job, get out.” She stared down at the paper pile, sighing. “What is it?”

“She’s been reported on Onderon!”

“Stop shouting,” Poda rubbed her nose, “what about Onderon?”

“The rebels there have requested Jedi assistance in regaining their planet. The King, recently deposed by a senator, is scheduled to be executed.”

“Of course they send Tano.” Poda glanced at the papers and then at her aide, “send the Specters ahead of me. I want them to locate Tano and whichever Clones she has with her. Tell them to prepare a sting kidnapping. I want all of them trussed up and pretty when I get there.”

“Yes, sir!” The man saluted and scampered from her office. Poda considered her project and picked up the most recent file. It was a simple, innocuous one. A message from one senator to another. It connected with a bigger, nastier plot that she’d been unraveling slowly. About a month ago she’d discovered the name of Dooku’s Sith teacher. Her time spent in the dusty basement libraries on seven different planets and breaking into the restricted sections; had paid off.

The Sith. The Rule of Two. A few more things made sense, and with this information, she was tracking down the truly elusive information.

Why?

Why was there a war in the first place? Why had anyone bothered with it? She’d hired a few underfunded researchers to give her credible, useful information. They’d be worth every penny.

There were legitimate sociological, economic, and political reasons that the war had broken out. So many that she’d taken the paper and sponsored it so it’d be published.

After she’d gotten her use out of it.
Still, by any stretch of the imagination, something was wrong. When she’d discovered that Dooku had seen another source of information, behind her back no less, she’d investigated. It had been disgustingly easy to find Palpatine after that. For all his Sith and Jedi tricks and his royal attitude, Dooku still made mistakes. One of them was using her staff to secure his information.

“Why?” She held the note into the air and pondered what could possibly be done. Sith tended to treat the entire galaxy as a point of conquest. They were meant to rule everything and lose nothing. Why had he bothered with a war?

A war that split the whole galaxy in half and he controlled both halves. If he wanted pure entertainment that the whole galaxy would sneer at and the gleefully partake in, Poda thought he should have just gone and hired a stripper.

Poda considered a few people who could have qualified for the job and wondered if any of them would accept a commission like that.

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Anakin’s depressed air hadn’t lessened much, but he’d seemed genuinely touched by all the thing she’d sent ahead of him. He’d spent a while mixing the different teas together and then made that blend into an enormous pot that they’d shared on the floor of their tent while discussing the effects that the loss of Nubian support would have on the Jedi. She knew that he wasn’t planning on staying the Jedi forever.

“I’ve had enough of this war.” She still hadn’t sat down but was lying on her stomach. Anakin was sitting cross-legged in front of her and fiddling with some wire and metal. “I want it to be over tomorrow. I never want to have to think about Clones troopers and their cost. I don’t want to think about how the galaxy is falling to pieces.” She winced as she forgot the delicate state of her backside and tried to roll over.

“It feels odd to have people know.” He eventually said, choosing to ignore or not comment on her announcement. “The Queen and the rest of the people here. I can…tell the difference in how they treated me as a Jedi and how they treated me as the…prince consort.”

“There’s been a bit of a shift in public opinion on Jedi ever since the incident with Baby Ludi. It was a mess.”

“Hmm,” He hummed to acknowledge her and then sighed, “This would be easier if Artoo were here.”

“Where is he?” Padme leaned up to look at the odd contraption.

“I sent him with Ahsoka,” he looked up, “I wanted her to have every advantage. Padme,” he licked his lips, “I’m not sure how comfortable I feel about all this.”

“About what?”

“About being here. I…it seems like so much, and it seems to excessive. I don’t…feel comfortable.”

“Oh,” she hadn’t anticipated this. Why hadn’t she anticipated this. “Ani…do you want?” He didn’t seem to be looking at her, he turned away and then sat on the enormous bed with a deep sigh.

“I’m getting less…I’m becoming less.”

“What?”
“I used to, Padme, I used to be angry all the time and furious and then just hateful and I could feel everything hurting, and now I just feel sad. I just want to sleep the war away. I don’t’ even want to be anymore.”

“Anakin,” Padme sat beside him, wrapping her arms around him. “I don’t…what would you like me to do? What can I do for you? Please, let me help.”

“I don’t know,” he said quietly, “I don’t know how I feel anymore and I don’t even know what to do feel anymore. I just…feel empty.” His eyes flicked up to look at her, “I love you, I’m sorry, I’m ruining this trip.”

“You’re not ruining this trip.” She told him, “This is why I told the Queen of our marriage. I wanted you to be somewhere safe. Somewhere you want to fix something and relax and try to understand what problems you might have and for us. For me to help because that is what I’m supposed to do. This is…my family, Anakin. You are my family, and this is me trying to help.”

“Oh,” he stared at her and leaned into her hug, “I don’t deserve you.”

“Nor I you,” she said quietly, and Anakin huffed a laugh into her hair. “I love you, Anakin.”

“I love you.”

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“If anyone asks,” Ahsoka Tano said the moment Poda strode through the door into her interrogation cell, “I fought off a hundred battle droids before I was captured by some sneaky seppies trap.”

“Right,” Poda stared down at the young Togruta and sighed, “instead of being captured the way you really were?”

“Yes.” The girl wasn’t blushing; she stared at Poda with an unwavering gaze. “Let me go.”

“I don’t think so,” Poda shook her head, “technically you're aiding a known terrorist organization. You’re Republic, and Jedi Council is breaking a million laws right now by sending you here. Also, where the hell is Skywalker?”

Tano didn’t reply. The bravado was obvious, along with easily identifiable Jedi arrogance.

“So, I have two choices for you. First, you go to prison; your men go to prison. I use you as a sign of the Republic’s arrogance and their unwillingness to listen to a sovereign state. You become the poster child or Jedi arrogance, along with Kenobi, and then your men go away for the rest of their miserable lives.”

“This is not a sovereign state.” Tano snarled, “the King is the rightful ruler and that. “

“The king is a weak-willed idiot whose hold on Onderon has been breaking for a long time. Yes, the usurper is annoying and obviously much less ethical and evil but, it was pretty legal from my standpoint.” Tano glowered.

“What’s the next option?” Tano shifted in her chain and Poda shrugged agreeably.

“You’re men go free. Well, back to the Republic I don’t know much about free but, whatever. I put the King back on the throne, and I don’t press charges against Saw and his sister. Then, I take you and that little blue astromech pain in the ass, and we go somewhere else.”

“Where? The Citadel!” Tano shot at her and Poda sighed.
“No,” She rubbed her nose, “we go somewhere else.”

“Where?”

“Tano, this is a war. Where we go will be a military secret. I do not have time for your reckless
stupidity. Make a choice.”

“You could have hurt them,” Ahoska said, her training must not have covered how to act when
captured. Still, Poda tossed a datapad onto the table which revealed the security footage of her
clones. They were groggy, waking up from their drugged sleep, “oh.”

“Tano?”

“Fine!” She took a deep breath and seemed afraid, “you send them back to the Republic, and I’ll go
with you.”

“That’s fine!” Poda knew that such an obvious choice would be easy to make even with the girl
being a Jedi. “First, they need to recover, and you have to come with me. Don’t worry,” Poda
stepped to the side to reveal General Grievous’ shadow as he stalked through the door, “I have your
escort.”

“Brat.” Grevious rasped in the way of a greeting. Poda nearly slapped him, if it wouldn’t have ruined
her hand.

“Oh,” Ahsoka stood, her expression was the same shade of bratty that Poda knew intimately, “I’m
surprised you could make it up those stairs.”

“I will not tolerate your arrogance, young Jedi,” Grevious said, shaking a metal hand in her face.
“One wrong move and I will destroy you.”

“You can try,” she challenged, mockingly, “I’ve fought you before.”

“Guys, stop. I already have a headache. Grevious, take her to the droid. Tano, tell that helldroid to
behave. Remember, I’m not as nice as some people, a misstep from either of you and I kill you
both.”

“Whatever.” Ahsoka rolled her eyes, which Poda saw more as a way to prove to Grievous that she
wasn’t afraid of him.

“You’re both annoying,” she told them both. The stare-down didn’t abate until both Separatist and
Jedi ran face first into the turbolift door. Poda didn’t laugh. A Roger droid began to chuckle and was
swiftly cut in two by a grumbling Grievous. “On my ship in twenty minutes,” she reminded the
cyborg and ran off to time something that wasn’t going to give her a headache. “I want you there.”

The clones were easy to deal with. Their artificial obedience made them compliant, and their
weakness for their Jedi commanders made them just as easy to manipulate as the Jedi. The eighty
clones were a pricey ransom of a Jedi and a droid, but Poda figured that anything involving his
padawans, Anakin Skywalker would move the universe to rescue her.

When she’d shipped off the clones and returned to her own ship, she found another complication.
The droid was being persnickety and annoying, and Tano was goading Grievous into an argument.
Dooku at least has had his aristocratic dealing to make him semi-tolerable.

“I still have a dozen clones as hostages,” Poda reminded the padawan. “If you keep your end of the
bargain, then they go free, and I prop that useless King back onto his throne.”
“And Saw?”

“Goes back to whatever he was doing.” Poda sighed. It was a very hefty price to pay just for the Padawan. “I don’t care, get her down the brig and keep her locked up.” Tano stuck her tongue out at the general, who shook his fist at her, as she was lead away. “Why are you antagonizing a teenager?”

“Jedi brats are to be dealt with immediately.”

“You didn’t seem very inclined to kill her.”

Grievous didn’t answer, he glowered at Poda and stormed toward the bridge. “Get this ship to Serrano, now!” He barked. Poda rolled her eyes and went back to hide in her office and plan how she’d get a discreet message to Skywalker.

#$#$3

Anakin spent the first two days of the retreat wandering over the meadows and hiking paths alone. He returned for dinner, only to eat in silence. Padme wanted to be hurt by the silence, but she felt only relief. It gave her a chance to prepare her newest political plans. It gave her time to consider what she wanted. Anakin still, thankfully, slept in their bed.

“I know what I want to do.” He told her quietly over breakfast the next day. He wasn’t dressed yet, wearing only his sleeping pants and nothing else. Padme was momentarily distracted when he stretched his arms upward.

“Yes,” she forced her eyes to focus on his.

“I want to leave the Jedi,” she straightened. “I know I don’t want our children to be raised as Jedi. To be raised in the Order. I want them to be free to feel and to love and to hate. I don’t want them to end up like me.” He seemed to dim, and Padme understood. The welts had faded a week ago, but Anakin flinched now every time he saw someone with anything thin in their hand, it didn’t matter what it was.

“Alright.”

“I…the war. I don’t want to leave the war undone. The lines in the sand have all faded. I don’t understand everything or anything. I don’t understand the war at all. Why is started or even if the Confederacy has a point?”

“There is actually was a paper published on that very subject,” Padme said without thinking, “I have a copy.”

Anakin seemed to smile faintly, “Senator,” he said, “are you harboring information that paints the Republic as the aggressor in this war? You know your duty to be silent and useless.”

“Hush you,” she said, “I’ve kicked the trade federation off my planet! Don’t you think that silly things like censor laws are going to bother me?”

“Padme,” the levity vanished, “I really do want to leave the Jedi, but I don’t know how. This war, it’s a disaster, somethings going wrong all the time. The lines are so blurred; I don’t even know what I’m fighting for anymore. The Republic? From where I’ve stood in my whole life the Republic has always been cruel and pointless. It’s been apathetic in the face of widespread pain and destruction. I don’t want to fight for the Order. The longer I think about, the more obvious it becomes that the Jedi,” he looked at her, “need to end.”
“Naboo will support you Anakin,” she said, reaching across the table to hold his hand. “I will always support you. I hate them for what they’ve done to you. What they’ve forced you to do.”

Anakin nodded silently, but his metal hand trembled.

“Anakin?”

“I’m afraid of what will happen.” He replied, “they’ll try to take out children, I know that much. They’ll want me back. I can’t go back, Padme. I can’t go back.”

“Do you want to declare dissolution from them now?” She asked, and Anakin seemed to be considering the idea before they were interrupted by someone knocking against the wooden post outside their door. They stared at each other for a moment, and Padme went to get the door, and Anakin pulled on a robe.

“Yes?” She pulled back the flap of their tent and stared at the ungainly form of Helgina, “Doctor?”

“Excuse me; I need to speak to you both immediately.” Helgina stomped past the former queen and into the tent. She glanced to Anakin, who seemed hopeful at her appearance.

“Mr. Skywalker, I’m afraid I have bad news.”

“What?” Anakin stood, his hand going to his lightsaber which he’d stored next to the boxed cereal two days ago. He grasped at open air and cursed.

Helgina surveyed them both, “my idiot cousin is trying to get your attention. Your padawans mission to Onderon was sabotaged. She’d been kidnapped by someone who works for Yan.” Anakin stared, “she’s unharmed and the ransom to release her is to go…to Serrano.”

“What?” Anakin stared at her, “why?”

“That’s separatist territory, Dooku’s going to kill you!” Pamde exclaimed, and Anakin wavered.

“I…why does he want me at Serrano?”

“My idiot cousin didn’t explain,” Helgina shook her head, “I’m sorry, Mr. Skywalker but I thought that this message was too important to wait.”

“I can’t leave,” Anakin said suddenly, both women stared at him. “I can’t; I’m here as the Prince consort. If I leave early, then the whole of Naboo will know. It’ll be a huge insult.”

“That right and..”Padme knew that the queen would be sympathetic, but if Anakin gave a hint of leaving, then the Jedi would pounce.

“I will go visit my cousin and keep an eye on her.” Helgina promised, “I don’t know of the nature of the exchange, but I know that young Ahsoka is unharmed. Don’t panic or suddenly drive a lightsaber into my heart, Mr. Skywalker.”

“I’m not,” Anakin sat down slowly, trembling. “Okay,” he took several deep breaths. Dooku, he’s been odd the last few times we’ve met. He might not hurt Ahsoka, but she won’t be comfortable. If he’s keeping it on the down low, then he won’t use her like he’s using the trial against Obi-Wan. It means he wants to talk to me.”

“Anakin, he’s tried to kill you in the past, he cut off your arm.”

“I know,” he cried and buried his head in his hands. “I just, he’s also helped.”
“He’s helped you, but you’re both still at war. He might not.”

“I have to believe that he won’t hurt her!” Anakin cried desperately. Padme had seen this look of fear and desperation after his mother had died. “I have to, Helgina, please tell me that you’ll look after her.”
“I promise that I will look after your padawan.” The doctor promised. “I apologize for frightening you so much but.”

“Thank you, doctor,” Anakin said gratefully, he seemed to have shed the air of insecurity from earlier. Instead of closing in on himself and hunching his shoulders, he was standing tall. “Thank you.”

“Of course, Mr. Skywalker.” She finally turned to Padme, “Senator.”

“Doctor.” Helgina departed soon after, and the pair was left in relative silence.

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“Why do I have to wear this?” The two guards stared at her and said nothing. Ahsoka tugged at the long sleeves and muttered swear words. “What’s up with them anyway?”

“They keep you from fully reaching the force.” Dooku, hated foe, entered the small parlor room where she’d been cooling her heels for an hour now. The count seemed to be in a good enough mood, though his eyes were still the dark yellow of a Sith. “Excuse their use, but I’d rather have you as a properly presentable hostage, instead of some poor holo-film stereotype.”

“Dooku.” She bared her sharp teeth, and the man gave a simple bow.

“Padawan Tano, it is a pleasure to meet you when we are not engaged in battle.” He looked her up and down, “they suit you.”

“Seppie rags aren’t really my style.” She replied, and Dooku chuckled.

“My dear, those rags are worth a great deal. The lastest fashion, certainly better than those ridiculous padawan robes. Too impractical to use in battle, I have no idea of what their appeal was.”

“I liked them.” Ahsoka snapped.

“You now look like the true inheritor of my legacy.” The count raised an eyebrow, “if you wish to know then know that I am you lineage grandmaster. I trained Qui-Gon who trained Obi-Wan who when trained Anakin Skywalker, who is now training you.”

“What of it?”

“I lead the confederate planets, and I am a count. Therefore my lineage children should represent that.” He peered down at her, “what were you doing on Onderon.”

The whole capture and prison thing hadn’t really been what Ahsoka had been expecting. Still, this was the interrogation she’d been waiting for.

“I’m not at liberty to say.”

“No,” Dooku murmured, “I suppose not. Please, Miss Tano, take a seat.” He gestured to the seats she’d been ignoring. “Tea?”

“What, you solve everything with tea?”
“I try to; I want to understand something difficult. It is usually easier over tea.”

“You’re going to need more,” Tano said as she finally sat down. A temple raised Jedi to the core, she knew the protocol, even if it was in an unusual situation. Dooku poured the tea, and she strained her senses to test for poison.

“It’s not poisoned, young one. I don’t waste time with poisons on teenagers.” She glowered at him. “I wonder why they sent you to Onderon.” Dooku didn’t seem to look at her; his attention was focused on the enormous garden outside the bay windows. “A death trap for just a padawan.”

“I had the mission under control!”

“No, you didn’t. If they had sent Skywalker and Kenobi with you, you might have fared better. Goodness, you might have succeeded. Sending just a padawan into a war zone like that? I don’t know if they were anticipating your death or simply trying to hurry it along.”

“The council wouldn’t have done that!” Ahsoak exclaimed, “they wouldn’t!”

“The council might not, but Yoda might. Tell me; this is an undercover operation for a trained master. Not a young teenager. I certainly don’t think it ought to be fit for someone so inexperienced.”

“I am not inexperienced!” She shouted, and the guards inched closer.

“That was no an insult, Ms. Tano; it was an observation.” Count Dooku stared at the garden and then turned as he lifted the cookie plate into the air with the force. “Cookie?”

“What?” She blinked rapidly, hand already reaching for the plate. She ate a few in silence, glowering at the Sith.

“You’re fortunate that my agent was on the planet to apprehend you.” Dooku finally said after a while of silence, “it could have been a disastrous operation.” He ignored the ugly glare she leveled at him.

“Who are you using me against if you’re using me as a hostage?”

“I need to have a conversation with your master. An off-the-books conversation, young apprentice. I’m sure you understand.”

“Anakin won’t join you,” Ahsoka glared at him, “he’s too strong for the dark side.”

“Oh?” He didn’t seem annoyed at her, “of course he won’t fall to the darkness. That is not what I wish to discuss with him. As I have very limited abilities to contact him without the interference of your council, I must find other means.”

“What kind of conversation then?”

“A simple one.” Dooku sipped his tea and stared at the door, “my cousin is coming to visit.”

“What?” She jumped as the door opened with such violence it bounced off the walls.

“Helgina!” Dooku nodded, “how are you?”

“Irritated.” The woman didn’t look exactly human; there was a portable respirator strapped to her back and mask over her fairly fanged teeth. “Ahsoka Tano,” she turned to the surprised togruta, “I am Dr. Helgina.”

“Hi.” Ahsoka frowned a bit, “what’s up?”
“I’ve just spoken with Mr. Skywalker,” she cast an ugly glare to Dooku. “I am also here to ensure that you are not harmed.”

“I’m fine.” Ahsoka held her hands up and then sighed, “I’m not even in cuffs. They still have my men as hostages.”

“Hmm,” dark eyes sharpened, “Cousin, a word.”

“Of course, excuse me.” As soon as he was through the door, she slapped him. “Helgina!”

“You idiot! He was on vacation!”

“Yes, well, excuse me, but I do have important negotiations to discuss with him. Kidnapping his padawan was rather important. I have no way of getting ahold of him.”

“There are better ways.”

“They sent that child to die!” Dooku snarled, and he finally seemed angry, “they sent her to die on Onderon. Without Kenobi or Skywalker to guide then, she would have been destroyed and hurt! I’m not jesting, Helgina. This was the Council throwing their Chosen One’s padawan on the blade. I cannot go into specifics, but the situation on Onderon was dangerous.”

“Your odd attachment to Skywalker I understand, a little. What do you want from his Padawan?”

“I am not discussing that with you.”

“Then I am serving as Tano’s temporary guardian.”

“Why?”

“Because I promised Mr. Skywalker I would.” She glowered at him. “You are not going to interfere.”

“I didn’t intend to.” Yan sighed, “I am rather preoccupied with making Obi-Wan Kenobi’s life a living hell. The padawan was in serious danger. Please do not harm my Chief of Intelligence for kidnapping her.”

“I won’t,” Helgina’s eyes roved over his face, and he sighed. That didn’t mean she wouldn’t psychoanalyze Poda into tears. “Cousin, recall your guards. I will speak to Tano alone. Also, send me some lunch and have my bags moved to the room opposite hers.” She turned and stumped back into the parlor. His guards left a moment later.

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“Withdrawing support from the Jedi would probably make them lose their credibility.”

“I don’t know if Bail would be able to discontinue his support of the Jedi,” Padme glanced to Anakin. He was fiddling with some wires and a small droid.

“Organa won’t,” Anakin added and he glanced to the assemblage of Naboo royalty and advisors. Normally the living queens would also be present except that the Trade Federation had murdered them soon after the invasion began. When one queen was gone, as Padme had been during the invasion, Naboo was supposed to defer to her immediate predecessor. As it was, the empty chairs spoke louder than any voice might have. Anakin wasn’t able to look at the empty chairs without a feeling of guilt swamping him. Padme had stared at each one and sighed, near tears. “Alderaan is too
closely tied to the Republic, and it is the poster child for Core world cultural superiority. Bail won’t break with the Republic or pull his support of the Jedi. We could speak to Queen Breha.”

“Prince Skywalker is correct,” Queen Jamilla nodded as she worked on her own project. The scarf she was knitting was distinctly of classical Naboo design, but she seemed to be making her own interpretation of the colors. It was very pretty. “Anyone against the Jedi would have to be on the outer rim. Those who have Separatist leanings.”

“Speaking of the Separatists,” Padme was glancing between several spreadsheets, “the war has taken a turn for the worse for the Republic. Tang has become Dooku’s most effective High General. And, instead of pushing for more territory, they seem to be digging in and declaring sovereignty. The war has become much more difficult with a drastic increase of Republic spending to afford invasions on planets that now have functioning garrisons and local militaries.”

“Ah,” Anakin beamed at Padme, ever impressed by her. Queen Jamilla sighed enviously. “What about the next budget meeting?”

“It’s a mess,” Padme frowned, “the Banking Clans don’t want to give out money. Kamino demands more money before they give anyone more clones. Political Polls show that people are determined to win the war and want to give them money. Except that the treasury is now minting money too fast and adding it to circulation. The credit is falling fast. Independent studies show that the Republic’s poverty gap is growing and I’ve been informed of an increase in slave trading…” she glanced at Anakin. “Mostly clones.”

“Clone slaves,” he stared out the tent window in a moment of breathless rage. He wrestled himself under control and seethed quietly. “Is there anything to do?”

“At the moment the political climate will not allow anything.” Jamilla told him, “there is another avenue, of course.” She hesitated and waved an imperious hand, “there are no other people present.” A second later the entire room was emptied saved for the two queens and the prince. “Prince Skywalker, given what I know of your past, sharing this with you may prove difficult.” The young woman shook her head, “a year ago, I was approached by a man who represented an independent organization.” Anakin held very still. “He requested Naboo assistance and funding in a matter that I care deeply for. While the assistance Naboo currently offers is simply material and monetary, I am certain I could gain permission to aid in a far more obvious manner.” At Anakin’s breathless expression, she clarified, “they are identified only as the Freedom Flight. As I understand, a network of citizens aiding in the eradication of the slave trade. I am tied by politics to keep this support silent. As of now, there are truly very few people on Naboo who are aware of this spending project.”

“Freedom Flight,” Anakin remembered with a painful bump, just what it was. It had a secret, even when he was a slave. He’d forgotten all about it. He’d forgotten all about his home. “They’re.” He set down his project and nearly fell over. “How much are you helping them?” Queen Jamilla named a figure so high that Padme nearly coughed up her lungs as she choked on tea and Anakin squeaked.

“Majesty!” Padme stared, ignoring the tea dripping down her front, “how are you paying for that?”

“Through the sale of Naboo’s art. Palo,” Anakin glanced at his wife as she gaped, “has donated every credit he’s made since. Several artists and performers are likewise donating money. Also, through the sale of Ryoo flowers to off-world florists. Various other citizens are helping. I cannot give more detail. Prince Skywalker…are you alright?”

“Why?” Anakin hadn’t realized that his face was hot and tears were hanging just below the surface until the queen’s stopped.
“There are innate right to ever sentient and non-sentient, Prince Skywalker. I am ashamed that there is little else Naboo can offer but money. That is has taken us this long to realize our most sacred duty is not to a distant government or to some form of eternal harmony that is impossible to achieve. We must act for the betterment of all lives.”

Anakin started crying silently, burying his head in his hands.

“Oh, dear.” Padme stared and patted his shoulder until he seemed to regain his faculties enough to speak.

“Thank you,” Anakin blubbered, “this is…”

“Ah,” Jamilla stared at him awkwardly, “Prince Skywalker, the matter of clone slaves is deeply important to Naboo. I understand that while Naboo cannot aid the Freedom Flight except for money, there would be little suspicions Naboo attempting to curtail the clone slave trade.”

“I will look into it as well,” Anakin promised and remembered that he had no political sway, no money of his own, and no help from the Senate or the Order. “Shit.”

“Until such time that you leave the Jedi Order, Prince Skywalker, it may not be safe to endanger yourself with political alliances of any kind,” Jamill told him kindly. “Trying to amass power as a Jedi would sow the seeds of discontent even further than they already are.”

“You’re right,” Anakin sighed, “you’re right. But you will try to help the clones, won’t you?”

“I will.” Jamilla nodded slowly, “now, back to the matter of the loss of Naboo support. We must plan for while will happen when Prince Skywalker leaves the order. There will be political fallout that we must curtail.”

Anakin glanced over to Padme, his face still shiney with tears. She knew they were for the enslaved clones and partly for his padawan, still in uncertain health but definetly a prisoner of Count Dooku.

Luke returned to the Jedi Temple with the rest of the disgraced council with no fanfare. Unlike sometimes when Yoda returned from long trips, there weren’t groups of padawans and initiates gathered at the edge of the landing pad.

News of their inglorious defeat had already reached the planet. No one really wanted to be seen with them right now.

The whole mess of the Ryloth Conference was hugely embarrassing.

Luke didn’t care. The council members dismounted the ship first, taking their luggage and attendants with them. Yoda went back to his high chambers and the other masters back to their rooms. Luke, following a few of the chattering acolytes, watched as a dozen temple guards marched onto the ship and then back out. This time, escorting Obi-Wan. He wasn’t cuffed, as much as Luke saw, but he looked beaten.

The last few days of the trip had probably worn on him.

Luke stepped behind a piece of luggage and watched the guards march him out of the hanger. As if sensing his gaze, Obi-Wan looked around. Luke ducked down and hid until he knew that the guards and Obi-Wan were gone.

Once he was sure the coast was clear, he grabbed his bag of stuff and went back to his rooms.

They were locked.

“What?” He tried the door control again to find it unresponsive the second and third time. “Hey!” He kicked them and wondered why the hells it wasn’t working. Where was he supposed to sleep? After a few minutes, he stopped kicking the door and went off to find a place to sleep.

This late at night, there were very few people. Every nocturnal species of Jedi had long since learned to keep themselves in their room for the night. He went to the med-bay and found it near silent, the night duty staff almost asleep on their feet or busy with paperwork. He went to the temple archives to find them locked up tight too. The Room of a Thousand Fountains didn’t really have a place that was comfortable to sleep in. He knocked on a few doors of padawans he knew, and no one answered.

Luke wandered around the temple looking for somewhere to sleep. Eventually, he went into the lower sections of the temple and found a set of old storage rooms. He wanted to sleep somewhere none descript, where no one would see him in the morning and make fun of him. In one of the corners was a cot that might have been used for a Padawan that had just moved in with their master and hadn’t gotten the furniture situated.

With a tired sigh, he set his bag on the floor and glanced around the storage room. There were a lot of bits of furniture covered in white sheets. Piles of junk and machine parts lay in one corner, all
dusty. It felt like he was standing in a junk pile except there were still bits of Jedi identity stuck in random parts of the room. An abandoned lightsaber hilt that had never been finished. A few droids that were out-dated and probably used to target practice.

“It’s not so bad,” Luke told himself as he unfolded the bed and dusted the mattress off. When that didn’t work, he wrestled it into flipping over. He refused to spread the pure white baby blanket on something he wasn’t sure was clean, so he tucked that further into his bag and used his cloak as his blanket and his stuffed nerf as his pillow. He could ask where his new room was in the morning.

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“Do you even know where she is?”

Plo Koon, who had wanted to spend the evening repairing socks, perked up when he heard the voice of Mace Windu shouting at Depa Billaba. Never able to resist prime gossip, he set down his darning and sneaked to the door.

“I don’t know where Padme Amidala is,” Depa replied, only just keeping her cool. “I’ve also lost contact with my Padawan. Caleb has not responded to any of my calls, and I cannot sense him in the force. I believe he may be in danger.”

“Padawan Dume will handle himself well enough, Master Billaba.” Windu snapped, “he is a trained Padawan, nearing knighthood. If he cannot manage a single retrieval mission, then that is in your training.” Plo didn’t have eyebrows to raise, but if he did, they would have been trying to climb off his forehead. “Finding Padme Amidala and shutting down her transmissions is your primary mission. With lethal force.”

Plo was too old to be surprised at the politics younger Jedi engaged in, but he was deeply disappointed and almost sick with his sadness.

“I understand, but what about Caleb?”

“Find Amidala,” Mace ordered, and the call was ended. Plo snuck back to his chair and his darning just in time for Depa to slam open the door, distraught.

“Something is wrong with Caleb!” She announced, “I can’t sense him, and he hasn’t called!”

“Perhaps,” Plo said, not looking up. “You should go out and search for him?”

“He has our ship!” Depa cried, pacing around his living room. Her pacing shook his little oil lamp. “Something is wrong!”

Plo wanted to point out that Caleb was with his son and thus safe. He felt Depa should be more concerned with agreeing to murder with little to no disagreements. He waited until the woman stomped from the room before he picked up his hidden datapad and sent off a quick message to the Bedrock saloon.

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Padme and her team of protectors docked back in the fishing village they’d pushed off from. The land was a welcome and beautiful sight after having been at rough seas for so many days. She was amazed, not by the relative beauty of the frontier town, but by the appearance of a ship.

“What?”
“That’s for you,” Hodo said, moving down the wooden dock to Padme. She stared at the distant ship and then back at the boat.

“I thought I would keep hiding some more.”

“No, sorry. We’ve got news and orders to get you off-planet as fast as possible. WE’re sure going to miss you.” Hodo said without apparent sadness. “Ready to go?”

“Can you tell me if my speeches meant anything?” The weequay followed beside her.

“They meant something to someone I’m sure. Lots of fire and passion in those speeches. I was impressed.”

“But what about the rest?”

“My job is not to make them super effective and how to distribute them.” Hodo told her, “my job is to make sure they get out, and once they’re out the signal can’t die. So I wouldn’t worry much. I’m backed by people who know what they’re doing.”

“Right.” Padme stared at the ship and then at the weequay. “Thank you for all you’ve done for me.”

“Yeah. Make sure you go bring that Republic down or at least the Jedi. I’m not picky.”

“I will.” The former queen and senator stomped up the last of the dock and then later into the ship where she met a grinning twi’lek.

“Welcome to the Confederacy of Independent Systems; I will be your tour guide.” He held out his hand, which Padme took. “Edo Milare, I work for Tang.”

“It is an honor to meet you, Edo Milare,” Padme replied.

“Sorry for the long wait but we’ve had a lot of setbacks.” Edo led her into the little ship where she was situation into the co-pilots seat. “We’ve tried to rescue you about ten dozen times. Seriously, I think Tang was about to wring my neck for taking so long.”

“You’ve tried to find me before?”

“Sure.” Edo began the take-off sequence for the little ship, Padme stared down at the planet, shocked. “But the Jedi knew that we were probably being sent off to find you. Locked you up tighter than a Hutt’s wallet.”

“I was moved often enough.”

“Yeah,” their ship broke free of the clouds and rose to the stars, Padme stared at the sky, heart suddenly thumping in her chest. “Look,” Edo turned to her, “I’m really sorry about how longs its taken us to find you. Even then it was only because….”

“The Jedi didn’t care about me.” She said, “they thought that after 14 years I was only broken and wretched.” Edo nodded silently as he tossed the ship into hyperspace. “That I was just a relic of the past and the whore of a traitor.”

“Ah,” the twi’lek winced, “you guys were married.”

“I’m mocking them,” Padme told him, “everyone who saw me only as Anakin Skywalker’s wife. Everyone who forgot my crown and my authority. When I was reduced to only a blurb attached to someone else. I believe they are forgetting that I wasn’t made by my husband.” Was it bad to resent
Anakin for that? Could she even blame him?

“Right.” Edo coughed, “do you want some news?”

“Give me the news.”

“Well, Ryloth is officially a member of the Confederacy. Erm, so is Naboo. Though the Republic should be hearing about it soon and I think that’ll make them pretty unhappy. I’ve got a bag full of information on the last 14 years. Relations between the two empires, where Corellia fits into it, the Hapes system. A lot has changed, and I brought enough reading for that long trip back.”

“Where is it?”

“In the back pantry cabinet beside the cereal box. A spare padd there too.”

“Thank you, Edo. Where are we headed?”

“We’re going to Seranno.”

“Very well,” she felt her heart flutter at the thought of meeting Anakin. There were so many emotions, jumbled and mixed up and horrible that she felt she might combust from them.

Anakin.

Her children.

Even now…what was she going to do?

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The boy's names was Luke.

Five pounds and four ounces.

18 inches long.

Blue eyes.

Blond hair.

Leia

Six pounds, zero ounces.

Brown hair.

Brown eyes.

Twins.

They were infants when they were stolen. Ripped from their crib as their mother screamed and fought in the other room.

They had been crying when they were carried through the door. Screaming.

The apartment was trashed. Priceless artifacts were broke, carpets slashed by lightsabers and blade
alike. Blood of every color was splashed across broken vases, lamps, and dishware. Blaster bolts has set a few minor fires.

Padme was cuffed, and set on by several Jedi, bleeding with her face in the carpet. Screaming.

Screaming.

Obi-Wan Kenobi was heard. His voice quaking and fearful as he carted a baby away. Traitor. Scum. Liar. Monster.


Two handmaidens were dead. Sola and Ertee. Stabbed and beheaded.

Dorme wasn’t moving.

The Jedi took the children. The Jedi took the children. The Jedi took the children.

Luke and Leia were taken by the Jedi.

Anakin Skywalker stared at the tapestry before him with a gaping mouth and wide eyes. Shocked into silence. Around him, a few attendants watched curiously. Almost afraid of his sudden silence. Eventually, they filed out, but Anakin didn’t notice.

Shaking with a nameless emotion, he knees finally gave out. Anakin collapsed to all fours, hardly even aware of the tears streaming down his face.

He wasn’t sure when he’d begun screaming. Maybe he’d been screaming the entire time already and hadn’t heard. His metal hand dug painfully into his hair, yanking on the threads until a few began to rip out of his scalp. The remaining hand of flesh was clawing at the floor, nails breaking under the force.

The glass in the room around him began to crack and shatter. Beneath him, stone was trembling under the weight of his agony.

Screaming. All he could feel was agony. Pain. Horror. Hatred. Such hatred that he felt the Dark Side rush on him with gleeful anticipation. Ready to bend to his will to destroy and kill.

Across the galaxy, every force sensitive trembled.

Yoda trembled in his meditation chair. Horrified by the sheer power the howled into a vortex around the very person he’d attempted to capture.

Dooku clutched at his chest, feeling his aging heart race faster. Tang and Kitster hovered at his side, worried but unable to help.

Leia woke up between the two adults she’d claimed as her parents. Convinced it was a nightmare, she snuggled back under the blankets and hid from the universe.

Luke didn’t wake up, he shifted under his cloak and held the stuffed nerf closer. In cluttered space of the storage room, his whimpers were the loudest noise.

Obi-Wan only felt a sense of deep dread as his ship sputtered through the atmosphere of a planet whose original name and people had long since been destroyed. He looked around and pulled his cloak closer to himself, almost feeling a clawed hand reaching across time and space to surround
him.
As Luke and Leia begin to settle into their new lives, Anakin Skywalker deals with discovering that he is a father.

“Anakin!” Yan Dooku’s desperate voice echoed immediately followed by Tang’s and Kitster’s, echoed across the chamber. “ANAKIN!” He skidded over loose pebbles and dust, nearly falling right over his younger friend.

He gasped and held out his arms to stop his companions. “What happened?” Tang hissed, peering around his shoulders. She stared while Kitster muttered a short prayer under his breath. Anakin was the center of absolute destruction. His hunched form bowed and nearly pressed into the newly formed rubble, shook from noiseless tears. Blond hair was mangled, they could see faint rusty spots of blood in it. Cracks in the duracreet spiderwebbed from him, occasionally interspersed with small fires and freshly grown flowers. The glass in nearby rooms and ships was shattered, setting the rest of the hanger floor in a sparkling layer of glass.

“Anakin?” Dooku lowered his arms slowly, picking his way across the rubble until he stood at the former Jedi’s side. “Anakin?” He tensed as Anakin stirred from whatever spell he was captured in. Bloodshot eyes gazed miserably out from a bruised and scratched face. His lip was crusted over with dried blood, and his face had scabbed over scratched down the side. “Oh, Anakin.” Unable to stop himself, Dooku dropped to his knees beside the tall senator and bundled him into a hug.

Tang paused at the sight, torn between her concern for Anakin’s wellbeing and the violent jealousy that reared its head as she watched Dooku cradle the man. Kitster had no such trouble as he joined the aged count beside the senator.

“Anakin?” Kitster patted down his friend, looking for a response. Anakin continued to heave breathlessly, “Ani?”

“What is this tapestry?” Tang stepped away from the bundle of men to the piece of drapery probably responsible for Anakin’s state. “Anakin?”

Dooku stared up at the tapestry, also unsure what it meant.

“It’s a message.”

All three newcomers jerked as Anakin’s voice, steadier than they expected, emerged from the huddle.

“It’s a message.” He lifted his head, “it’s a message. A secret language designed by the royal courts of Naboo, centuries ago during the warring states period. Before the Great Peace. They made four different codes, one for long-term prisoners with access to materials needed.” He took a shuddering breath, “it’s a message from Padme.”

Dooku, Kitster, and Tang exchanged a series of significant glances before the representative spoke.

“What does it say?”
“The Jedi took the twins.”

Tang wished she hadn’t instantly understood the implications of what Anakin said. She wished she didn’t know that it meant the Jedi had committed somehow, even more, a heinous crime against her brother. She prayed that she could forget the newly minted trauma that would come cascading over Anakin as he tried to find his children and recover his wife.

“Twins?” Tang managed, still staring at the tapestry.

“Luke and Leia,” his voice shook, but he didn’t cry, probably because he’d cried himself drier than a desert already. “Twins. Luke and Leia. The Jedi ripped them from her arms. They took them from her.”

Dooku stared down until he closed his eyes and leaned his head back. “We’ll find them,” he promised Anakin. “We’ll find them.”

“Even if we do they’ve been taken by the Jedi. If they’re even alive, then the council will never let them go free. They’ll keep such a close eye on them. They’ll brainwash them; my children will never understand freedom.”

#$#$#$#

Mace Windu glowered at the Jedi palace beneath his feet. The historic spires of the Alderaan royal buildings soared by as the ship approached the hanger. Below him, he knew the padawans and initiates were waiting to welcome him back.

Every Padawan but one, his.

Leia had been a difficult child since he’d brought her to Alderaan. She’s lashed out in a temper as a child. Her force abilities had been next to nothing; her skills were limited. Her attempts at being a model Padawan had been practically laughable.

Even so, he didn’t know what to do with her. She was young, still the tainted blood of Skywalker. Teaching that Jedi had left the order had been told as a cautionary tale; not to serve as inspiration.

He considered a plan for Leia, debating the various punishment available until he was meeting with a palace droid. It was a protocol droid, almost the same brand and make of Skywalker’s annoying golden clunker, 3PO or something.

“I need a meeting with Queen Breha,” he told the droid as he usually did. Instead of a beep of confirmation followed by a meeting place, there was silence. Windu turned back to the droid, waiting for it to reply.

“Apologies, Master Windu, there is no one available to speak with you until the royal sabbatical is over.”

“Royal what?”

“The royal sabbatical. It is a time to celebrate the oneness of the Alderaan.” The Jedi pursed his lips, “to pray at the ancient shrines, to heed the words of the citizens, to nurture the planet to bear a good harvest next year.”

“I see.” It sounded like a publicity tour. Whatever the royals were trying to accomplish was beyond him, but Windu wasn’t a master for nothing. “When can the queen be expected back?”
“When the sabbatical is over.”

“Then I don’t want to speak with the queen. Just bring me, Padawan Leia, she’s spent too much time on this tantrum.” He tucked his arms behind him and wandered over to the window, waiting until his Padawan was retrieved. When he didn’t hear the droid move, he turned around. “Well?”

“I cannot assist you.”

“Why not?” Mace stalked closer to the droid, feeling his temper rise.

“I am sorry, Mr. Jedi.” He jolted, “I cannot assist you.”

“Why not!” He loomed over the droid, “I am Master Mace Windu, Master of the Jedi Council, Master of the Alderann temple! Tell me where my Padawan is?”

The droid was as unimpressed as a droid could be. It didn’t move its head to nod or shake. “I am sorry, Mr. Jedi, I cannot assist you. A member of the palace staff will contact you when they are next available. Without another word, the droid turned around and stiffly walked out. Windu stared and wondered which political game the queen was playing now.

Ever since the new Jedi wing had been added the queen had always agreed to a meeting swiftly. To deny him now, in this political climate, was nearing sedition. He stepped forward to press the matter when a Padawan rushed into the room, eyes wide and shocked.

“Master Windu!” The boy yelled, Mace winced and whirled around.

“What have I told you about conducting yourself with Jedi decorum. We do not run senselessly about.”

“I’m sorry, master, it’s just that some.”

“Padawan Kino!” Mace barked, wanting something he could control easily. The boy froze and straightened, smoothing the concern out of his face. When the master nodded, Kino finally spoke.

“Naboo has left the Republic and is already occupied by Separatist ships.”

“Excuse me?” He almost wished he’d let the boy report as frantically as he’d tried. Now, the calmly spoken report did nothing to drive the truth home.

“Naboo has announced its secession from the Republic. The queen released a statement today. There was a ceremony where she and the leader of Naboo signed a treaty with the Confederacy. Reportedly attended by Senator Skywalker from Tatooine.”

Mace didn’t waste another second; he sprinted past the boy toward the command center.

#$#$# Grandmaster Yoda had previously believed that nothing could have surprised him anymore. Even after Skywalker had left the order. When Amidala had started broadcasting seditious speeches from the heart of her prison.

Now, he witnessed the culmination of their wretchedness.

“How bad is it?” Yoda chewed on his gimmer stick, flapping his ears every few seconds as the recording of the ceremony concluded. Anakin Skywalker, even as recording, commanded an intense presence. He was as frightening and horrible as Yoda anticipated. “Master Yoda?”
“Treason the Naboo have committed,” Yoda announced, the other council members sighed in relief. “Siding and abetting the Sith. Stand for this; we will not.”

“The body double on Ryloth. Tang’s fleet above the planet, the communication black-out. All of it was designed to throw us off the track. No doubt,” the holo of Mace Windu snorted, “planned by that woman.”

“We knew Tang was dangerous during the Clone Wars,” Adi Gallia said, “she killed many Jedi and damaged much of the Republic.”

“We should have been watching out for her.” Silence reigned for a few minutes as the screen died down and the imprints of Naboo’s secession were left seared into their minds. “She’s very good a stealing planets. Ryloth, Naboo, Lothal, Axilla, Nar Shadda, and Nal Hutta.”

“This wasn’t the work of Tang,” Windu disagreed, “only the Sith are capable of such duplicity.” The council room went quiet again.

“Call up the military; we will.”

“How? The Kamino cloning facilities were destroyed years ago?”

“A draft,” Yoda bit his stick and pondered the conundrum, “all those of age shall participate. Bring the Separatists down; we shall. Reunite the galaxy; we will.”

Absolute silence followed the statement. Jedi masters exchanged looks until Master Mundi nodded slowly. “Protecting the Republic is our sacred calling. For years we have held only a part of it. Perfecting it and weathering the scorn and attacks of our enemies of the fallen and misguided.”

A few of the other members muttered in agreement until Master Tiin spoke. “A draft may bring more riots, like the Student Riot of a few years ago.”

“We have helped the populace and the ignorant,” Master Kolar said with an officious tone. “Repaired their broken education and saved them from the slavery emotions bring. They will come to our call because they owe us their well-being.”

“It is only right,” Mundi agreed, “that the Order is finally repaid for its work.

“I’m not sure the people will see it that way,” Mace interjected.

“The force moves with us,” Yoda said, “our call, right it is. Authority, our abilities give us. Leadership, we are due. To war, we will go. Restore the Republic; we shall.”

The meeting ended, and when the other masters had left, only Windu and Yoda were left. Mace waited until Yoda seemed ready before he relayed his inability to retrieve Leia.

“Fetch her, you must.” Yoda declared, hitting his stick against his chair.

“I know we can’t allow a member of Skywalker brood run free,” Windu rubbed the back of his head, “but the queen is protecting her. Going against the authority of the queen so brazenly might ruin our standing on Alderann.”

“Standing, we care not for.” Yoda told him severely, “allow this sedition; we cannot.”

“No one knows we took Leia from her mother as violently as we did. If we try that with Queen Breha, there will be no stopping her from broadcasting this. Amidala already has access to an illegal
broadcast system; she might have access to a illegal holo-net channel. If Queen Breha makes an issue of this, then Amidala will know where her daughter is. That makes both women into martyrs.”

“Hmm,” Yoda considered the man, “retrieve Leia. If all else fails, under martial law, you may place Alderann. To Courascant, bring Leia, then.”

“As you wish,” Windu bowed and disconnected the called; leaving Yoda to meditate in the enormous council room.

#$#$3

The storage room wasn’t much nicer in the morning even though it was warmer. Luke surveyed the clutter with a critical eye. It really needed to be organized. He swung his feet back and forth until he jumped off the dusty folded cot and made his way up to the cafeteria.

It was odd to be in there without his master; no one looked twice at him. The droids serving the food didn’t seem to notice that they’d given him a few extra portions. Even the watcher in the cafeteria ignored him.

Luke took a seat in the center of the room, looking from the tables of initiates and padawans and knights. He wasn’t officially in disgrace anymore. There was a reason for them to ignore him. Why hadn’t anyone tried to talk to him?

“HEY!” Luke turned, his heart soaring as someone shouted at him. “Null.” His heart sank as Master Olin marched across the cafeteria.

“Master Olin.” He bowed politely, “how can I help you?”


“No, sir.” Luke didn’t dare look the man in the eye. Master Olin had almost always taken an un-Jedi like glee when he made Luke look stupid. Humiliating Luke whenever he taught a class the boy was in and eventually using him as a public example of what not to do. It wasn’t the way of the Jedi, but Luke decided that if Anakin Skywalker ever came back and burned the temple down (something every initiate seemed to believe would inevitable), he wouldn’t mind if Ferus Olin was the first one killed.

“Well, since you’ve eaten.” Luke hadn’t had a chance to touch his food, which Olin probably noticed. “You’re needed.”

“Yes, master.” Luke abandoned his plate, following the man as he was escorted from the cafeteria and toward Master Yoda’s quarters. He tensed as they approached, remembering his last meeting with Yoda.

“You know the drill,” Master Olin pushed him toward the doors to the receiving room and stepped back into the turbolift, leaving Luke alone. “Good luck, Null.”

Luke glanced wildly back, shocked at the abandonment until the door in front of him slid open.

“Padawan Luke.”

“Master Yoda,” Luke edged into the room and bowed before ancient alien. Yoda seemed older than ever, what remained of his hair was whiter than bath foam, his expression was tired, and his eyes were closed. “I was told you needed to speak to me.”
"Yes, yes, sit." Luke glanced around for a chair. There was none. Blushing, he lowered himself to the floor and looked up at the grandmaster. "Adrift you are, young one?"

"Master?"

"Gone, Kenobi is. Left with no master, you are."

"Well, no. I don’t have a master anymore," Luke said, "I guess I’m adrift. Master Yoda. I don’t know what to do without a master. Am I going to get a new one? Or a teacher?"

"Many questions you have, young Luke," Yoda observed, and Luke felt like kicking the green alien. "No one told me where to go or what to do. How am I supposed to know where to do without someone showing me? I can’t go without direction." Luke leaned back a bit as something like satisfaction gleamed in Yoda’s eyes. For a moment he felt faintly ill.

"True. Answers to your questions, find in the Force."

"The Force?" Luke’s meditation and Force skills were legendary with their awfulness. "I don’t think the Force provides room assignments." Yoda moved faster than he had in years, his gimmer stick striking out and wapping Luke’s right shoulder. He yelped and scrambled back. "What was that for?"

"A test this is!" Yoda announced, folding his gimmer stick back under his arms, "from the Force." Luke felt his stomach wobble again. The Force wasn’t with him. He was a null; he couldn’t do anything besides write papers and clean. "Go!"

"But."

"Waste my time, do not," Yoda declared and Luke left the room, rubbing his shoulder and trying to keep his stomach from complaining too much. When he made it back down to the cafeteria, it was closed down. Lunch wasn’t for a while yet, and he winced.

Was that whole meeting just to make him miss his breakfast? Yoda hadn’t said anything important at all! Was he supposed to live in the storage room now? Did he have anyone teaching him anymore? Did anyone want him around? What was he supposed to do?

As he stared at the empty cafeteria, Luke nodded seriously to himself and marched back to his room to get ready to get breakfast.

#$#$#

Dilje was trying to figure out which of her friends would take care of her pets in case she was arrested at the meet and greet with the Jedi when her comm rang. Still running through the list of potential caretakers, she answered it without a second thought.

"Dilje here."

"Dilje," the voice she almost recognized, "this is Ultor De, I run the noodle stall near the library you visit."

"Ultor," now she knew why the voice was so familiar, "what’s the call for? I paid off my tab last week."

"I know," Ultor’s voice went quiet, "but that kid you brought to the stall a while ago is here. He
came up and asked for me to put a bowl on your tab.”

“What?” Luke? He hadn’t come to the library in weeks. Hell, she was sure his parents had honed in on his probably illicit visits to the Undercity and grounded him.

“I gave him a bowl,” Ultor confessed, and Dilje felt like shoving a toothbrush down his throat. “He looked hungry, and I could actually hear his stomach rumbling. I’m sorry, Dilje but I think this kid is in trouble. Can you come here and check up on him?”

“Give him food until I get there,” Dilje ordered, standing and getting her stuff assembled, “I’ll be there as fast as I can.”

Luke felt a little better as he finished off the bowl of noodles. His stomach wasn’t cramping anymore, but he felt intensely guilty. He knew that Dilje was seriously short of money and putting something on her tab was going to be a problem.

“Here,” the stall keeper grinned and set another bowl down. This one had vegetables in it.

“I don’t think.”

“Think of this one as free of charge,” Ultor nodded at the bowl, “you look like you might like something with a bit more of a kick. This one has spicy stuff in it.”

“Spicy,” Luke wasn’t accustomed to spicy, but he enjoyed it when he got it.

“Yep! If it’s too spicy, have some milk.” A plastic glass of blue milk was set beside the bowl, and Luke stared at the man.

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

Alright,” Luke picked up his utensils and began to dig into the new bowl. He was half-way through the bowl when a voice from behind nearly made him spill it.


“Dilje!” He spun around on the stool, eyes wide and rubbed broth off his face. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know what to do and I just.”

“Are you alright?” Dilje ignored his babbling, stepping forward and glancing around at the crowd. “Luke?”

“What?” Luke watched her take the seat next to him.

“Luke, Altar called me because you wanted to put food on my tab.”

“Dilje, I’m so sorry, I didn’t know…what else….to do.” He swallowed.

“I figured, and I don’t mind you doing it, but if you’re in trouble then maybe you need some help.”

“What makes you think I’m in trouble?” He refused to look up at the togruta.

“You’re not dressed in clean clothes, you looked tired, and you came down here and asked to do

“They said he wasn’t fit to, um, take care of me anymore.”

“Do you have anyone taking care of you right now?”

“No, um,” Luke ate a few more bites of noodles to avoid talking, “I was in a meeting with the, uh, director during breakfast hour and I couldn’t get anything to eat.”

“They wouldn’t feed you?”

“The eating schedule is very strict,” Luke shrugged, “getting a meal outside of the designated time isn’t allowed.” Dilje leaned away from the bench, feeling her entire body coil tight with fury.

“Of course,” she shook her head, “Luke, we need to go shopping.”

“So this doesn’t happen again,” she said, “can you hide non-perishables in your room?”

“I,” he stared, “yes.”

“Then we’re going to buy you some non-perishables for you to keep in your room, so you don’t have to go hungry again.”

“I just won’t miss the meal times next time.”

“You can’t guarantee that you won’t oversleep and mess up.” Dilje glanced around at the other stalls and vendors, “this is a contingency plan. What do you like to eat?”

“Um.”

“Never mind, we’ll figure it out.”

The procession across the mountain foothills just a few miles away from the palace, slowed significantly as it approached one of the older farms in the area. Inside the palanquin, Leia turned around until she faced her foster parents.

“Why are we slowing down?”

“We are reaching my parent’s farm.” Bail said, “the Antilles have been nerfherders for as long as anyone can remember.”

“Farmers?” Leia said, trying to push down the sense of derision she knew wasn’t polite.

“Yes,” Breha said, “Bail and I have always made the Antilles farm our first stop whenever we make a tour of the planet. It is only polite.”
“Does that make them my grandparents?”

“Yes,” the pair seemed gleeful, “and you’re going to meet my siblings and their children.”

“Aunts and uncles,” Leia stared, “that sounds like a lot.”

“We will try to keep your from being overwhelmed,” Breha promised, “but it is important for all children to know their family. Since you have come to us, you have gained a large family.”

“Oh,” Leia ducked her head, “are they nice? Are they going to make fun of me like the other kids in the temple did.”

“They should not,” Bail told her mildly, “if any of them hurt your feelings then tell one of us or an uncle or aunt. If they say something rude, tell an adult.”

“I can stand up for myself.”

“We know,” Breha leaned forward to press a kiss to Leia’s forehead. Leia felt her eyes burn. “We are here to help you anyway.”

“Okay,” if her voice was a little more choked up they pretended not to notice. “Um, so could you give me a rundown of who I’m going to be meeting and what they’re like?”

“Certainly,” Bail leaned forward on his cushion and drew back the curtain that separated them from the outside. Leia watched the small farmhouse get closer as the nerfs pulling them ambled further on.

By the time the entire procession had arrived, Leia felt comfortable enough with the information that she wasn’t as nervous. Still, her heart skipped a beat when the palanquin jerked to a halt, and a small silver step ladder unfolded from the outside. Breha and Bail stood and preceded her down the steps, reaching out to hug a silver-haired pair that must be Bail’s parents. Leia wavered at the stairs before climbing down herself, careful of her white dress.

“Mama, Papa,” Bail pulled away from his parents and gestured to Leia. “Meet Leia.”

“She is our foster daughter,” Breha said, holding out a hand for Leia to take. “Leia, please meet my in-laws. Mazica and Prestor Antilles. Parents, this is Leia.”

“My goodness,” Mazica held a hand to her chest, “another grandchild. Prestor, we need to make another hat.”

“We should have been told,” Prestor shot a stern glare at Bail, “now I’ve got all night to make a hat. Bail, you can certainly assist me.”

“Papa.”

“No! You give me another grandchild and don’t tell me!” Normally a scolding would make Leia nervous, but both sets of adults were smiling, “I have a whole new hat to make and probably an outfit. I’m old! I can’t do this stuff simply on a whim. You will have to help me.”

“I can help,” Leia offered.

“There is no need,” Prestor waved her offer off, “you must meet with your new family, drink cocoa, and relax. You haven’t met your family yet, and it’s time for that to happen. Bail, my son, is going to help me make you a hat.”
“I don’t need a hat,” Leia told her grandfather. The man beamed.

“It is a tradition. I make one for every single one of my grandchildren to welcome them.”

“I’m not a baby,” Leia said, correctly guessing that they were newborn caps she sometimes saw when she was out in the city.

“You don’t need to be!” Prestor began herding them into the house where an even bigger crowd of people waited. “You only need to be family.”

Luke surveyed the storage room again, feeling a little more optimistic than usual. It wasn’t a terrible as he’d previously thought it was. Sure it needed to be cleaned, dusted, and organized, but it was better than nothing.

He drifted around the piles of stuff and nodded to himself.

If he was going to be here, then he would organize the storage rooms. After all, the masters had told him that every job as a Jedi was important. Luke wandered out of the storage room and into the other. The second room was more or less organized. All of the boxes were labeled after dead Jedi and padawans. Their scant personal items were all gathering dust. The third and fourth were just the same, as were the rest on the floor. Luke went one lower and found every single one but the last one properly organized.

“Huh,” he flicked the light on and surveyed the absolute mess in the room. It was somehow worse than the room he had spent the night in. “What a mess.” He took a step forward, and his foot immediately collided with a small mouse droid. One of the older models that the temple has gotten rid of not long after Luke was born. He picked it up and noticed that it was out of power. “Huh.” He tucked it under his arm and ventured deeper into the clutter. There were crates of tools and machinery and pieces of what looked disturbingly like prosthetic limbs. There were whole piles of bedding, broken frames of furniture that had been thrown violently into the storage room. Worse, Luke discovered later, was a shattered crib.

It tilted to one side, half against a splintered dresser, the dusty bedding spilling out of it. There was something uneasy and miserable about, abandoned and lost. Luke paused before venturing closer, a second later he whipped around.

“Did you hear that?” He asked the inert droid. It didn’t reply. “I thought I heard someone screaming.” It was silent, and he was alone. Luke glanced back at the crib and poked at it.

“GIVE THEM BACK!” He whirled around, the desperate scream rent the air. “GIVE THEM BACK!” The woman’s screaming was punctuated by the shrill cries of babies. Luke shuddered, jumping back and holding the droid closer to his chest.

“Who’s there?” Again, nothing moved. The screaming and crying faded slowly. After a second he picked up one of the abandoned prosthetic arms and used it to push the crib away from him. Even if the noise had faded, the overall sense of despair and helpless hadn’t.

Luke scanned the room for a charging port for the droid, grabbed the closest one and ran from the cluttered storage room as soon as he could.

He huddled in his room, deeply unsettled. He didn’t recognize anything in there, but he somehow knew that it meant something to him. For a moment he fiddled with the droid, and it’s inside and set it on the newly plugged in charging port. It beeped at him to indicate it was charging and Luke
leaned back against his bed.

For a while he sat there, smoothing out his fears and cataloging the enormous amount of contraband food he’d snuck into the temple. Dilje’s shopping trip had been more like a military campaign. Unlike when he was out with Obi-Wan or anyone else, she actually listened to him. She worked out what he liked to eat and what he wanted to try. As a person he hardly knew, Dilje was wonderful. Finally, he sat up and began to rearrange the storage room.

Luke worked for hours, moving furniture as best he could, sweeping up the dust and cleaning out the dirt. Unintentionally or almost intentionally, Luke organized the smallest items in front and the largest ones directly behind them. It gave the person at the door that the room was already packed to capacity, hiding the cleared area in the back that Luke decided to claim for himself. He acquired one of the beautiful desks for himself. Setting his datapad on its newly cleared surface and admiring the view. Luke set about packing his few clothes into one of the dressers, the sheet was draped over the back, and no one from the door would be able to see that it was being used. With the basics set, Luke unfolded the bed properly and went to hunt down some decent sheets.

When he returned from his trip to the quartermaster's office with a new set of bedding and two new pillows, Luke was shocked to see the little mouse droid rolling around his make-shift room. It beeped curiously as it inspected everything in sight.

“Hello,” Luke set the blankets and sheets on his bed and watched as the droid seemed to survey him. “You sure charged pretty fast.” It beeped. “I don’t know what you’re saying.” It rolled forward and backward a few times, almost like a nervous tick. Luke grinned and went to make his bed. “I found you a few hours ago in one of the storage rooms. I didn’t think you’d work, but I guess I was wrong.” He heard it roll away and Luke shrugged as he finished his bed. It looked handsome with the new blankets, as plain as they were, spread over it. With more than a little sense of accomplishment, Luke set his stuffed nerf on the pillows and spread out his baby blanket over the center at an angle to give it some style.

He had a new room with a dresser and desk and a bed. It wasn’t so bad to sleep in a storage room, and he didn’t mind being alone. It sure beats spending his nights afraid that Obi-Wan would come stomping into his room knowing that Luke was breaking so many rules while spending time with the university students. Here he knew his secrets were safe.

At the sound of some incessant beeping, Luke turned around to see that mouse droid pulling an ancient data pad with him. Where he’d gotten it, Luke didn’t know. “That one doesn’t work,” Luke told it as it bumped against his boots. “I have one that works.” He set his own datapad in front of the droid and watched it extend a small cable and plug into it. “What?” Luke reached forward, and the droid screeched. Second, later words popped onto his screen.

[Hello. I am Little One 134. Thank you for charging me. Will you deactivate me?]

“Hi,” Luke stared at the droid and his data pad, “uh, what do you mean?”

[Order 1893_34OI. All mouse droids of identical model and make are to be deactivated and incinerated.]

“Oh, I think that was a while ago,” Luke rubbed his head and wondered why the droid seemed to be so personable. “I don’t think the order is still standing. I won’t deactivate you. I don’t know about the others though.”

[Thank you]
“Um, how long have you been down there?”

[Estimated 14 years.]

“Oh, why do you call yourself Little One 134?”

The droid seemed to consider him, and Luke felt unsettled. Droids weren’t supposed to be so…alive.
[Chosen name and gifted from re-maker.]

“Oh, should I call you…Little One?”

[Acceptable.]

“Good.” Luke leaned back on his heels, “we’re in the storage room right now, Little One, but you’re a little outdated to be running around the upper levels. I wouldn’t go there if I were you.”

[Information processed.]

“I was just fixing up my room,” Luke gestured to the cleared space in the storage room, “I’m going to be re-organizing the other rooms too.”

[This is a storage room.] Little One observed and Luke nodded.

“Yes, it’s my room now. You can hang out here if you want to. We’re in a pretty well-deserted section of the temple so you shouldn’t have to worry about people coming down and deactivating. You can even help me with the organizing! Erm, if you want.” Little One considered him some more before the word were scrawled out on the screen.

[Acceptable.]

“Great!” Now he could have some company! “I’m going to go to dinner, and I’ll be back! Don’t get into trouble and please charge yourself if you think you’re running out of juice.” Without a second thought, he patted the droid chassis and left his new room and friend in favor of something to eat.

#$#$#

Tang felt almost alright when she stormed into Anakin’s room a few hours later to visit him. A medic had seen to him, given the number of bacta patches on his hands and arms, and that his face was finally clear of blood. Slightly damp hair frizzed a bit, and he was hunched over in his favorite armchair wrapped in a ratty blanket.

She ground her teeth together, seething.

Delicate. Anakin looked breakable and delicate, a glass figure that she could hurl at the wall and shatter with ease. She hated it when he looked so damned delicate.

“We’ve entered their names into the search databases,” she reported. Anakin didn’t move, but Kitster stared at her with the same woebegone expression he always had when he thought she was being unkind. “Nothing back yet, hopefully soon.” Tang wrung her gloves between her hands and sighed. It prompted Anakin to look up finally. “Padme Amidala is on her way. She’s not too far out.”

Anakin groaned and covered his head. Kister glowered.

“It’s not your fault we never managed to find her and rescue her. It’s mine. I am head of intelligence, and her recovery was my job.”
“I’m married to her,” Anakin moaned, “I was supposed to find her.”

“You? You were laid up in medical for months after you defected,” Tang shouted suddenly, the familiar tick of jealousy rose. “You couldn’t have navigated yourself out of a wet paper bag. How the hell were you supposed to know where she was? How could you have known that she was pregnant?”

“She’s my wife! I should have noticed when the twins were born! I should have felt it. I should have known!”

“How?” Tang stomped around the room, “HOW? You were completely out of it!”

“They’re my children!” Kitster swore as Anakin lurched to his feet. “MY CHILDREN!”

“They are, but they were hidden specifically so that you would never learn about them! So that you would never know them. If you never suspected, then how could you have instinctively known!”

“They’re my kids!” Anakin and Tang were face to face now, roaring. “My children! Padme’s children!”

“Then get them back and burn the Temple down!” She didn’t dare set a hand on him, but her voice climbed a few octaves, “vengeance! Destruction! Rain it down on the Jedi like they deserve!”

“I will!” Anakin shouted, and he paused. “How?”

“I have a few ideas,” Tang told him, “nothing concrete.”

“What about my children?”

“We’ll find them,” Tang promised, “I will find them. I promise I will find them Anakin.”

“We will find them.”

“Yes,” Tang nodded vigorously, “we will find Luke and Leia, and we will burn the Jedi down.” She yelped as Anakin wrapped her in a hug and pressed her close.

“I’m sorry,” Anakin muttered.

“About what?” Tang stood still, glowering at Kitster who seemed annoyed at both of them.

“I know you wanted to enjoy watching the Republic flip out over Naboo leaving. You’re caught up in even more of my drama.”

“Apologize for yourself again, and I will punch you in the gut.” She felt Anakin chuckle weakly. “You’re going to need to see a whole new set of shrinks you know that?”

“I thought I was done,” he muttered, “I thought I was done being hurt by the Jedi. I thought I had finally finished healing.”

“I’m sorry.” Tang finally reached up to hug him back. “But we’re going to burn them down, and we’re going to find those twins.”

“Twins, oh force! I have children. I’m a father!”

“Apologize for yourself again, and I will punch you in the gut.”
Take-Out

Chapter Summary

Anakin and Ahoksa settle into their respective places. For now.

Ahsoka wanted to have a reason to sucker punch Dooku. Well, more than her usual reasons of him being the enemy and a Sith. Those reasons didn’t qualify here since she was a prisoner. She’d have to wait for him to be a jerk or impolite or insult her fighting and honor.

He did nothing.

As a warden, he was disgustingly and annoying polite. Her cell wasn’t even a real cell; it was a neatly decorated room in a heavily guarded section of his estate. It had an attached refresher that had a bathtub with about a dozen settings and had the capabilities to reduce her to a practically snoozing puddle of Padawan goo. She’d used it her first night at the estate and had slept for about ten hours afterward.

What made the room even worse was the fact that the temperature control was also perfectly stable and manageable. She didn’t wake up halfway through the night too hot or too cold. There were plenty of pillows for her and even if she didn’t sleep like a human, her bed was perfectly fit for a young togruta.

Across the hall, in a less guarded room, was Dr. Helgina. Apparently supposed to be a guardian until Anakin arrived. Which, Anakin’s arrival was only a matter of days. A fact with infuriated her more than she would admit.

He’d be walking right into a trap, and there was nothing she could do.

“Ahsoka?” She glanced up from her folded arm, glowering sulkily at the Sith. “What is troubling you?” What seemed most annoying was that Dooku was earnest to the point he seemed almost genuine.

“Take a wild guess,” she snapped, refusing to uncoil her arms which were crossed over her chest.

“There are many reasons that you could be upset over,” Dooku set down his embroidery set and picked up a datapad. “How your master’s evaluation went,” she flushed, “how poorly your mission on Onderon went. How you’ve been coping with my cousin as your temporary guardian.”

“The doctor is fine!”

“Also how you’ve been sleeping.” Ahsoka glowered as Dooku continued to tick off his hands, “how you enjoy the food here. Maybe.”

“IT’S YOU!” She shouted suddenly, “I’m not happy because you’re here and you’re smug and superior and gross!”

“Gross, my behavior has been that of a perfect gentleman.”

“Yeah? Then why are we just sitting here, doing nothing?”
“I offered you several choices of entertainment, and you pushed them all away and had spent the last hour sulking.” The sith challenged, “I will not be blamed for your poor attitude. Furthermore, we are sitting compatible silence because your temporary guardian is in a meeting and I refuse to leave you to your own devices in your room. Gods know what sort of trouble you’d get into!”

“I’m sitting here in silence because I can’t tell you no and that’s why you’re smug!” Ahsoka finally shouted, losing her temper. “And since you’re a big sith and some fancy count, you’ve got a lot of space to show off, jerk! Plus, you’re acting like my master is about to walk into a trap and die! So you’re all happy about that, you can finally get Anakin out of the picture so you can try to rule the galaxy.”

“I,” Dooku stared, slackjawed at the young Padawan. For a while, he stared, and eventually sighed to himself. Outside the enormous bay windows, the rainstorm continued, unabated. In the relative silence that followed, there was another deep sigh from the Sith. “No. I am not dealing with this.” With that, he stood and gathered up his needles, cloth, and thread, and left. The door swooshed shut behind him, leaving the astonished Jedi behind to stare at it when he vanished through it.

“What?” Ahsoka stared, unsure of what had just happened. “Hello?” No one answered, and she approached the door. “Hello?”

“What did you do?” It opened, and Helgina stomped through.

“What do you mean?” The togruta wasn’t in the habit of angering doctors just because she could. She tried to be nice to the woman.

“Why did my cousin just stomp off? What did you say?”

“I didn’t say anything!” Ahsoka denied, a little too quickly.

“He looked hurt.” Helgina raised a brow, “what did you say?”

“I didn’t say anything! He’s just stupid.” She stomped back to the window, glowering at the heavy rainstorm.

“My cousin is many things; he is not stupid.” Helgina walked toward the window as well. “I’m assuming he asked you why you were being so sulky and miserable?”

“No,” Ahsoka lied.

“Then you accused him of many different things? Probably along the lines that he was evil and you were waiting for the other shoe to drop? Maybe how angry you were that your master was coming to a Sith estate.”

“He’s going to kill him!” She shouted, turning around. “Kill him!”

“Who?” Helgina detached her respirators mouthpieces and held it over her face. For a few moments, she only breathed. “Will kill who?”

“Dooku’s going to kill Anakin!” She waved her arms around. “He already had him in prison! He’s going to kill him just for some sick power fantasy! Hasn’t he had enough! Skyguys’s already had so much stuff happen? Doesn’t he get a break too?”

“You’re worried about Mr. Skywalker?” Helgina, apparently too tired to deal with Ahsoka’s outburst standing up, took Dooku’s abandoned chair. She managed to fold her body into the narrow chair, sighing gratefully when she propped her feet up.
“Yes,” the Padawan replied, refusing to look back at her. “He’s my master. It’s my job to worry about him.”

“It isn’t, actually. He is your teacher. He should worry about you.”

“He worries too much. You should have seen him before I went to Onderon. He was freaking out.”

“I’ve read your mission details on the Onderon situation. His worry was understandable. It was a very dangerous situation.”

“It was not! I could have handled it!”

“You didn’t.”

“I HAD TO!” Ahsoka shouted, turning around and jabbing a hand at Helgina in her fury. Unknowingly copying Anakin’s movements exactly. “I had to prove to the temple that I could do it! I had to make that evil man go away! I had to train those rebels and get the king back! I had to prove that I could do it because I’m not a failure!”

It was too late to take back what she said, and Ahsoka covered her mouth as she realized what she’d admitted. The doctor stared at her for a moment and nodded. “A failure?”

“I’m not talking about it.”

“You didn’t fail your mission. If I recall, you did stop the evil man, and you did put the King back on the throne. You also managed to keep the rebels alive, your men sent back to the Republic, and you are alive too. I don’t see how the mission was a failure.”

“It just was!” She bit her lip, “I might have gotten the king back on the throne, but the planet is still under Separatist control. I was supposed to get it back to the Republic.”

“Let me see, train the rebels, kill the man, replace the king, remove the Separatist forces on and around the planet? Was that your mission?”

“So what if it was?”

“That is a great deal of responsibility to put on a 14-year-old. Along with only twenty clone troopers and little to no assistance from the Republic itself. For what happened and your resources you had available, you did not fail your mission. You made the best of a very bad situation.”

“I’m a prisoner. I got captured.”

“You fulfilled your mission.”

“Onderon is still part of the Confederacy!” Ahsoka shouted, “I failed.”

“Three out of four is not bad. That 75%.”

“Which has always been considered an unacceptable grade at the temple,” the togruta ground out. “I still failed my mission.”

“75% is failing?” Helgina stared at her, “everywhere else it is considered a passing grade.”

“I’m not,” Ahsoka took a deep breath, “I failed my mission. I had to do better on this mission. I just had to. I had to prove.” She glowered at the humanoid alien sitting near her. “It doesn’t matter.”
“To prove that you could be a Jedi?” Ahsoka didn’t answer. “I know that initiates not chosen by their 13th birthday are sent to the AgriCorps, and others too. You’re only 14, you’ve only been with Mr. Skywalker for a short while. How close were you to being sent to the AgriCorps?”

“Too close. I had problems with my feelings. I got angry and competitive; I got in fights. I was the best in my fencing classes, and force technique classes and no one wanted me. I was alone, and they were going to send me away to farm because I was a waste of every master’s time. Then,” she looked back out at the rainstorm. “They sent me to Skyguy. I was going to be a Padawan, and he agreed to train me.” Her shoulder hunched. “All the initiates love him. All the padawans wanted him, and I got him. I was his Padawan, and he was my master.”

“Has he failed you?”

“They put him under evaluation! They hurt him! They humiliated him in front of the whole galaxy! They let everyone know that they didn’t trust his judgment and that they didn’t like him. When they did that they got me caught in the backlash too! I was his Padawan, and everyone in the temple hated me! They thought I was stupid! I wasn’t even the one in disgrace, and people acted like I was! I was supposed to prove,” she choked back on tears she hadn’t realized were forming. “I was supposed to prove that neither of us were failures. That we could be Jedi too, and.” She turned around, pressing her forearm against her head. “And I failed, and if I ever go back, everything will be worse.”

“Hmm,” Helgina sighed. Ahsoka didn’t dare to face her, embarrassed by her outburst. Scared of how angry she felt.

“What am I supposed to do? There’s nothing for me at the temple. I’m going to go back, and everything is going to be horrible.”

“What do you think Mr. Skywalker is going to say?”

“He’s going to worry. He always worries. I don’t even think he cares about the missions anymore. He just wants me not to get hurt.”

“It seems he is a good teacher then?”

“If he was a better teacher then I wouldn’t have failed.”

“That’s not the case, Miss Tano. You have been trained very well by Mr. Skywalker. A few weeks ago I got a ranting sort of email from my cousin. He complained bitterly of your skills as they were used to destroy one of his projects. You did break your master out of prison, didn’t you.”

“Erm.” Obi-Wan was in prison for something like that too. If she admitted to it, she didn’t want to be thrown into a jail cell.

“Then you’ve also managed to fight General Grievous to a standstill. Though I never listen to gossip, I’ve heard he thinks you’re an honorable opponent. A little snippy, but definitely a good dueler. This is the same general who has killed many people.”

“I remember.”

“These aren’t small victories, Miss Tano. You have skills and power and the admiration of some of the most dangerous beings in the galaxy.”

“That doesn’t mean anything if I can’t get a mission completed.”

“Your own teacher has failed on multiple occasions.”
“Yeah,” Ahsoka snorted, “look what that got him. He got defeated and captured and thrown into prison. Like some common criminal. Then the evaluation.”

“He did suffer the evaluation.”

“They can’t put me under evaluation unless they tell my master to. He told me, he wouldn’t do it. He wouldn’t put me under the evaluation, but ever since Obi-Wan was put in prison and the whole mess started.” She finally sighed. “I insulted him.”

“What?”

“You asked me what I said to Dooku. I insulted him. I wasn’t nice. I lost my temper.”

“Ah,” Helgina cleared.

“What do I do? I’m here, and my master is coming, and we’re both going to die.”

“You’re going to die eventually,” Helgina said, “not now. Part of my cousin's agreement with Mr. Skywalker was that if he attended the meeting; you both would leave unharmed.”

“What is this stupid meeting about anyway?”

“I have no real idea,” Helgina said after a moments silence. “Sit down, Miss Tano. Please, talk to me.”

“You think that he won’t try to kill him?”

“Oh, if he does I’m sure I can handle my cousin. I’m sure.”

“HELGINA!” The door opened, this time revealing a tall woman in a bright green dress. She looked older and distinguished; graceful, even in the high heeled boots she wore. “My darling! Where is that little Jedi!”

Ahsoka whirled around, hand groping for a weapon she didn’t have. Helgina flinched, forcing herself to not punch out her cousin. She stormed into the room, booming in a voice that made her children dive for ear protectors.

“What is it, Yin?”

“The little Jedi! Where is she,” the woman’s eyes fell on Ahsoka, who was frozen in her confusion. “Ahsoka Tano! My unofficial grand-niece! How are you?”

“Who the hell are you?” Ahsoka demanded, retreating around the small table to evade the woman’s waving arms.

“Oh! Yan hadn’t told you? I’m his sister! Not the one suing the Jedi Order, certainly not. I am Yin Dooku; I’m the third oldest. I’m just under Yen and Yan.” Yin Dooku planted her hands on her hips. “When I heard that he was hosting Ahsoka Tano, I just had to come. You see, when he came back to the family, he told us all about how lineage works and all that. We just thought it would be fantastic to see some of his lineage children. Well, Qui-Gon died, which was a real shame, but that leaves you and Skywalker and Kenobi! Though, considering everything that’s going on, I don’t really want to talk to Kenobi.” The woman paused, she’d spoken nearly in a breathless stream of words that made the Padawan cringe.

“So?” Ahsoka glanced at Helgina. The doctor shrugged.
“If you want to spend time with her, be my guest.”

“Yes!” Yin clapped her hands, “come with me! I can take you shopping.”

“Not shopping,” Helgina countered, “she has to remain in the clothes that Yan has fixed up. To keep her from using the force with deadly force.”

“I don’t need the force to be deadly,” Ahsoka grumbled, “I am deadly enough on my own.” She glowered at the two women. “What?”

“Of course you are! But I just want to take my niece someplace wonderful! Oh, I bet Yan is playing one of the secret information games. I can’t take her off the estate, can I?”

“I wouldn’t want to leave!” Ahsoka protested, “I don’t even know who you are.”

“I know what we’ll do!” Yin said, after losing the staring contest with Helgina. “We’ll order take-out.” With that, the woman swept from the room, promising to return.

“Is this an interrogation?” Ahsoka demanded. Helgina shook her head.

“The Dooku family has always been very family oriented. Siblings and nieces and nephews and step-family members and even family members that aren’t family members. I’m not surprised Yan explained the lineage stuff to them.”

“He is not my grandpa,” the Jedi snapped, pulling her jacket closer and glowering. “That’s like saying Anakin is my dad.”

“He isn’t?” Helgina asked Ahsoka glowered.

“He isn’t.”

“Hmm,” Helgina took another sip of tea, “of course he isn’t.”

“It’s really best if you stay away from the windows, Master Kenobi.” The thin, reedy voice of the Grandmaster of the Corellian Temple, gave Obi-Wan pause. Before he could open the curtain and look down on the city-scape below.

“My apologies, Master Tenroc,” he dropped his hand and folded it neatly behind his back. “I forgot the hordes were still out there.” From the sharp glare angled his direction, he was sure that Master Tenroc didn’t believe him. “What can I do for you?”

“The situation hasn’t changed much.” Tenroc said, “the High Court is demanding you appear. The council says to not appear before the High Court.”

“I should think not,” Obi-Wan said, “the Jedi are above any single systems judicial court.”

“We are the Corellian temple have always had an amicable affair with the local government and planets.” Tenroc wandered into the room, “we strive to keep this relationship smooth.”

“You think I have disrupted it,” Obi-Wan said slowly; he raised an eyebrow. “May I remind you, Master Tenroc, that the Order does not answer to a single systems court.”

“You’ve said that twice,” Tenroc pointed out, fast losing the patience in his voice.
“If you’re here to convince me to turn myself over to the uneducated and hysterical masses, then you may leave,” Obi-Wan gestured to the door.

“Those hysterical masses control a significant portion of what the temple here receives from the government. Furthermore, keeping this temple on friendly terms with the local government means that we are able to do out duties much easier.” Tenroc nodded at the window.

“That is not my concern,” Kenobi answered. Not for the first time he felt as if he was pulling apart at the seams. Everything he knew as a Jedi was being yanked apart and dragged through the dirt. “I will not go to the high court for some already determined judgment. I am a Jedi Master, not a squatting criminal.”

“At this point, Master Kenobi,” Tenroc said, “I’m not sure I can tell the difference. I will not be risking this temple’s reputation and position to get you back to the first temple. If you want to find a way back, you’ll have to do so without our support.”

“I will report your insubordination to Master Yoda.” There was a black hole beneath his feet. Something was sucking the sense from his life. Capture, prison, trial, prison again.

“You can tell the troll all you like.” Tenroc shrugged, “this is Corellia.” With that, he left. Obi-Wan stared after him. He pulled back the curtain enough to get a glimpse of the crowds of police, media, and protesters waiting just beyond the temple walls. He bit his lip and pondered his next move.

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“Prince Consort Skywalker,” a small man carrying a small paper note, bowed at the end of the dining table. Both queen and senator looked over at the prince consort who hastily set down his tinkering things.

“What is it?” Anakin tucked his screwdriver behind his ear, forgetting the headpiece that Padme had convinced him to wear.

“I have a letter for you.” The man scurried around the table to press it into Anakin’s hands. “I apologize for the interruptions, your majesties.”

“There is nothing wrong,” Apindala replied graciously. “Thank you for your delivery. You may go.” Anakin folded back down and ripped the envelope open.

“It’s a letter from Helgina,” he scanned the page. “Ahsoka’s doing well.”

“That is a relief,” Padme leaned against him to read the letter. “Oh, what does it mean that she does not like her clothes?”

“Probably the same trick the count pulled with me. He embroiders the clothes with specific patterns and sigils to create a form of Sith magic. It keeps the force user from using the force. They can still feel it, but they can’t use it.” Anakin smiled briefly. “For some reason that was the only time I’ve felt like my head was screwed on the right in years. The whole galaxy wasn’t crushing me.”

“Did the doctor make any mention of the count?” Queen Apindala set down her own entertainment and leaned closer to blond.

“No, only how Ahsoka is doing.” Anakin passed the letter over. “They won’t let Ahsoka write a letter. I don’t even think she knows that she’s writing letters. It saves us the worry.”

“It does,” the queen nodded, “I hope that you can be patient for another week, Prince Consort.
Having ones loved one in peril is not easy. Though, if there are any signs of true peril you must leave immediately.”

“Thank you,” Anakin replied sincerely, “I do appreciate the help you’ve given me.”

“You are a Friend of Naboo and Prince Consort. It simply makes sense,” Apindala stood suddenly, “I know you two are deeply concerned for your student, but I believe that this would be an excellent game of smash ball.”

“Oh dear,” Padme grinned as Anakin perked up, “my queen, Anakin takes smash ball very seriously.”

“I do too,” Apindala pointed a finger at Anakin, “we will assemble teams and meet in the pit. I warn you, Prince Consort.” Apindala’s excitement bled through into her words; her finger was shaking. Anakin remembered that this sabbatical was one of the few times that the girl queen would have a chance to be a young girl. “If you manage to defeat me, it may be considered high treason.”

For a brief instant he was frozen, then, he began to laugh. Mocking and loud with an edge of brash excitement.

“Then so be it!” He exclaimed, glancing at Padme.

“I am not playing,” Padme reiterated, “I will help you get ready though.” Anakin leaned over to kiss her cheek, staring at her with such an open expression of adoration she felt heat rise in her cheeks. “Find Captain Panaka; he plays smash ball better than anyone.”

“I will!” Apindala exclaimed, racing toward the door of the tent.

“I will!” Anakin sprinted out a second later, his robes flapping and his headpiece threatening to slide off. “Victory shall be mine!”

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“I got take out!” The cheerful pronouncement was enough to make Ahsoka slide off her bed and onto the floor. “Oh?” Yin paused just inside the door, “are you alright?”

“I’m fine!” Ahsoka shouted, feeling embarrassed that she’d fallen over so easily. It was a tricky dance move to learn and trying to figure it out on top of her bed was a bad idea. “What do you want?”

“I said I was going to get take out! I brought it.” Yin held up a big plastic bag, grinning broadly. “It’s from the food stand not too far into the city. It’s my family’s go-to place for food when we don’t want to cook. Also if you’re hungover or drunk!”

“So?”

“You’re my niece!” The human floated into the room and set the bag on the desk. “Goodness knows that Yan is probably trying to get you to behave and learn some etiquette lessons and I know he thinks that sitting in the parlor room and embroidering is the epitome of family entertainment. Gods know he’s a little boring.”

“I don’t like stitching stuff,” Ahsoka agreed, “and he was a little stuff.”

“It’s probably the politician in him.” Yin pulled out a cardboard container stained with grease and an unidentifiable goo. It smelled fantastic, and Ahsoka edged closer to the woman. “He can’t have any
real vices because he’s the head of the CIS. Do you want the shaak or the nerf?”

“I don’t care,” Ahsoka accepted a box and then a small little bowl container. “Why did you bring this?”

“Because I want to be the cool aunt,” Yin struck a flamboyant pose, “Yan is already that boring grandpa that buys you clothes because he judges your fashion choices. You should have seen him when Anakin Skywalker was in prison. He was all flustered. He dragged Yon to twelve different fabric stores to find something that would work for him.”

“Really? Why can’t he just get the normal fabric? Why twelve?”

“Because Anakin is sensitive to those scratchy fabrics the Jedi wear. They are so uncomfortable. Plus, I know he’s coming to have a sort of conference with Yan, and I’m just dying to meet him. He seems like such a nice boy.”

“Right,” Ahsoka watched her and accepted a plastic spoon with a frown.

“Don’t worry,” Yin crowed as she settled onto on the couches, “if my family all comes to the estate. They’re just curious, that’s all. The last time a Jedi was here it was to take my nephew you away.”

“Being chosen as a Jedi is an honor,” Ahsoka said the woman’s gentle attitude had been enough to make her forget she was surrounded by separatists.

“Sure,” Yin, despite her gown and her presentation that she was an elegant woman with sophistication and charm, propped her feet up on the small table in front of the couch. “but when they came for little Juri, I swear Yon was about to punt them through the roof. It was hilarious.”

“What’s wrong with being a jedi?” Ahsoka demanded.

“Nothing, if you consider not having a family as alright. If you consider when Yan came back he was so stuffed up with his own pretensions that it took years to unwind. He also came back with the shakes, plenty of nightmares and PTSD. He had no idea how to lead a planet, how to handle money, how to handle relationships. Honestly, he was a mess, but we got him straightened out. No worries now, though sometimes he and Yen get into fist fights. It’s horrible when they fight.”

“I know how to handle money!” Ahsoka exclaimed, “I’m not an idiot.”

“Maybe a little bit of money,” the woman dug her fork into the box to pull out strings and strings of noodles, “not a fortune. Certainly not a real income. Not what a family makes.”

“I bet I could!”

“With a proper education, sure,” Yin pointed her loaded fork at her, “not right now. Do you even get money from the order?”

“Does it matter?”

“It does, do you want to get stranded on a planet that doesn’t care about you being a Jedi and not being able to afford a way off?”

“That would never happen!”

“Sure it would. Happened to Yan once, it was the first time he got in contact with us. Honestly, it was the most amazing thing that happened. We were all at the breakfast table when CeeTee came
into the room and said that a Jedi named Yan Dooku was calling.” Yin laughed to herself. Ahsoka held very still, both horrified by the story and desperate for any dirt on Dooku’s past. Yoda never discussed him, and no one in the temple spoke his name. “He was so embarrassed to ask for money, but we wired it to him, and he made it away. The next time he ever spoke to any of us was after he left the order.” Yin looked at Ahsoka over her take-out container. “I know your digging for dirt on my brother, but this is family history. Basically, the whole planet knows it.”

“Oh,” Ahsoka deflated. Yin laughed

“Don’t worry; I will give you the best family gossip. You can hear all about how my sister ended up in law school instead of marrying the queen of Hapes.”

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“Why do you enjoy doing this?” Padme glanced over at her husband. Anakin was sprawled over the grassy slope, his eyes closed and looking bored.

“I’m fishing, Anakin.”

“This is so boring,” he complained, barely opening his eyes to see the wide, glittering lake and the sandy beach that ended just a few feet before Anakin’s feet. He wouldn’t step on the sand for anything, even her.

“It’s fishing, dear.” She glanced over at the several fishing poles that were stuck into the sand. “It’s all a matter of being patient. The fish will bite when they’re curious enough.”

“If you wanted fish,” he lifted his head up, reluctantly as possible to showcase the depths of his boredom, “I could pull them from the water with the force.”

“That’s cheating,” Padme cooed at the small family of ducks that waddled over to Anakin. He blinked slowly as the whole family settled onto his leg. “You can go back to the camp if you want. You don’t have to stay and fish with me.”

“I want to enjoy the things you do,” Anakin frowned as a loth cat, someone’s exotic pet, emerged from the bushes. The ducks and cat stared at each other before the cat laid claim to Anakin’s chest and settled down with a happy purr. “Also, it is now illegal for me to move.” Padme laughed, “It’s not funny!”

“Oh, Ani,” she approached her husband. For the first time, he seemed properly relaxed and calm. The horrors and fears of the war, of the order, of the coming meeting with Dooku, had faded during his game of smash ball. Padme hoped that the visit was doing just as she’d wanted. Giving Anakin a chance to find an even keel, to breathe without the background fear that it was toxic, poisoned, or his last. When she kneeled at his side, and he opened his eyes, her breath was sucked from her lungs. Pure adoration and affection seemed to flare from the depths of bright blue. As if Anakin would and could only ever see her. When he smiled, she felt her heart shudder.

“Have I told you how much I love you?”

“You have.”

“Have I showed you how much I love you?”

Anakin blushed, the bright pink was a fantastic compliment to his eyes. “You have.”
“I’m not talking just about sex,” Padme said, grinning anyway. “How I showed you that I would support you no matter what? That I would burn the galaxy for you?”

“I don’t think you need to burn down the galaxy for me,” Anakin said slowly, “just…the Senate would do?”

“How about the order?” Padme offered, remembering the violent rage she’d felt when word had reached her of Anakin’s evaluation. Naboo queens were warriors too, not just pretty girls in pretty make-up. Naboo had not remained one of the most influential outer-rim worlds with a culture so distinct that it basically thumbed it’s nose at Core sensibilities, by being weak and falling over at a stiff breeze. She had killed to keep Naboo free from the Trade Federation. The Order relied on her for support and assistance she was planning on savoring the shock they expressed when she abandoned them.

“Haven’t you already planned that?”

“Yes,” Padme admitted, “they hurt you, thus they hurt Naboo. They deserve it.” Anakin looked away, sighing.

“Can we adopt Ahsoka?”

“Ahsoka?” Padme blinked, “your student?”

“Yes,” Anakin looked back to her. His metal hand rose, and he scratched the Loth-cat behind its ears. “When I leave, I don’t want her to be hurt because of her relationship with me. It’s already bad. She doesn’t admit it, but I know the rest of the Jedi have been bullying her.”

“Why?”

“She’s my Padawan. I was under evaluation. I was captured. I failed many times. The council doesn’t approve of me. She was nearly sent away to the AgriCorps until they wanted to dump a student on me.”

“You love Ahsoka.”

“I do,” Anakin admitted, “but when they sent her to us, we were in the middle of a war zone. We were waiting for a ship to bring supplies and weapons. They sent Ahsoka down on an empty ship. I don’t regret her being there, but we needed those supplies. We lost eighty troopers from the lack of medical supplies and, they gave me a Padawan I didn’t ask for and didn’t know what to do with.”

“Ani.”

“I love Ahsoka, I really do, but sometimes I wonder why they sent her to me. If they wanted to teach me a lesson through her, what kind of lesson was it?”

“Who knows what the council thinks,” Padme said, kissing his forehead, “you love Ahsoka and I know she looks at you as if you were her father.”

“She does?”

“She practically told me herself,” Padme whispered, “she cares about you. When you were in prison, she cried. She stayed the night at our home, she cried herself to sleep. She was so worried. If she’d cried at the Temple, I’m afraid of what they would have done.”

“Oh,” Anakin stared, “I hoped, but I didn’t dare speculate. I didn’t want to.”
“Be disappointed?”

“Yes,” Anakin smiled briefly, “she told me that if anything happened, that she’d come crash on your couch. She said that, since you’re loaded, you wouldn’t mind a squatter.”

Padme laughed, “she doesn’t know that we’ve got a spare bedroom, just practically waiting for her? Oh, that will be hilarious when we tell her.”

“Maybe she doesn’t want to be adopted,” Anakin frowned suddenly, “I mean, the media circus would be wild. A secret marriage, a Jedi adoption? I don’t; when I leave, I’ll ask her to come with me.”

“Maybe you could hint how much happier she could be if she left?” Padme kissed him again; his eyes were drawn to something beyond her.

“My love,” he said, “you fishing things are shaking.”

“OH!” She whirled around and rushed down the beach. “My lines!”

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R2-D2, astromech droid with a personality matrix that had developed into something that any mechaphobe would hate, beeped at the separatist intelligence officer.

“Don’t rush me,” Poda replied, still glowering at the game board. “I’m figuring out how to win.” She looked up, incredulous and insulted when Artoo made a derisive blatting noise. “Excuse you, shellhead.” Artoo beeped some more, and Poda leaned away to gather her pride. “What the hells, droid? Who taught you to be so nasty?” She waited for the reply. “Oh, you taught yourself? Really? You didn’t learn any of those clever little words from Skywalker?” As she considered her next move, Artoo buzzed again. “Kenobi and Skywalker? Well, fine, that’s not so bad, but you’ve got a serious attitude problem.” She programmed her move into the board. Her pieces moved, and Artoo gave a miserable whine. “Ha! Take that!”

The small room was silent for a few more minutes while Artoo calculated the next move. He beeped and wooed at Poda until she began to laugh.

“What is so amusing?” Dooku rounded the corner and blinked rapidly to see his chief intelligence officers and a droid playing an intense game of derajak. “What are you doing?”

“Winning,” Poda replied, grinning as Artoo buzzed angrily. “And laughing at the droid. Do you know what he said? He said that he doesn’t like to play against humans because they always muck up his calculations.”

“I think that is a compliment,” Dooku said.

“It’s not,” Poda translated for him, “Ha! Move, droid!”

The droid beeped and moved his characters. He gave a low whine when Poda grinned savagely and programmed her next move in.

“Poda,” Dooku said, “Skywalker will be arriving here in a few days. Is everything ready?”

“As ready as it can get,” she replied, not looking away from the board and the droid that was rocking from side to side. “Come on, Artoo, make your move.” The droid buzzed. “I’m not rushing you! I’m just asking you to move!” She turned to Dooku, who was observing the scene with an expression of
absolute confusion. “Look at him; he’s being intolerable.”

“I’m sure he is,” Dooku rolled his eyes, “whenever you’ve finished dealing with the droid, come find me. I have security issues I want to discuss with you.”

“Yes,” Poda answered, not looking from the board and Artoo made his move. When he was gone, she tilted her head to the side. “How are you going to feel about see Skywalker again?”

The flickering photoreceptor seemed to focus on her. Artoo bleated out an answer.

“Happy?” She made a lazy gesture at the droid, “have you told him that you intentionally sabotaged the mission to erase Kenobi’s evidence locker?” She savored how the droid froze and stared at her. “Oh, yeah. I know how that mission went. You guys are good, but I have way more funding than you two, and I can figure out what I want. I watched you, Artoo, set the wrong evidence locker on fire. You probably wanted to keep Kenobi in prison. I sympathize, Kenobi’s a real pain in the ass.”

Poda pulled a small piece of metal from her pocket. “He kept making too many demands, too many insults, jokes at your expense, and he doesn’t see you as a real person?”

R2-D2 bleeped quietly, his shock prod extending.

“This was your first retraining bolt. I found it on Naboo. It wasn’t easy. I had to bribe a lot of people for it. I’m sure Kenobi wants to see you fitted with this again, maybe a better and newer model. Now, why did you ruin the wrong evidence locker? Not just because he insulted you too often?”

[ I have nothing to say to you. ]

“It wouldn’t be how much you know he was hurting Anakin, was it?” Poda gritted her teeth at the silence. “Saying the same sorts of jokes about him that he said about you? You’re a droid, though. You expect that sort of behavior. You know what its like to be treated a tool and a thing. You saw people doing the same thing to the very person you loved. You had to know how bad that was?”

[ I knew Anakin when I was asleep. I know him now that I am awake. ] Artoo seemed to hesitate. [ My calculations presented a .349534% chance that the evaluation would be done. ]

“Except they did evaluate him. Publically humiliated his stance as Jedi and as a General. I know that they hurt him. Intruder Funny 11 sent me the information. I know what they did to him that they didn’t advertise.”

[ I didn’t want him to be hurt. ] Artoo beeped sadly. [ I didn’t want Kenobi to come back and talk to him like he was me. He is a person, and his name is Anakin. ]

“We agree on that. We both agree that Kenobi isn’t good for him. There’s a reason I arranged to kidnap Ahsoka Tano. Anakin Skywalker is going to come for his family, his daughter, and his best friend.” She poked Artoo’s dome. “I shouldn’t tell you this, but we’re planning something of a vacation. That’s not what I want from you.”

[ I will not betray Anakin or Anakin’s family. ]

“Of course not, I’m offended you thought that was part of my offer.”

[ What is your offer? ]

“There is a threat looking at both Skywalker and Dooku like they are its next lunch. It’s closer to Skywalker than anything has the right to be.”
“Not a what? A who. The Sith Master that commands Dooku. I’ve followed his trail of money, his crimes, his schemes all the way to the highest office in the Republic.”

Artoo was quiet.

[Palpatine is a danger to Skywalker.]

“He’s a Sith Lord,” Poda said quietly, “called Sideous. I have the evidence to believe that he has been grooming Skywalker since the man was a child.” Artoo rolled back, beeping violently.

[I WILL KILL HIM! I WILL DESTROY HIS WHOLE LIFE! HE WILL BEG FOR MERCY!] Podia leaned away, as the droid began to spark his extender. As the threats got more violent and graphic, she kicked at him. It connected with a clatter.

“Artoo! Calm down! I know that this is probably very upsetting for you, but there is a reason I’m telling you in confidence.”

[To help me plan his murder?] Artoo buzzed darkly, and Poda smiled.

“Exactly.” The droid considered her.

[How?]

“This is has to be a careful plan.” Poda now ignored the board, pulling out her datapad. She held it out to him and let him connect to the port. “Palpatine has enough emergency powers to make a handy little empire in a single vote. That would put the entire Republic at the disposal of a Sith Lord. He’s popular enough to make murdering him straight up an act of political suicide. We have to be very careful how we do this. If you tell Skywalker now, he’ll kill him, straight up. Arrest him without proper cause; it’ll be a mess. We can’t let the Jedi kill him. I don’t have a concrete plan yet, but we’ve got four days before Anakin arrives. Do you think we can plan how to topple a political despot in four days?”

[Yes.] Artoo stared and held out a small metal extender. Poda grinned and took it, they shook
The closer the closing date of the retreat got the more nervous Anakin got. He stayed up late on projects to keep his mind off the potential trouble Ahsoka might be facing. He worked out his tension in other ways too. One evening he gave Padme a massage that nearly made her melt into the floor. He lavished her with attention that she felt she hardly deserved. Some nights were simple, where they only slept. Other nights, they enjoyed each others company to their fullest extent. Anakin spent an entire day inside, refusing to face the crowd after one of their more memorable nights.

They went on walks and hikes, swims and boat rides. Rekindling their affection and admiration. Learning more and more about each other as the sabbatical went on. Padme was pleased that they still had so much to talk about.

When the sabbatical finally ended and queen gave him permission to leave, he kissed with such passion that her toes curled in her slippers.

“You’ll keep her safe, right?” She asked.

“I promise,” Anakin pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I love you, Padme.”

“I love you too.” Padme said, “forever and always.”

“Master Dooku,” a cheerfully pink colored protocol droid waddled into the living room where the Dooku family and Ahsoka and Dr. Helgina were seated. “A Mr. Skywalker is approaching and will be landing shortly.”

“Thank you, T-4,” the count said and nodded at Ahsoka, “are you ready?”

“Anakin’s here!” She lurched to her feet, sending the game in all directions. “Let’s go.”

“Not so fast,” the count held up a hand. “You are not going out like that.”

“Out like what?” She looked at her clothes, “they’re comfortable.”

“I can see your mid-driff.”

“So? I go into battle like this.”

“I am aware. It is not appropriate. Not only is it inappropriate, it’s not safe. You need real armor and real clothes.”

“But I look best in crop tops!”
“No, you need to get changed into something respectable. You’re going to meet your master, that means you must look the part.”

“If I go out in some stupid fancy outfit Anakin is going to think something is wrong. He knows I like this sort of stuff and I want to wear it.”

“Ahsoka, this is not up for debate.”

“Your right,” she tilted her head up, “it isn’t. I’m keeping what I’m wearing.”

“Young one!”

“Come on! I want to see him! Let’s go!”

Dooku pursed his lips and wagged a finger in her face, “A jedi is supposed to be patient and respectful.”

“You became a Sith lord, you don’t get to talk.”

“She had a point,” Yin called, “just go say hello to him. She hasn’t seen him a while.”

“Yin, this is not how to handle.” Ahsoka tried to brush past him, he stopped her with an outstretched arm and a firm look. “This situation. Young one.”

“Oh, come on Grandpa!” She said pleadingly, “I just want to see him! I can get changed later!”

Dooku wavered visibly until he looked back down at Ahsoka and saw how desperate she looked. Her wide eyes were nearly brimming over with tears and her bottom lip was trembling.

“Oh, all right.” He moved his arm and Ahsoka took off. He watched her retreat and turned back to his sister. “What?”

“You soft-hearted idiot!” Yin laughed into her arm, “you just let her walk all over you! She pulled out the pouty face and the fake tears and you folded like a house of cards. Unbelievable! I can’t wait to tell everyone else.”

“Yin, that was not emotional manipulation.”

“IT was classic emotional manipulation! She called you Grandpa and you had as much backbone as a jellyfish. I can’t wait to tell Yen. Some terrible, horrible Sith Lord you are.” Yin nodded to Helgina who was also chuckling.

“I was not manipulated by a 14-year-old.”

“Yes, you were. You have your granddaughter practically crying in your arms and you rolled right over.”

“I’m not having this conversation.” He huffed and stormed out of the room.

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Anakin could feel Ahsoka, her presence was dimmed and quiet, but he could feel her. As soon as he landed his ship, and ignoring the necessary security guards, he ran across the landing pad to locate her. He turned a corner nearly at the exact moment that she did. Their collision sent them both to the ground, laughing and hugging.
“Are you alright? Did anyone hurt you? Have you been eating? Have you been getting enough sleep?”

“I’m alright. No one’s hurt me. I have been eating enough and I’ve gotten sleep.”

“Are you sure you’re alright?”

“I’m fine! I’m fine! Look at you! You don’t seem nearly jumpy.” Ahsoka leaned away as far as Anakin would allow. “Did your skin get darker? I didn’t know humans could do that?”

“I got a tan. I’ve been outside a lot.”

“You look better than I’ve seen you in months,” Ahsoka grinned, “and I got Dooku to give me what I want by pouting at him.”

“He’ll learn,” Anakin laughed, pulling her closer and hugging her harder. “The poor fool will learn.”

“If you two are quite done.” They looked up. Dooku loomed over them, glowering with every bit of a glower that he could summon. Instead of looking like a terrifying Sith out destroy them, he looked like a disappointed grandfather. “Making an unseemingly scene on the floor?”

Anakin and Ahsoka got to their feet. “Where is Helgina?” Anakin demanded as he pushed his padawan behind him. “Tell me everything that’s been going on.”

“I would be glad to enlighten you,” Dooku said severely. Ahsoka giggled despite the sudden severity of the situation. “If would stop with such childish antics.”

“I haven’t seen my padawan in weeks,” Anakin waved a threatening hand at the count. “Ahsoka, tell me about your mission to Onderon.”

“I,” Ahsoka looked at him and then at Dooku. “I can’t.”

“Ahsoka?”

“I don’t want to.”

“Perhaps you two would like some privacy?” Dooku offered, “the secondary parlor room is available and there are no cameras or bugs.”

“I’ll check that for myself,” Anakin glared, “where is it?”

“Through here,” Dooku turned around and led the way. Ahsoka looked up at Anakin, smiling despite her sudden nervousness. “I will have you know that your dau, excuse me, your padawan was poorly behaved. She was a hell-raiser.”

“I knew that I taught you well.” Anakin ran his hand down her montreal. If she had been human, he would have ruffled her hair. “Good job.”

“Knight Skywalker,” Dooku frowned heavily and gestured grandly at the door. “Perhaps while you speak to your student you can impress her with the importance of manners.”

“No, thank you,” Anakin said, gently pushing Ahsoka through the door, “I don’t want to accidentally copyright anything you’ve already said the last few days.” He shut the door with a satisfying snap in his face, and turned back to his padawan. She grinned awkwardly and hunched in on herself. “’Soka?”
“I don’t want to talk about the mission,” she said, turning away.

“It was a dangerous mission, little one. A very dangerous mission that you shouldn’t have been sent on. I didn’t want you to go alone. They still sent you alone.”

“But I messed it up,” she didn’t look at him. “I was supposed to make you proud. I was supposed to show that I’d learned something.”

“You have,” Anakin said, “you went up against a superior force with limited resources and an impossible mission.”

“But I should have managed it!” She burst out. “You got the evaluation and this mission was to prove myself. It was to prove that we are a good team. That you were a good teacher! The other padawans make fun of me!”

“Soka.” He reached for her, but she stepped away angrily.

“I’m sorry I failed, Master.”

“You didn’t fail, ‘Soka.” He set his hands on her shoulders, as if nervous that she was going to push him away. She didn’t, and he hugged her again. This time she leaned against him, sighing. “I promise.”

“But I failed the mission.”

“Maybe, but you’re alive.”

“So are my men,” she looked up at him, “please don’t me angry, master. I made a deal. My men would be safe, and the king would be safe, but they’d be a Separatists and I’d be in prison. Well, I’d be here. I didn’t want to, but it was all I could think of. It was all I could do.”


“But I failed the objective.”

“Maybe, but your people are safe. You were against.”

“I’m not stupid!” Ahsoka shouted, “I know they wanted me to fail.” Anakin blinked, “I know they wanted me to fail so I can go back and be the stupid padawan of the stupid Anakin Skywalker!”

“Ahsoka,” he took a deep breath slowly and let it out. She waited for him to speak, but he didn’t. “I’m just glad you’re alright. I don’t care about that mission.”

“But, Master.”

“It’s alright, Ahsoka. I promise.”

“Don’t make promises that you can’t keep! You were supposed to be the greatest Jedi of them all,” she shouted, “you were the best and then you got evaluated just because! What are they going to do to me? I can’t stand.” She stepped away, wrapping her arms around herself. “What about me?”

“I,” he wavered miserably and finally hugged her again. “I don’t know, Ahsoka, but if anything
happens I will be there to help you. Always.”

“But I don’t want to be evaluated! I haven’t done anything. I’m not,” she took a few deep breaths. “I
don’t.” Her head thunked against Anakin’s chest and he held her close staring at the wall and wishing that everything could change. She didn’t have to speak for him to know she was thinking of the night not so long ago when she’d seen a fraction of what the council was capable of when they were displeased. “I’m scared, Anakin.”

“I know,” he swayed from side to side in an attempt to be soothing. “If anything does happen then you can call go with your plan B.”

“My what?”

“Take off and live with Senator Amidala,” he smiled despite the situation. “You know that she’d love to have you.”

“Anakin!”

“I’m just saying,” he said, “but how did you get captured.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Did they hurt you?”

“No, it’s just embarrassing.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“And if I tell you then I’m afraid you’re going to laugh.”

“I’m not going to laugh,” Anakin promised but she shook her head. “I promise.”

“I’m not telling you,” Ahsoka said, “how was your visit to Naboo?”

“It was fine. What has happened here? He captured you and.”

“Nothing,” Ahsoka said, “I was dumped here and Dooku’s all, ‘you need to represent my lineage properly. How dare you wear something that bares your mid-drift. Helgina managed to keep him from being too obnoxious. I, might have talked to her.”

“That’s good, what did she have to say?”

“A lot of stuff,” Ahsoka said. “I know that I’m not supposed to talk to her, but I just. I just started because she was talking and she was asking me questions and it’s not polite to ignore someone. Then we started talking some more and I.” Ahsoka seemed to hesitate before she hugged him again. This time, her hug was longer. Her head lingered against his chest, as if she didn’t want to pull away.

“I’m glad to see you, Anakin.”

“Of course,” he said, “I’ll always come for you.”

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Anakin didn’t take nearly as long as Artoo expected him to for his reunion with Ahsoka. The droid had expected a few more hours before the conference between Poda and Dooku was interrupted.

It was only twenty minutes after he arrived that Anakin burst through the door and pointed angrily at
the Sith. Dooku and Poda, who had been leaning close and discussing the finer details of Tang’s battle plan, leaned apart. Poda vanished a moment later, without Skywalker looking once at her.

“What do you want, Count?”

“Ah, Skywalker. I hope your reunion was as joyous and you hoped. I trust you are not displeased with the state your student is in.”

“What is she here for, Dooku. You wouldn’t have gone through the effort of saving her if it wasn’t for some bigger purpose.”

“The bigger purpose was to get you here,” Dooku said, stepping away from his datapad and wandering around the table. His fingertip trailed along the edge of the wood. “Which succeeded, I might add.”

“I am here,” Anakin growled. Artoo buzzed a greeting at him before it could get ugly. Anakin might have had a change to relax on Naboo, but he always got twitchy when Ahsoka was in trouble. “Explain.”

“I told you,” Dooku crossed his arms in a grand, intimidating gesture, “that I wanted to speak to you. Skywalker, I will allow you and Ahsoka to leave unharmed and with your lightsabers and initial possessions.”

“What’s the catch?” As Dooku moved further around the table, Anakin mirrored his actions, moving around the table.

“Nothing in this conversation is to ever be repeated. Never. I will never speak of it and you do not ever discuss it. No matter the outcome.”

“You went through a lot of trouble to get my attention,” Anakin said, his eyes hadn’t let the counts once. “To capture my padawan, to bring me here. To get this in motion. What is it?”

“Have you ever considered defecting?” Dooku asked abruptly and Anakin paused.

“What?”

“Defecting, Skywalker. Leaving the Republic and fighting for the confederacy?” “Fighting for the Separatists?” Dooku’s expression was relaxed, but there was a gleam in his eyes. “You are the best commander in the Republic, hobbled by their commands and their idioc.”

“No.” His voice was rushed, his eyes wild and furious.

“Skywalker, consider.”

“You don’t know me!” The blond roared, he slammed his metal fist on the table. It cracked beneath the blow. It went ignored as Anakin whirled around, reaching for the door controls.

“I know you better than you think, Skywalker,” the temperature of the room dropped. Artoo buzzed, afraid. Anakin didn’t turn away from the door, but he’d stopped moving. His fists were clenched at his side. “Probably better than your own teacher. Have you told him about your hypersensitivity yet? Have you told him that your transmitter was removed?”

“That has nothing to do with.”
“And what about your recent evaluation?” The Jedi flinched, “do not think that I don’t know what that entails, Skywalker! I was a Jedi longer than you have been alive!”

“It doesn’t matter,” he muttered.

“Of course it matters!” He exclaimed. “They beat you! The council caned you for your obedience to their orders! For failing on an impossible mission!”

“It doesn’t matter!”

“Yes it does! How can you not see that they’re using you to further their own ends! They don’t care who suffers and dies in the process of their war! The council tried to have you student killed! IS that what you wanted, Skywalker. A message from them that Ahsoka was killed in action. Too bad,” Dooku’s thunderous voice took on a sarcastic turn. “That you didn’t train her better. What a pity that she had such a master. Already evaluated for his failures! You,” Dooku jabbed a hand at his bad, “spend the rest of your miserable life assuming the responsibility of her death.”

“Ahoska isn’t trained well!” Anakin finally responded, but his voice was a small as he was trying to pretend to be.

“She can fight Grievous to a stand-still,” the count told him flatly. “Fully grown Masters have difficulty with even getting a proper guard up. She is intelligent and keen and dangerous! A credit to her teacher. Who, until this point, I believed not to be damn dense!’

“I am not stupid.”

“You were evaluated and your padawan was throne into a pit to die. You don’t have to like me, Skywalker, but you cannot deny what that was. You can see the truth for yourself!”

“And if I defected then Ahsoka would be in even more trouble. I am not defecting.”

“You,” Dooku took a deep breath, “then consider what will happen if this war continues. How long until the Jedi are the enemies of the Republic? Do you think that the galaxy is going to sit by and allow a few Jedi with so much power over the Senate and the military. Public opinion is changing!”

“That’s is your fault!” Anakin shouted, whirling around. “That is your fault! Your sister is doing this at your asking! You took Obi-Wan and turned him into a criminal!”

“Kenobi was a criminal long before he was captured! I only exposed him as he deserved!”

“He is a respected Jedi Master.”

The sith paused and considered the younger man. “Why?” He asked, “when push comes to shove, are you spouting the council’s lies? You are using the same arguments that any regular Jedi would use! One’s that I thought you might be above!”

“I am not spouting the same arguments.”

“You are!” He drew himself short and shook his head. “Anakin.” The suspicious glare did not fade. “I offer you this. If you ever need protection from the Jedi. If you ever want to leave them, you don’t have to join me to take me up on this offer; I will hide you.”

“I have never needed you.”
“If you do,” the count said gently, “then I promise that I will help you.”

“I won’t need your help ever.”

“That may be so,” Dooku said, obviously still angry. Anakin ignored him, and started grinding his fingers together. A nervous gesture that Dooku recognized easily. “My offer still stands.”

“Fine, I want to leave. Give me Ahsoka.”

“Ahsoka will join you when she is done packing.”

“Packing?”

“My sister bought her too many presents. She’s only been here,” Dooku paused, “she won’t be able to take them back to the temple. It would be best if we just left them.”

“Why did you sister buy my padawan presents?”

“I told you, my siblings adore family. Even family that happens to be fighting on the other side of the war. Ahsoka is very popular. If you stay for dinner, you might get chance to know my other siblings. Yen is coming for dinner.” It was impossible to miss the way that Anakin shuddered.

“I am not staying. Artoo, buddy, come on.”

“Why can’t I take it with me?” Ahsoka held up the little tea-cup. The woman shook her head.

“No, because you can’t take back something that a Sith Lord sister gave to you. They’re going to expect you to have gone dark side.”

“It’s just a tea-cup and I love it!”

“Leave it here and the next time that you come visit you can use it.”

“I’m not coming back.” The padawan protested, but she set the cup aside.

“Listen,” Poda nodded a bit and finally handed Ahsoka a piece of flimsi. The padawan stared at her.

“Do not show this to anyone. Do not use it unless you think your life in at risk and there is literally no way out. This a life-line if you’re two seconds from drowning and your boat is gone. Understand?”

“Why would I need a lifeline from a Separatist? Why would you give me one? I thought we were enemies?”

“We are on other sides of the war, sure,” Poda watched the Jedi tuck the paper into her pocket, “but I feel bad for capturing you and I think you might need it.”

“I won’t need it.”

“You might,” Poda left her to pack up her old uniform and went to talk to her employer.

Chapter End Notes
Listen, I just go spring break and I plan to post more of this fic in the next two weeks. But I had to get this boring part out of the way. Angst and pain! Coming soon to a fanfic near you!
Nothing

Chapter Summary

Writing is hard. Ahsoka is a teenager. Palpatine is a huge dick. Drinking in the middle of management meetings should be encouraged.

Clone Wars Era

Prison wasn’t boring for Rex. Being a POW meant that he was entitled to certain privileges, and his rank meant that he got even more. His paper supply was replenished when it got low, and he was allowed to mail Commander Tano as often as he wanted. He wasn’t sure what he wanted to write, only that he knew he wanted to.

He was also introduced to the novel idea of eating food that wasn’t just plain ration blocks. To keep a while prison planet fed, the Separatist has started implementing farms. Which they offered to give under the control of clones if the clones wanted to raise animals, for raise grain, or to tend to crops. More brothers than Rex anticipated accepted the offer, and now the building had a few empty rooms. Dozens of them had left to the countryside.

He, as the senior POW, was left to coordinate everything. The brothers leaving, arriving, moving, what trades they’d started teaching themselves, and how to get supplies for it. He was busy almost all the time and had developed an unhealthy appreciation and dependence on Separatist farmed caf. Since they controlled the planets that grew the most caf beans, the Republic was left to suffer with substitutions, high caf bean prices, and instant caf mixes. As the senior POW, he hoarded the rations of real caf he got. To make the Republic officials who would check his letters for codes jealous, he rubbed a few of the fine grains into the paper. Apparently it’d worked, because the Separatist warden had asked him to avoid contaminating his letters with caf.

He wanted to go back, he wrote in an unsent letter that he kept with the rest under his bed, but the Separatists had hobbled him in the most effective manner possible. They’d given him the responsibility of his brothers well-being and left him without a proper backup.

It left his alone when he wanted to deal with problems like this.

“You want to what?” He stared down at a brother who was as old as he was and had been in the war longer than he’d been. His name was Jumper.

“I want to write a book about what it’s like to be a clone,” Jumper said earnestly. He spun around and pointed at the computer console in the library. “Look, I think it got a narrative style down.”

“A what?” Rex glanced at the stack of datachips with titles such as “How to Write a Book” and “How to Not Make Your Life Sound Boring” as well as one called “Plotting, Pacing, and Planning: How to Write a Criminally Entertaining Bestseller”. “Why?”

“Why not!” Jumper moved too fast and hissed as his healing wounds protested the treatment. He took a moment to anchor himself and then he smiled at Rex. “I was guarding one of the libraries
during some nasty business.” Jumper’s eyes shifted over, “on a planet with nasty business.”

“Alright,” Rex knew that his brother wouldn’t be willing to betray what information he did have. “And?”

“I got to talking with the librarian.”

“Oh, boy.”

“And he started asking me about what it was like to be a clone soldier.”

“Okay?”

“And I answered him and then he started telling me that he had studied sociology and that he was fascinated with sociological structure that the clone army must have.” Talking to librarians had made his brother crazy, he knew that much. Rex listened anyway. “I didn’t even know what it was and then he explained what it was and then I got interested because I’d never thought about it. What is it like to be a clone? What is like to be a clone trooper in the Republic. I mean, obviously we don’ t get nearly as much respect and I’ve heard plenty of people talk about us like we’re just meat shields and meat clankers. I mean, you can talk to any of the brothers. So I’m going to write a book!”

Rex sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. His brother looked wildly enthused by the idea, and more animated than he’d seen Jumper be in the two weeks since he’d been brought here. The explosion that had killed most of his squad, the extensive damage to his limbs and lungs, and then the slow recovery had wrecked a mess on Jumpers mood and mind. “Okay, just make sure that there is someone who will edit it.”

“Sure thing!” Jumpers excitement practically bled outward. “It will be great! Maybe people will see us in a different light!”

Rex encounters other like-minded brothers. All of whom have turned to the arts. A few poets, who aren’t terrible but need work. There were some who had asked for art supplies, which were sent in with his next packet of paper and a leather-bound journal.

He said nothing, but let his brothers make their crafts.

He stuck with letter writing.

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The the ride to the hyperspace jump was silent. Anakin took the controls while Ahsoka dithered in the back. She finally joined him the moment they jumped to hyperspace and were officially headed back to the Core.

Back to the Jedi temple.

Anakin wasn’t sure he wanted to go back to the Jedi temple. He really wanted to go back to Padme and sleep a week away. Dooku’s conversation and been enlightening and horrifying at the same time. He wondered if the count had given his proposal any thought or if it had spilled out.

“Skyguy?” He lifted his head off hand and glanced at Ahsoka. She was sitting rigidly in her seat, staring straight ahead at the starlines.
“Yeah.”

“What is the council going to do to me?”

“I have no idea,” he admitted, he watched her carefully and she looked at the wall for a second before turning to him. “Are you afraid?”

“I didn’t fail my mission,” Ahsoka said. “I did the best I could. I really did. I made that bargain so my men would be okay. I wanted to make sure that they’d be alright. And they said that they’d keep the king in power so then the bad guy wouldn’t take over and.”

“Ahsoka, it’s okay.” He set a hand on her shoulder, “listen, I know you did the best that you could.”

“And then I fell for this stupid, stupid trap!”

“Soka.”

“I didn’t even think that it would work! I thought that I was going to be able to get out of it! I was so sure that it wouldn’t catch me! I was,” she slumped into her seat, “I was so proud and arrogant and then I got captured and my men got captured! Then I got that stupid.”

“Ahsoka.”

“You know that Dooku said that I shouldn’t be too hard on myself for that because the person who captured me was a lot more experienced than I was.”

“She probably was.”

“She was!” Ahsoka exclaimed, and she looked over, miserable. “She was smarter than I was too and all I could do was what she said.”

“You weren’t with enough support, Ahsoka. You haven’t had enough training.”

“I haven’t had enough good training.” She regretted the words the second she spoke them. Anakin tensed, his grip on the controls tightened and he looked straight ahead. His whole presence seemed to flare with pain and hurt. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that. I just.”

“You should probably get some sleep,” he said, not looking her direction. “You’ve had a rough couple of days.”

“I’m not tired,” Ahsoka answered, and he shrugged off her hand. “Skyguy, I didn’t.” Artoo buzzed miserably as Anakin pointed firmly at the back of the ship. For a moment she dithered beside him and reluctantly left. Their ship was too small for there to be another room, but there was a cot built into the wall and a blanket and pillow were stashed beneath it. Anakin hadn’t said anything, but being sent to bed was basically a punishment. Or he didn’t feel like he could face her. She yanked the blanket open and wrapped herself in it and flopped over. Even with the blanket over her head, she could hear Anakin discussing things with Artoo.

Their arrival at the temple was ignored. Anakin guided his ship into the hanger and found it nearly empty. Only a few of the acolytes who worked on the ships meandered about.

“What’s going on?” Ahsoka asked, she’d dressed in her most formal outfit. Foregoing her midriff
barring uniform in an attempt to make the council less angry. It was also an apology to Anakin, because she knew he never really liked her other clothes but had never said anything. He still hadn’t acknowledged her beyond what was necessary and it hurt.

“I don’t know.” Anakin frowned and then his expression turned to horror. “Obi-Wan is back.”

“Obi-Wan is back!” Ahsoka twisted around, and seemed to be looking through the ceiling at the man. Ahsoka felt a sudden surge in fury and wondered if it was directed at her, or if she was just too close to him.

“Okay?” She wondered if she ought to speak. “Should go greet him?”

“No,” Anakin shook his head, “he’s in a meeting with the council.”

“How can you tell?”

“I can always tell.” Artoo buzzed at him, and pumped into his leg. “It’s okay, Artoo. Just go charge and get cleaned, alright?” For a moment the blinking photoreceptor focused on Anakin and he seemed to nod. Ahsoka could never tell if Artoo was just following a program or if he’d started building his own. “Come on, they’ll want us soon.”

“Yeah,” Ahsoka followed behind. For once, not at his side.

By the time they had reached the common areas of the temple, a messenger was rushing to meet with them.

“Knight Skywalker,” the young acolyte skidded to a halt in front of them and nearly doubled over, heaving for breath. “Master Yoda,” he took another deep breath, “wants to see you in the council rooms, please.”

“Of course,” Anakin nodded with ever air of the aloof Jedi master that he was terrible at pretending to be. “We are on our way.” And they were. Instead of passive aggressively making them wait, by getting cleaned up or going to get food, Anakin took the quickest route to the council room.

It looked the way it normally did, except that Obi-Wan was seated, in person, in his chair. He looked older than Anakin had ever seen him, his beard had grown to an impressive size. His eyes were weary, his face lined with new wrinkles, and he seemed to be drowning in his uniform as if he’d lost weight. Still, the expression on his face bordered on smug and he was smiling faintly.

“Knight Skywalker,” he said, “it has been a long time.”

“You look terrible,” Anakin blurted, not bothering with niceties or bowing to the council. “What did they feed you in prison?”

“Gruel,” the master replied, “you seemed to have handled your capture better. Hopefully better than you handled your evaluation.” Anakin flushed and vividly remembered the last time he had been called to the council chambers. His back itched with phantom pain. “And.”

“We aren’t here to discuss this,” Mace Windu intervened, “we’re here to discuss something else. First, the chancellor promises that Obi-Wan’s case is going to be stopped. Since we need our best general back, and the Separatists need to be stopped, we’re grateful for that.”

“Though I must admit,” Obi-Wan said, stroking his beard, “that I don’t like asking the chancellor for such a favor. It reeks of an overreach of power.”
Because it is, Anakin thought, but said nothing.

“Furthermore, we have an urgent call from the Senate today. It seems the terrorist organization, Death Watch, is threatening the Duchess Satine. We know that Mandalore is peaceful and neutral system, but at the moment it is threatened. As soon as the case is cleared the from the court, Obi-Wan is going to Mandalore. Knight Skywalker, you will attend to the chancellor. He has been asking after you since you left for your little vacation.” Anakin tensed. “Padawan Tano.” Ahsoka felt her nerves flare, and Anakin somehow tensed even further. “You will accompany Master Kenobi to Mandalore for his mission. They may give you some perspective on how to complete a mission properly.”

She’d only just gotten back to the Temple and the council was sending her out on another mission. Getting rid of her as if she didn’t matter. Separating her and Anakin as soon as they were able. She hated them for it.

“Ahsoka,” as soon as they were out of the council chamber, Anakin’s metal hand fell on her shoulders. “Come with me.” He led her to one of the more isolated sections of the Temple. He pushed her into a small meditation chamber, and turned on her quickly enough that she flinched. “Ahsoka, are you alright to go on this mission?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Obi-Wan has only just returned and he’s been in prison for a while. Prison does strange things to someone’s mind, and he’s not. Ahsoka, I don’t think he’d okay.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“I,” Anakin ran his hand through his hair. “Listen, I know that you didn’t mean to say what you said.”

“I didn’t!” Ahsoka exclaimed, “I’m sorry. Really. I was just angry and annoyed and I wasn’t thinking. You’re the best teacher that I could have asked for. I’m sorry! I really am and,” to her horror, she felt tears stinging the back of her eyes. “I’m sorry, Skyguy.” She reached up the wide away her tears, looking away. “I just.”

“It’s okay,” the near frantic edge in his voice was smoothed away. “It’s alright, ‘soka.”

“No it isn’t! I’m not supposed to hurt you! I’m not supposed to say stuff like that. Even when I’m mad.” By the time Anakin wrapped her in a hug, she was crying too hard to notice. “I just wanted to be the best padawan. I was so close to being sent to the agri-corps and then I...I...” Her hands twisted into the fabric of his cloak as she cried. “I’m so sorry.”

Anakin did what he always did on the rare occasions she got overwhelmed by her emotions, he held her close to his side and hummed gently enough that her motreals buzzed pleasantly as he swayed from side to side. She struggled to keep her emotions in check, but failed miserably as he began to rub soothing circles over her back. It made her feel worse about insulting him and his abilities. Hell, she wasn’t sure that she was supposed to feel this bad about insulting her master. The other masters sure made mean comments all the time.

“It’s alright,” Anakin muttered, “It’s okay.”

“But.”

“Ahsoka,” he held her back a bit. She missed the proximity. “You’re going on a mission with Obi-
Wan, you need to be careful. You need to,” he swallowed hard, “hide. I know that he’s a Jedi too but something is off about him. He seems sick.”

“I will be careful.”

“Be the padawan that they want you to be,” Anakin said and Ahsoka felt her stomach bottom out. Their peculiar relationship, their differences had never been spoken out loud. Anakin had never admitted to having a different teaching style, to having different ideas, to carrying more than he should. They had an unspoken agreement to never speak their nervousness aloud. The undercurrent that was the whole of their relationship.

“I will.” If Anakin would bringing this to light, verbalizing it, then she would have to listen. She would have to obey. “I will, I promise.”

“It won’t,’ Anakin seemed to struggle, “it won’t always be like this. We won’t have to worry like this forever.”

“How can you be sure?” Ahsoka rubbed her face clear of tears. “I feel like everything has gone so wrong forever now. We used to be respected by the rest of the order and now the only person who seems to respect me is that crusty count.”

“I,” Anakin rocked back on his heels and he nodded slowly, “it’ll be okay. Alright. Just do what Obi-Wan says and don’t rock the boat, alright?”

“I won’t,” she promised. The council had ignored her for the most part, and if they weren’t going to mention her failure on Onderon, then she wasn’t going to draw attention to herself. She was going to keep her head down.

There was something different about the Chosen One; something that Palpatine noticed the second that the Jedi Knight sulked into his office.

Skywalker skulking into his office wasn’t unusual, drowning in heavy robes and looking borderline surly was definitely not out of character. He looked a bit beaten down and depressed, like always.

Palpatine narrowed his eyes as the boy settled into his usual spot in front of his desk. Just as he should have been. It was all the old Sith could do to keep from licking his lips.

“My friend,” he set down his stylus and stood, smiling broadly. At the last second, he noticed the blue and white astromech that followed the boy everywhere. It rolled directly between him and his quarry, buzzing at him. “Something seems to be wrong with your droid, my friend.” He held out a hand to pat the droid on the head, but it rolled away, pushing Anakin back too. “What seems to be the issue?”

“I’m not sure,” the boy patted the droid, seemingly ignoring its behaviour. “He’s been a little jumpy since Onderon. He doesn’t like getting tazered.”

“Does it affect droids very much?”

“It can,” Skywalker didn’t move around the droid to accept the hug and Palpatine didn’t want to look desperate, so he retreated behind his desk. “I was told you wanted to speak to me, Chancellor.”

“Anakin! We are old friends!” He didn’t want to invite the boy to call him with any familiar terms, but if it got the lads attention…..
“Yes,” Skywalker continued to pat the droids head and Palpatine finally put his thumb on what was different.

“How was your visit to Naboo?”

“It went well.” Palpatine waited for the boy to elaborate. Considering that Skywalker looked much more than the last time he’d seen him, his hair was a little more bleached, and he looked like he’d put on weight. For once, the dark circles under his eyes had faded.

“It must have. I must say, you look much improved. The same can’t be said for Master Kenobi. When I spoke with him, he seemed ill.”

“I think so too.” Anakin finally seemed to contribute to the conversation. Considering his past with Kenobi, it was a wonder that his emotions on the matter weren’t stronger.

“And for his crimes he is still a Jedi Master,” Palpatine mused. “It is always wonder why they haven’t made you a master yet or set you on the council. Clearly you have been their most effective commander.” He took great pleasure at the bitter laugh that it evoked from his prey.

“I wouldn’t have been evaluated if I had been better,” Skywalker scowled.

“That evaluation was unfair and cruel, my young friend. It must have been ages for your back to heal properly.” Skywalker’s bright blue eyes narrowed and he tucked himself further into his cloak, glowering out. “To have them mistreat you so,” he hummed to himself. “And then to turn around and allow Master Kenobi to flaunt the very laws of this Republic.”

“Obi-Wan always did have that way about him. Nothing like undermining the law and the people before breakfast. Speaking of, Chancellor, if you disapprove of Obi-Wan returning then why are you trying to bury his case. Shouldn’t the lawyer be able to properly prosecute him?”

“While I agree that Master Kenobi has made many foolish choices and done many reckless things; why should he be the one to face charges for them? As well, my young friend, he is desperately needed on the front lines. High General Tang is proving to be a deadly opponent.” Speaking of Tang, he would have to have the High General murdered. That man was causing almost as much trouble as Yen Dooku.

“I guess the troops need him,” Skywalker mused, “but the council is sending him to Mandalore. Apparently Death Watch is unsettling Duchess Satine.”

“Death Watch,” Palpatine mused, “is very dangerous. I certainly hope that your teacher will be able to handle them.”

“I’m sure,” Skywalker sighed and fidgeted with his hands, “I’m sure that Obi-Wan will do fine.” He shifted away from the table and ignored the tea that Palpatine had set out. “I am sure that he will do just fine.”

“Perhaps he may,” Palpatine wondered where Anakin’s temper was. With the knob beneath his desk, he turned up the music and watched the boy fail to hide his wince. “What do you think of this music, my boy?”

“It’s,” Skywalker screwed his eyes shut, “excuse me, chancellor.” To his surprise and annoyance, the chosen one left in a hurry. His hands were clamped over his ears. It was the first time that Anakin had been so rude. His eyes widened even more as the droid made a close approximation of a rude gesture with his extensions before wheeling away. The Stih gaped after him, wondering what had
happened.

“With tightened border security,” High General Tang gestured at the holo in front of them. “We can
do a better job of keeping the Republic out of our affairs. Also, with 10% more battle droids being
rolled out we can also do a better job with security.” The assembled high generals and Dooku
watched as the holo began to turn red. “Here are spots that the Republic has infiltrated easily. These
are outposts, bases, weapons factories, prisons, and strategic processing plants. These,” the screen
showed a few dozen Jedi, “are the main perpetrators. Since the trial against Obi-Wan is being
dropped.” The few that could read the General’s body language, noted how angry he seemed. “I
suggest that we make it policy to never accept a Jedi’s surrender again. This trial has shown use just
how little the Jedi pay attention to the rules of engagement.”

“What if the Republic commander is not a Jedi.”

“Then it is up to their discretion,” Tang said, “but never again should we accept the surrender of a
Jedi.

“I agree,” Dooku muttered, “it is too dangerous for our own holdings.

“Also, I suggest the formation of an organic army. Not just the few commanders that we have. There
are plenty people who would be willing to fight the Republic on the ground and we need people
who are not droids.”

The conversation was a muttered assent. Dooku didn’t think anyone at the table would give Tang
much trouble. They were too afraid. This was the most interesting part of a three hour long meeting.
Too many decisions to make and since the CIS senate was in recess and wasn’t allowed to meddle in
military affairs, he was at least allowed the luxury of drink. He sipped his wine and all but pitied Wat
Tambor’s inability to drink in this atmosphere. The sentient looked like he wanted to drink something
to wash down the data that had been tossed at him today. Everyone did. The only military Gunray
was slowly nursing a shot glass as she leaned over the table. Her entire posture spelled exhaustion
and Dooku didn’t envy her the task of attending to her ridiculous relatives and their increasingly
corrupt Trade Federation.

Ute Gunray was better at administration than pitched battles, and Dooku didn’t think anyone could
play logistics better than she. So far she was the military administrator over a growing number of
planets. Planets that Tang had captured and then handed over to her.

This, of course, was all important. An infant government didn’t run well with a pure dictatorship and
he was too busy with his side-projects to run the entire war and the government. He left that to more
capable members of his teams. The fact that most of them were women, was of little consequence to
him; but he nursed a grudge against several Republic news teams who’d made them into a joke.
Claiming that the Jedi could easily defeat them and be home for dinner. They’d been proven wrong
of course, and since Dooku had begun a delicate and careful rebellion against Sidious and he was no
longer actively hobbling the CIS, they could do their jobs even better.

He hadn’t realized just how much he had been doing to keep them from doing their work and it was
honestly more work to keep them from doing it, than to simply allow them free reins.

Sidious wouldn’t approve of his letting Tang take over huge parts of their strategy. Not that he cared
much for what Sidious thought anymore. The longer he spent trying to convince Anakin Skywalker
to defect from the Jedi because of their abuse and hypocrisy, the more he realized that he was stuck
within the same trap with the Sith. It was a double standard that he didn’t intend to tolerate any
longer. Ridding himself of Palpatine’s influence would take some time, but he was confident he could do it.

“We have another problem,” Tang said, and Dooku shook himself from his bubble of thoughts. “The Zygerrian’s want to ally themselves with us.”

“Is that a problem?” Someone asked, Dooku didn’t bother figuring out who it was.

“Of course!” Tang looked sharply at the fool. “Their queen is an untrustworthy snake and a habitual liar. We do not need anymore crazy in the CIS.” A few people chuckled, but the message was clear.

Dooku felt that he may have once courted a treaty with the queen. Before he learned to fear Poda’s increasingly graphic threats on how the future of the CIS should be considered. Before he came to the conclusion that a genuine rebellion would be far more entertaining.
Chapter Summary

Everyone does a little bit of everything.

Padme hadn’t been so nervous in years. Her farse of a trial had been amusing, not frightening when she knew that her potential death sentence was already decided. A prison sentence as a kinder decision that Jedi gave her, but death would have been wiser.

As she watched planet grow in the viewport, she tapped her hands on her knees and considered her options.

“Is my husband down there?” She asked. The pilot jerked in their seat and nodded.

“Tang ordered me to bring you here; unless you don’t want to see him. I can take you anywhere you want to go. Where do you want to go?”

“I was just curious, but I appreciate your offer of treason on my behalf. “

“Yeah, I don’t mind. I did much worse when I defected from the Republic,” Edo answered, “it’s alright. Do you want to sit up here with me as we land or do you want to like, freshen up? I can stop by a spa if you want? I know a couple who take in walk-ins.”

“I don’t want a spa,” Padme said blankly. She’d used to love them, spending credits on being pampered and fawned over. Her reward for her service to the Republic, she told herself. “I don’t think I could handle being inside right now.”

“Oh, um. We’re going to be landing in a hanger bay, but if you want, I can take you to the garden right after. You don’t have to go inside. I promise.”

“I think I’m getting better,” she admitted. “Just as long as there aren’t locks on the doors and they're open.”

“Well, you did spend a few years under house arrest. I can see why you don’t want to be inside,” Edo began to flick the switches as they approached the planets orbit. Ships streamed in and away from the planet. The comm crackled. Padme listened with half an ear as Edo responded to the hails with the necessary codes. When he was done, he swiveled toward her. “Do you want me to stop by and get you some food? Um, I know a few fast-food places you might like?”

Unable to stop herself, she laughed bitterly. Edo swallowed hard and glanced around. “I’m fine, thank you. Just take the ship down, and we’ll handle it from there.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Edo obeyed silently, watching the woman from the corner of his eye. Padme focused on her trembling hands and her singing nerves. The was the moment that she had daydreamed about, had nightmares about, pondered, and fantasized about. There were thousands of different scenarios of what she’d imagined for their first meeting if they’d ever had one.

Where they would shout, and she would throw things. Where they would both cry and never stop. Where she would refuse to speak with him, and they’d never speak again. Where she would shout
and shout until her voice gave out. One, on a particularly lonely night, where she imagined them in bed and Anakin was lavishing his full attention on her with the intensity he used for battlegrounds and warzones. A hundred different scenarios and now, on the cusp of the moment, she wasn’t sure what would happen. Padme wasn’t even sure how she felt about him anymore.

When the ship finally set down in the hanger, she noted that Dooku’s castle looked nothing like how she’d imagined it.

“Erm,” in the silence of the engine cut-off, Edo turned to her again. “Do you want me to show you where the gardens are?”

“Yes, please.” Padme smiled as he shot up and they exited the ship. The crews tending the other ships stared and watched them exit. Whispering broke out and followed them until they reached a very reclusive part of the estate. Edo had spoken hastily into a commlink and to a dozen different guards for them to be let this far in.

She hadn’t bothered to pay attention to anything besides the thrumming in her muscles. Nervousness began to overtake her.

“So,” Edo gestured to the wide expanse of green grass, trees, and white gravel paths that spread out in every direction. “The gardens, if you want to wait here or just start wandering that’s fine. Um, I’m sure someone will find you eventually. Do you want me to stay?”

“No,” Padme took a deep breath, “I’m fine. Thank you, Edo. For the rescue and the kindness. I appreciated everything you’ve done for me.”

“Sure thing.” Edo glanced around the garden as if he expected Anakin to jump from the shadows. “Any time. If you ever need me then just give me a ring.”

“Thank you; I’m sure you have a report to make. I know there are several people who are interested in my arrival.”

“Yes,” Edo didn’t bother to deny it. “There are. Good luck,” with that, he was gone, and Padme was alone. She adjusted her jacket and wandered down the first gravel path that caught her fancy.

Padme reached a small copse of trees that had grown up a respectful distance from a gurgling fountain. Now they stood taller than the fountain, and their branches created a comfortable shady spot. The fountain, carved from white and gray stone, was impressively tall and in the shape of a naked man with a bow and arrow. The water was pouring from several wounds on his arms and torso.

It was artistic to the extent that she could appreciate the expressiveness of the man’s face, the meaning of his stance and wounds, the water representing blood. The moment of observation gave her the opportunity to pretend she was younger; a queen with enormous responsibility, a senator with more privilege than she had any right to; she couldn’t hold the image for long.

“Did you know that I’m 41 years old?” She asked the statue. It didn’t respond, but someone did.

“That’s alright,” a man responded from somewhere behind the statue, “I turn 36 in a few days.” His voice was soft and unthreatening, and Padme circled the fountain to see Anakin Skywalker standing at the other entrance to the shady copse. She stared and took in how he had aged. Tall as weed, but missing the lankiness of his youth. He looked solid and warm, dressed in oddly styled robes, hair long and hung over one shoulder in a heavy braid. His hair seemed impossibly long, and without a speck of gray, but his eyes were more crinkled; from laughter or crying, she couldn’t tell. Butterfly
bandages sat on either of his cheeks, and she could see the faint swelling of the injuries. His hand was bandaged too each fingertip wrapped in gauze and tape.

“You don’t look it,” Padme managed. She was right, Anakin looked handsome and youthful. He wore earrings, and someone had convinced him to wear a necklace of kryat stone. “Senator Skywalker.”

Anakin flinched and didn’t approach. He shrugged once, “Tang tells me it’s the pining.”

“Oh,” Padme stared at him a few seconds longer before admitting to herself that the man in front of her was a complete stranger. She knew who Anakin had been, where he had begun, but not who he’d become. A man who had spent the last decade of his life helping build a new government. He was a man that the history books would remember for eternity.

“I,” he looked down, and she could see the same awkwardness of their meeting so long ago. When he was still a Jedi. Blushing as he’d complimented her on her beauty. “I got your tapestry.” She looked away, unable to look at him. “A few days ago.”

“A few days ago?” Padme whipped her head back around, “why only a few days ago?”

“It was sent a while ago, I understand, but I was on Naboo.”

“Signing the treaty for its entry into the Confederacy.”

“Yes,” Anakin watched the water flowing from the statue’s hands and looked back at her. “I found out about the twins a few days ago.”

“Luke and Leia,” she pressed her hands to her mouth, trembling and felt the burn of tears behind her eyes.

“Padme,” the desperation in his voice sent her over the edge. She began to cry. “Padme, please.” Anakin was at her side in an instant; his hands hovered over her shoulders as if he was unsure if he ought to hug her or not. She solved the problem for him, grabbing onto his shirt and yanking him into her arms. Anakin’s arms wrapped around her with the same as they had before the galaxy had fallen apart at the seams. Her head rested against his chest, and she cried all over his expensive jewelry and beautiful clothes.

When her tears ran dry, she pulled back enough to see that he had been crying too. The top of her head felt a bit wet. His tears had made a butterfly bandage start peeling off. Through the tears, his eyes were still the brilliant electric blue that had entranced her. Anakin stared at her with every ounch of adoration he had. The love and hope, the unspoken terror that she would hate him was obvious.

“Do you hate me?” He asked quietly, leaned against his chest, she could feel the worse rumble and how his heart beat faster.

“I did,” she admitted. His breath caught. “For a while.” She looked back up, “and then I thought I should hate whoever through that I deserved prison for loving you. The same people who stole our children.”

“Oh,” Anakin brushed a calloused thumb over her cheek, pushing away the tears. “Do you still love me?” The unexpected question, so blunt and out of character for Anakin, made her step away. Before, he never would have asked a question like that.

“I love you, Anakin,” Padme answered truthfully. He smiled, stepping closer, but she held out a hand to stop him. “But I don’t know you anymore.”
“Padme.”

“I’ve been in prison! I was alone, and you’ve been out in the galaxy doing stars knows what! I’ve changed Ani, you’ve changed. I can tell! I’ve gotten old! I don’t know what to do with us! Our children are Jedi! You’ve never even met them! I want,” Padme paused in her growing rant. Anakin’s expression had become stoic. “Do you even love me, Anakin?”

“I do, I always have. If you would permit me, I would beg for the chance to get to know you again. We’ve changed, I know that we’ve changed, but.” He stopped as horror dawned. “Do you want a divorce?”

“NO!” Padme shouted, horrified by the thought. She would be lying if she said she hadn’t considered divorcing Anakin. The Jedi would have brought her the papers in gold if they thought she would. “But we’ve never had a functional marriage! Our first three years was like having an affair! We didn’t know what we were doing! It wasn’t good for us. We haven’t spoken in 14 years! I haven’t seen you in 14 years! We have children we’ve never met! Anakin! I don’t know what to do! I don’t even know what to think! I’ve only been out of prison for a few days!”

Anakin stared at her and nodded. “I’m sorry, Padme. For everything, do you want to leave?”

“And go where?” She demanded bitterly, “I don’t have anywhere to go.”

“Naboo, if you want. You are still a Queen of Naboo.” Padme thought the words must have been harder for Anakin to speak than gargling glass. “But, there is a room prepared for you if you want. You don’t have to leave the planet; you can just leave the garden if you want. I’ll go away if you want me to.”

“Ani.” She stared, and he nodded.

“I’ll go,” with that, he was gone. He vanished into the trees, and Padme wondered if this was what it felt like for her heart to be ripped out of her chest. In a confused, furious, and depressed daze, she continued to wander the garden.

“Congratulations,” she turned to see an unfamiliar woman leaning against a tree and watching her. The woman stared, “why aren’t you happy? What’s wrong? What did he do? What did you do?”

“Who are you?” Padme asked, and the woman shrugged.

“Tang, why aren’t you happy? I thought you’d be happy.”

“I?” Padme looked back at the place where Anakin had left. “I don’t know.”

“Okay?” Tang stared at her and sighed, “you two didn’t work it out, did you?”

“Work it out?”

“You just created more drama than before, didn’t you?” The pained resignation in her eyes would have made Tang laugh if she wasn’t hurting so much.

Padme stared, and Tang fished a flask from her pocket and twisted the cap off. “Fucking Skywalker drama. I swear, it never ends does it?” She took a long drink. “Alright, lay it on me. What happened?”

“I don’t think it’s any of your business.” Padme snapped, and Tang shook her head.
“Listen to me, Amidala. I’ve been hauling Anakin out trouble for 14 years. I’ve listened to every whine and complaint he’d had. Every day we talk he asked about my search for you. He told me stories about you, all of them. He loves you. I have been drowning in your relationship drama ever since Dooku dragged his seizure having ass out of the escape pot. Help me understand why you haven’t kissed and made love or whatever it is that married couples do?”

“Anakin isn’t the man the I married,” Padme said after a moment. The whole galaxy knew of their relationship, what was one more person?

“You aren’t the woman he married, are you? Different, changed, you’ve lived 14 years separate, and he’s still holding that damn candle for you.”

“Do you think I don’t deserve it?”

“Do you want me to be honest or do you want me to make you feel better?”

“The truth,” Padme was done being lied to. “Tell me the truth.”

“No, you don’t deserve that much adoration. You don’t deserve that unwavering loyalty,” The former queen stared in silent horror. “No one does, ever. Anakin has thrown himself into hell or ideas and a fantasy he wanted to make true, and that will never compare what he’ll do for people he loves. And he loves everyone. He is compassion personified; it pisses me off so much because he dropped into my life and he dragged in things like ethics and ideals and love, and then he started talking about how much he cared. Do you have any idea how annoying he was? It was infuriating!” Padme stared as Tang took another hearty swig of her drink. “He was infuriating, and I never deserved the affection and the love he gave me. He was one of the reasons I managed to drag myself out of my self-manufactured pit of despair. I didn’t deserve it 14 years ago; you don’t deserve it now. He’s giving it to you; he’s offering it because he loves you with the passion that romance novelists only fantasize about. So what you don’t know him anymore. He doesn’t know you, and he’s not afraid of getting to know you again.”

“I am afraid,” she admitted to the younger woman, “everything has changed, and I’ve been…”

“Change, a scary little bastard, but it’s worth it.” Tang continued to watch her. “You haven’t had an easy time, and for that, I’m really sorry. I was supposed to find you, and you didn’t show up again on any of my radars until they dropped you into the lap of my best operatives. I spent a lot of time looking for you, and I couldn’t find you, and you can blame your guys’ long-term separation on me.”

“It was the Jedi,” Padme said, “they threw me in prison. They took my children. It’s not your fault.”

“I’m glad you see it that way because I blame myself,” Tang sighed, “I don’t really know what to say to make you guys make up and be happy. To me, you two love each other, and that should be the end of it. But, you need to get to know each other again so maybe start out slow?”

“When we got married it wasn’t slow,” Padme said, and she leaned against a tree. It was just us and our passion. We didn’t think of anything else. I think it was the first time I was really, truly selfish.” Without another word, she turned around and went to find Anakin.

Anakin stared down at the parts and pieces of his arm that were scattered over the bench. His arm was easy to fix, his arm was easy to maintain, it took his mind off the fact that had hadn’t managed to stop crying since he’d left Padme to think in the garden.

He had dreaded and hoped their return would be affectionate and romantic, but Padme had been
distant, cool, almost afraid. It was never a good idea to push when emotions were high, and there was too much unknown to them. He had learned the hard way with Tang. For a moment there, when they’d cried, he’d hoped that everything would slide back into place and be perfect. When everything would align, and he’d be alright.

Anakin wasn’t sure he’d ever be alright. Luke and Leia were still with the Jedi, and his wife had gotten older without him. He didn’t care about her figure, the new lines on her face, or the slight gray that began to pepper her hair. He only mourned that he hadn’t been at her side when it had happened. Did she mind that he had grown older, that he now had wrinkles and lines of his own?

He brushed his tears away and looked up as the door slid open. Padme stared at him, and then around the work-room. “You keep the lights low.”

“It helps with the sensitivity,” Anakin said slowly. Padme took a delicate step into the room.

“You seem to manage it better now,” Padme said, and he nodded.

“I try. I hadn’t had a fit in over seven years.”

“Seven years? You used to have them every other week.”

“Yeah,” Anakin looked away, “I know how to take care of myself now. I have a support animal now. Um, to replace Artoo.” Anakin pointed at the fat and happy cat sleeping on the seat of the dismantled speeder. “That’s Milo.”

“Milo,” she moved over to the cat and patted its head. A green eye cracked open and closed; Milo rolled over to let the senator have access to his stomach. Padme obliged, and soon he was purring away. “That’s a good name.”

“I thought so,” Anakin fiddled with his hypo-spanner. Padme seemed just as uncomfortable and nervous as he was.

“So you don’t know where Artoo is?”

“No, I don’t think anyone has seen him since I defected.” He clamped his mouth shut. Padme blinked a few times. “I thought he’d be with you,” Anakin finally said.

“No, when I was under house arrest it as just me and the guard droids. Sometimes a Jedi, but I was mostly alone and inside. I didn’t even get to keep Threepio.”

“He’s missing too?”

“Yes.” Anakin sighed and looked back at his arm and then flinched when Padme stepped closer, setting her fingertips against his hand. “What do you think of couples therapy?”

“What?” Anakin whirled around, Padme looked perfectly serious. Her eyes were focused on him with unnerving intensity.

“I know that you got the book and couple counseling years ago. Artoo had it, and I know it was because you wanted us to be a better family.”

“I wanted us to be happy,” Anakin said hurriedly, and Padme nodded in agreement.

“I do too, Ani. I love you, and I want everything to be perfect and work out, but that doesn’t happen.”
“Unless we both put in the work,” he supplemented hope springing to life in his chest. “Padme?”

“I just got out of prison, Anakin. I have a lot to work through. I, I want us to stay together, and I know that means admitting that I need help and that we need help.” Anakin could hardly believe his ears; he stared adoringly up at his wife, desperate to hug her.

“Well.” Helgina was now a Confederate citizen. She would be fantastic to hire again. She had helped him so much during the war years.

“Anakin,” Padme paused, “will you help me set up my hammock outside?”

“Hammock? You have, oh! OH! Alright!” Anakin stood up and glanced down at his disassembled arm. “Hold on.” He took a deep breath and held his other hand over his metal and wires. Padme watched, wide-eyed as the pieces began to click back into place. A second later everything was back in place, and he was flexing both wrists. “Where do you want to set up your hammock?”

“Outside,” Padme stared up at him, “I thought you said you liked to put your arm back together only using machines, not the force?”

“I, um,” was she going to think he was a liar? Did she think he was a real Sith? “I got more comfortable with the Force,” he admitted. “It took a while, but I was able to see it as something natural and a part of me instead of something to be used as a tool. I, I’m not afraid of it anymore.”

“That’s good,” Padme blinked and smiled. “You used to be so.”

“Nervous?”

“Scared too. Is that the same hand that Naboo gave you when we were on retreat?”

“Yeah,” Anakin tugged at his earring nervous. “You, you were so proud of it, and you loved how artistic it was.”

“You didn’t get an upgrade?”

“I didn’t want one. I modified it, but I kept it mostly the same. It, it reminded me of you, and I wanted to have something of you.” He flushed, “I’m sorry. I don’t want to.”

“It’s okay, Anakin. Um, I lost the necklace you gave me. I would have kept that, but the Jedi took it.”

“Oh?” He stared down at his hand and then at her. “I’ll make you another one. Um, if you want one. If you don’t want another one, then that’s okay.”

“I do,” Padme told him, gently taking his hands in hers. “Can we go outside now?”

“Yes,” Anakin rushed, “okay. Outside, where do you want to set up outside? I know a good place if you want, but the children play out there early in the morning before breakfast.”

“What children?”

“Oh, Yan’s nephews and nieces and pretty much everyone. His siblings all had kids, and then their kids all had kids, so there are about twenty children who live here right now. They like the garden a lot, so that’s where they spend most of their time. Except for today, I think there was a mass grounding because of something with hair dye, shampoo, and missing socks. I’m not clear on the details. My heads have been a bit fuzzy since, um, I got your message.”
“Sounds like trouble.”

“They like to cause it. Would you like to meet them?”

“Tomorrow,” Padme promised, “I tired and it’s been a crazy day.”

“Yeah,” Anakin brushed away any lingering tears and guided her down the hall and back outside. “It has been.”

Tang hefted her sniper scope and adjusted the view as she tried to shrug off Kitster and Yan Dooku. “Shut up; I can’t concentrate when you’re talking.”

“Well? What happened? Are they talking?”

“I think they’re setting up the hammock,” Tang answered truthfully admiring how Anakin restrained himself from wrapping his wife in a blanket and tucking her into a bundle of bubble wrap. This meeting had haunted Anakin for years, worsened by learning about his missing children. “It didn’t go as badly as I thought it would.” Tang looked up, “she wants to stay with him.”

“Oh thank god,” Dooku rubbed his forehead. Kitster seemed to be praying. “What are they doing?”

“Like I said, setting up the hammock. I can’t read their lips because they aren’t facing me. I think they’re getting along. Got to say, I didn’t think that Padme would still love Anakin. It’s been a long time.”

“As long as I remember during the war, Anakin and Padme’s love faced more than just separation. I will never understand this sort of devotion.”

“Imagine that your devotion to the cause of building the Confederacy. Now imagine that that cause had become sentient.”

“Then I wouldn’t have to do anything. Or, I would have to keep fighting. Making a cause sentient doesn’t mean that I’ll want to sleep with it. That is just ridiculous, now, be quiet.” Tang watched as Anakin tightened the last knot for the hammock and stepped back a respectful distance as Padme tested its hold. She knew her brother like the back of her hand, and at the moment, he could not have been more nervous.

Amidala spoke for a moment, and he nodded shyly, ducking his head to hide his smile. He lingered at her side as she climbed into the hammock and, made herself comfortable. A few dozen data chips spilled from a small bag and landed in her lap. Their conversation was short, Anakin offered her a bow and retreated.

Padme watched him go, a look of undisguised longing in her eyes. The love was still there. Anakin still mattered to her. Given the circumstances, it was the best that Tang could hope for.

“Alright, everyone get moving before Anakin finds us,” She pushed Dooku and Kitster off her, “go, go. We have things to do besides stalk him.”

Luke was in the middle of sorting through a long-dead Jedi’s sets of hairpieces when his datapad chimed. He looked up from the pile and peeked over the boxes to see Little One nosing against the metal curiously. Little One beeped a few times and tried to push the datapad closer.
“Thanks, Little One,” wriggled himself free of his confines and picked up his datapad. A message from Dilje blinked up at him.

: When are you coming back to the library?: Luke paused and shrugged.

: I don’t know: He typed back quickly. : I have chores I have to finish.: Technically he didn’t have any chores or any job he had to finish. He could do whatever he wanted. No one was paying attention to him. Still, Luke liked to have something to do.

: Alright. I miss the gang hanging out. Since Hans left it’s been lonely.: Han’s leaving had been a shock. The fact that he had left the Republic for the Confederacy and Dilje had been jealous of him, was enough to make Luke reel. Still, defecting had its own risks, and they weren’t low. Han had risked life imprisonment if he and his family had been caught.

Luke paused and stared upward in the direction of the creche.

: Bummer. Come by soon. Miss you.: Luke set his datapad down and a few minutes later was taking the turbolift toward the creche. The droids were activated, and their organic caretakers were at lunch. The babies, which Luke had met a few times before, were all napping peacefully.

Cautiously, feeling rediculously like he was a criminal, Luke crept into the creche and examined each of the babies. Several dozen species were all in the room together, and a few of them were twi’leks. One cradle at the end housed a small twi’lek, the same coloring as Hans.

“Hi,” Luke stared down at the baby, bright eyes gazed back, sullen and angry. “You're brother made it to the Confederacy….I guess he didn’t want any other siblings being here.” The baby, on the clear plastic wall that separated him from the baby the name Chim was typed neatly in the ID box. Chim’s blood type, vaccine schedule, and details were the rest of the form. “I don’t know why he didn’t want you to be here.” Luke reached down and hoisted the small twi’lek into his arms. The awkward shape of the infant lekku felt uncomfortable, and he had to be extra careful not to drop him. Chim didn’t seem to care at all; he stared up at Luke with a dully interested expression. “It’s not so bad,” Luke told the baby, carrying him over to the window. He tried to point his face toward the skyline beyond it. “It’s a great honor and a distinction that you were chosen to be a Jedi. I mean, I don’t know why I was chosen. I’m just a Null. That’s okay too,” he assured the baby, “not everyone can be force sensitive, and that’s alright. There is nothing wrong with it.” Luke fell silent. From here, he could pick out the Senate Dome and the chancellor’s palace which had been empty since the Jedi took over. “Your brother loves you, you know. I bet your whole family does.” He stared down at his feet and tried to cuddle the baby. He wasn’t really sure how to cuddle or even hold a baby, but Chim wasn’t fussing so he had to be doing an alright job.

After a while, he knew he was pushing his time since the masters had to be coming back from their lunch, he set Chim back in his crib and kissed the top of his head.

“I’ll come visit you later,” Luke promised, and he made his way back to his little storage room to think. Here, behind the piles of boxes and the stacked furniture he had carved out his own little place in the Jedi Temple. As he patted Little One’s chassis, he wondered what Obi-Wan was doing. After a moment, he decided he really didn’t care.

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Leia had shared sleeping spaces for years with Jedi initiates and padawans. For a few days, she’d had her own room before they’d come on their planet-wide tour. Sharing a room wasn’t the problem,
sharing it with kids who seemed to think it was a sleepover slumber-party. She guessed that they didn’t have to share room much or that it was an event they wanted to celebrate.

“Leia!” She opened her eyes and watched her cousins all face her, “come on! You can’t go to bed already. It’s only ten!”

“They told us to go to bed,” Leia answered, the girls giggled.

“So? They know we’re going to stay up past bed-time. That’s what we do every time we have a sleep-over. Come on, Leia, tell us about Aunt Breha!”

“You know her better than I do,” Leia pointed out. The girls scoffed.

“Come on! Tell us! How did she decide to adopt you! Tell us everything.” Leia looked around the room to see the five other girls staring from their various positions. The twins in their bunk, a few others on an inflatable mattress.

“Um,” Leia sat up and then considered their question. “I left the Jedi Order a few weeks ago. Um, I was friends with the Queen before I left. Um, and I was friend with Bail too. We all got along really well, and they said that they’d foster me until I could figure out what I want to do with my life.”

“Cool,” judging my Reina’s tone, it wasn’t that cool.

“I’m not really force sensitive anyway,” Leia told them, “I am so bad at using the force that the others called me Null.”

“That doesn’t sound nice of them.”

“It’s not really a nice to call anyone Null. Um, but since a Jedi is supposed to be force sensitive and I’m not, I guess it was okay.”

“Oh, so you were bullied.” Reina sat up straighter and nodded to her sister, “we’ll beat them up for you.”

“Why would you do that?”

“No gets to bully my cousin!” Reina exclaimed the other muttered in assent. “You’re really cool! I’m not force sensitive, and that doesn’t matter. Okay, next time we visit Aunt Breha, we beat the snot out of the Jedi padawans.”

“You can’t!” Leia stared at the group, “you just can’t. You’ll get into trouble.”

“That’s fine,” Imelda waved a hand, “we’re used to that. Comes with the job. We beat up bullies. Even Alderanns got those. I mean, we like to pretend we don’t, but sometimes kids are just nasty. We’ll take care of it.”

“I sorta did,” Leia told them, “when I left, I left them with this big mess to clean. They had gone to bed, and they just left it for me to do. Night chores are supposed to be shared by everyone, and they all locked me out of the dorm.”

“So you quit?”

“Yes, went to Master Illo and quit. Said I wasn’t going to be a Jedi anymore and then I left. Um,” Leia wrinkled her nose, “Mama and Papa said that I could stay with them.”

“Mama and Papa! So you’re really adopted! I think that’s so cool!”
“Well, not adopted. They agreed to foster me, and we’re getting out of the palace until Master Windu calms down. I bet he was furious with me when he figured out that I was gone.”

“Sounds like he should have been expecting it. I mean, if you’re going to be a jerk and let people get away with being a jerk then you really ought to expect them to hit back one day.”

“Oh, I could never hit them back. Mostly because they could all beat me up. I’m not even past the basics of fencing because to use one of the training sabers you have to be force sensitive.”

“Huh, seems dangerous.”

“Well, I guess it might be for regular people. We don’t have a lot of accidents, and people don’t really lose their limbs that often in training.”

“You know that’s not really normal, right. Like, losing a limb because of a lightsaber isn’t normal.”

“I never really got to handle a real one,” Leia glanced down at her hands, “it was only training sabers for me until they figured out that I shouldn’t even handle one. That’s probably for the best though; I wouldn’t have been any good at it. Like everything else.”

“Hey! You’re good at plenty of stuff,” Imelda exclaimed, “just because you weren’t good by Jedi standards or Jedi stuff doesn’t mean you aren’t good at anything. I’ve never seen anyone keep up with Aunt Breha on all that political stuff. She’s the smartest one of us all, and you did a good job at that.”

Leia blinked a few times, blushing. “I guess.”

“And you listen to Grandpa about hats and stuff, and he let you help cook. He never lets anyone cook with him.”

“I’ve never had to cook on my own,” she said, “I’ve never had to cook at all. I didn’t even know how. It’s not so bad.”

“Wow, you’ve never had to cook?”

“No, the temple provided everything for us. We had cooking droids and when I ate with the parents before I left the Order that was made by the staff.”

“So what do you know how to do?” Turo asked she leaned against her pile of pilfered as Leia considered her skill-set.

“I know the history of the Jedi and the Republic. I know a lot of science, um, and political theory and negotiation tactics. I know how to clean and stuff, I know all of eight levels of basic katas for the lightsaber, and I know three different forms for hand-to-hand, but I’m not very good at that.”

“How do you know for sure?” Imelda asked.

“I never won any of the fights with the other padawans.”

“Yeah, but you might beat us.”

“Who are we kidding? She would beat us. Did you see those arms?” Imelda reached across to poke Leia’s biceps, “she ripped.”

“Guys!” Leia and the other froze as the door slid open. Uncle Turro stood on the other side, looking annoyed and stern.
“Girls, bed-time was twenty minutes ago. Lay down and go to sleep. We’re all getting up extra early for the ceremony tomorrow, and I don’t want to hear any complaining about how tired you are.”

Leia ducked under his blankets in the vain hope that she hadn’t been noticed. Turro stared at the now quiet girls and nodded to himself. When the door shut again, Leia emerged.

“Are we in trouble?”

“No,” Imelda settled back into her bedding, “we’re only in trouble if we keep staying up. Once is okay, twice is pushing it, and thrice means trouble. Everyone go to sleep, Leia, you’re going to like tomorrow. This is the best part of the tour.”

“Alright,” Leia answered dubiously, “If you say so.”

“CALEB IS GONE, AND MY SHIP IS GONE!” Plo Koon woke up to the furious screaming of Depa Billaba discovering that her padawans had just abandoned her on the prison planet. News had come to Plo Koon on the illegal radio, that Caleb had tracked down Hera Syndulla and convinced her that he was supposed to be finding her. Apparently, in the days between him leaving the farm and locating Hera, he’d had a change of heart.

The sort of change of heart that the force noticed. From obeying council orders to following the will of the force.

Plo could not have been more proud. He knew from experience that the transition was not easy.

He made his way to the living room of the little house to see Buggy and some of his siblings watching out the front window.

“What happened?”

“Not sure,” Buggy lied, “she sure seems mad though.” Plo leaned over to catch sight of Depa Billba pacing the small front yard, shouting. Chickens and cats scattered before her. “Almost like someone stole her ship.”

“Right,” Plo glanced down at the note that his son handed him. It was a few words, and it brought a smile to his face. “I will go speak with her. Go about your chores.”

“We’ve been up longer than you, gramps,” Buggy pointed out, “sleeping in late shows your age.”

“Children these days,” Plo grumbled good-naturedly and left the gossiping clones as he went to speak to the furious Jedi. He didn’t make it a step out of the house before Depa whirled on him.

“What have you done?” She shouted, her braids had become steadily undone until they were just about her shoulders, swinging wildly. “What did you do to my padawan?”

“Depa, please calm down. I have done nothing to your Padawan. I am sure your young Caleb is perfectly safe and finding his way to you.”

“HE IS GONE! HIS SHIP IS REGISTERED AS HAVING JUMPED OUT OF THE SYSTEM A DAY AGO!”

“That is unfortunate, but not my doing.”

“Then which of your stupid sons did it?” Depa stomped forward, almost nose to nose with the
ancient ex-Jedi. “I want to speak with them.”

“No,” Plo knew that Wolffe was safe where he was. “Anyway, if you intend to find him, then you will need to start hiking to the nearest sea-port.” Plo pointed to the south, “a ten-day trip if you’re swift. A twelve-day hike if you’re slow.”

“You expect me to hike to the sea?” Depa stared, confusion overwriting her anger momentarily.

“Certainly, if you are fortunate then the Mariners might give you a ride to an inland water-port that could take you to Bedrock. I suppose if it depends on how much you like having to bail water constantly.”

“Hike and hitch a ride? Master Plo Koon, have you lost your mind?”

“If I have or not, that is not your concern,” Plo could sense the annoyance from his son's prickling the back of his head. “You return to the Order is not my concern. As long as you are gone by noon.”

“Gone?”

“You are not welcome here,” Plo tucked his claws into his bathrobes and knew it was childish to enjoy her anger. It was so rare that he got to rile anyone up these days and since he had left the order, he couldn’t spend his days mocking them. “Pray that the council does not see your anger and fury, Depa.”

“You cannot shove me out of here! I need help! I don’t have any tools or food, or any supplies!”

“The force will provide,” Plo told her, and she slanted her glare at the windows. A moment, her brilliant lightsaber was lit.

Fear and deep-seated terror froze the clones watching nearby. He didn’t have to see them to know that his sons were all frozen. “Put your weapon away, Billaba.”

“What did you do, Plo Koon. This is something you did on purpose!” She pointed her saber at him, “what happened during that talk? What did you tell him.”

“Put your weapon away, Billaba. I will not ask again.” The force tasted of his sons fear. The shattered and broken memories that were so carefully handled. There was a reason that Plo didn’t use his lightsaber and that it spent its life sitting in a box under his bed. “Leave this farm immediately and peacefully, and no harm will come to you.”

“That is not your promise to guarantee,”

“It is, do not trespass here any further.”

“How dare!”

“How dare you draw a lightsaber here! You know what my sons have suffered they have suffered enough! If you don’t leave them, I will forcibly remove you, and there is no guarantee that you will survive the confrontation.” The abrupt change was enough to make Depa step back.

“What has become of you?” She asked, her annoyance was still apparent, but lessened.

“I am no more and no less than I always have been,” Plo answered, and he did not want to summon his lightsaber and spend the rest of the day kicked out off the property as his sons dealt with their panic attacks. He jerked his head in the direction of the small road that led from the farm to the port. “Get going.”
“I will mention all of this is my report to the council, Plo Koon,” she threatened.

“She’s gone,” Plo reported, “she can’t hurt you.”

“See that you do, Master Billaba. If you do or not is not my concern.” Plo watched the woman turn and march away from his farm. He could have waited her out, convinced her to defect as well. He would have offered his patience and his assistance to Depa, except that she’d upset his sons. Their well-being and happiness would forever be more important than any single Jedi and the Order.

When she was gone, he turned to the house and saw Buggy at the window, face pale.

“Are you sure?” He turned to see Trudy leaning around the corner, “are you sure she’s gone? Dad, what if she comes back? We don’t have our lightsabers, and I don’t want to end up like the 501st.”

“She’s gone,” Plo promised, “Tully, would you radio ahead and get the ship’s crew to take her away. If she makes it to Bedrock, then she won’t be able to come back.”

“She thing,” Trudy disappeared from view and Plo stated at the road before walking back into the house. The group had vanished from the living room and were upstairs, talking among themselves. Plo sighed deeply not surprised by their reaction, saddened that it had happened.

As the farm began to settle down, taking a slow day after the events of the morning, Plo pulled out his knitting and waited for them to settle.
Mandalore

Chapter Summary

The Mandalore plot goes differently.

The Clone Wars

Ahsoka had never been to Mandalore before, and so far it was nothing like what she’d expected. The files had said that Mandalore was a pacifist system, but had enough trouble with the people like Death Watch to warrant a lot more weapons then pacifists usually carried. There were a dozen soldiers waiting for them when they landed their ship.

As well as a very angry woman in a fancy gown. Duchess Satine was an objectively beautiful woman, with bright blond hair and blue eyes, and a frown that put Obi-Wan to shame. She didn’t give Ahsoka a second glance as she launched into an argument with Master Kenobi. Ahsoka didn’t speak as the argument continued until they were inside the building and an aide had shown her to her rooms.

Kenobi stormed in a few hours later, looking furious.

“Unreasonable woman,” he seethed, pacing from one end of the room to the other. Ahsoka finally spoke up.

“What does Death Watch want, Master?”

“The restoration of Old Mandalore, they are a terrorist organization set to bring down Satine and her government.”

“Why?”

“Ever since Satine decided to set Mandalore as a neutral space, and declare that system as a pacifist system. They believe that the old Mandalorian traditions should be kept in place.”

“So, they want to kill the Duchess?”

“Basically, and dismantle all of the work she’s put in to keep Mandalore peaceful. We’re here also because there are rumors that Death Watch could ally with the Separatists. We need to keep that from happening; if Death Watch does want to ally themselves the Separatists, then we have multiples plots to untangle. You may have to go undercover on Concordia to find if Death Watch is operating off the moon as we have suspected.”

“What if they are?” Ahsoka asked, and Obi-Wan ran a hand through his hair.

“Then make contact with me and report back. I will go to Concordia to speak its governor, Pre Vizsla.”

“Alright, when do we leave?”

“As soon as we’re done speaking to government and the Prime Minister.”
The holo chamber was sealed to prevent sound and people from entering and exciting. Mostly because Dooku liked to discuss his plans in private as well as to keep secrets from leaking. This conversation was something that he was loathed to allow even Poda into.

Pre Vizsla hadn’t removed his helmet, but his arms were crossed, and he was obviously unhappy. Dooku didn’t blame him, but he had to remain as calm as possible.

“The Jedi Obi-Wan Kenobi and some little padawan have been sent to Mandalore. They could set a wrench in the plans, Count.”

“Certainly, Kenobi is a known war criminal, who is working with a supposed pacifist government,” Dooku told him, “as well as the fact that he was cleared of charges under suspicious circumstances as well as the fact that he is technically still in contempt of Corellia’s highest court. The vote in the Republic Senate in a few days over whether to send troops to Mandalore or not is vital to overthrowing Satine and her government.” Dooku tried to pacify the man, “a reminder that Kenobi is a criminal will help your cause.”

“It might,” Vizsla didn’t seem pleased. “These peace-loving idiots are supportive of Jedi. They don’t know what it means to be truly Mandalorian.”

“If that is the case or not, my friend, we shall see. Satine will fall, and your home will be yours to return to.”

“Fine, but this had better work, Dooku. These Jedi are here to support those cowards.”

“All will be well, Kenobi will not succeed in his mission,” Dooku promised and made eye contact with Poda beyond the holo. “I must go, other matters need my attention. If anything else happens, contact me immediately.”

The call disconnected and Dooku turned to Poda, sighing. “I need a drink.”

“The Republic suspects Mandalore of treachery and reason. That they’re allying with us,” Poda told him, “as well building an army.”

“This new Mandalore would never ally with us. There is no point in suspecting them.”

“But the Senate wants to deploy troops to Mandalore. They want to deploy clones and soldier, and then to most likely put Mandalore under martial law.”

“The Republic, I grow more tired of it every day.”

“That’s not all, the padawan that came with Kenobi is Ahsoka Tano.”

“Why is my Granddaughter on Mandalore?”

“The details aren’t mine, so I can’t answer, but she is smart enough to get in the way.”

“Hmm.”

“The Republic will likely vote for occupying Mandalore,” Poda told him, “it’s a wealthy planet.”

“The rest of the sector would never submit. The Mandalorian warriors who still live and follow their old codes are not going to allow the Republic to occupy their homes.”
“New Mandalore won’t like the occupation, but we can’t bank entirely on that. Death Watch and the rest of the Old Mandos are spoiling for a fight.”

“We simply need to conquer Mandalore before the vote is counted. Hand Mandalore over to someone else. Why, my friend, are we bothering to help Mandalore? As long as Duchess Satine remains in charge, she will remain neutral.”

“But supportive of the Republic, if she’s deposed and Vizsla takes that throne or someone not so much of an ego-maniac. We’ll want someone who will be willing to look at both sides, as well as we sort of, want to see revenge on New Mandalore for its crimes against the clans. As well as rub it in the face of the Jedi that we have the power to depose of their puppet government. Granted, Satine isn’t much of a puppet, but the point stands. Her sympathies lie with the Republic, not us.”

“Then we send in droids, and we help Death Watch, so long as Death Watch doesn’t take actual control of its government. They’re crazy.”

Mandalore was creepy, and Ahsoka wasn’t sure what it was that made her skin crawl. Kenobi hadn’t made much progress with the Duchess, but Ahsoka wasn’t complaining. Her own exploration of the capital city showed that Mandalore probably wasn’t as peaceful and happy as they wanted everyone to think.

There were spots on some buildings that showed fresh blaster fire and some places that had been bleached to hide something. Blood or paint, Ahsoka wasn’t sure. Very few people spoke to her, off-put by her Jedi robes or uninterested in what she was doing here. A lot of people glanced back at her, giving her a second glance. The people…Ahsoka stopped in her walk and turned back around to stare at the crowds of people wandering about.

The people were all human. That wasn’t uncommon; humans reproduced faster than any other species in the galaxy. What was odd was that every single human she saw white with pale blond hair and pale blue eyes.

There were vague expectations, those with darker blond hair and a few with bright red. Every human in this market was white. She didn’t see any darker humans or any aliens.

Was this the source of the creepiness? Was this what was making her so uncomfortable? Ahsoka turned toward the closest spaceport, not sure what she was hoping to see. There were people unloading boxes and containers from different ships, all under the watchful and somewhat threatening gaze of guards. Here there were aliens, but unlike on other planets, they didn’t seem to be allowed to roam far from their ships. Other planets like Corellia and Coruscant had entire districts designed to entertain spacers to spend their money on their planet.

This spaceport was closed off, sealed behind walls and soldiers. The crews, alien and human alike, were not encouraged to stay.

Anakin encouraged her to find answers and to discover the root of the problem. He said that problems, like weeds, were only handled with it was ripped up by its roots. She had to understand where the problem had come from.

Death Watch was issuing threats against New Mandalore. They hated the current government and were perfectly willing to burn it to the ground.

Why?
Ahsoka knew she wasn’t the best versed on history, but she wasn’t an idiot. If she was going to figure out why Death Watch wanted to murder someone, then she had to go back into the history of Mandalore and the history of Death Watch.

The palace library was a complete waste of time. Events of Mandalore’s history were listed out in dry chronological order, without naming any sort of reasoning. The fact were dry without the story.

“Padawan?” She jerked in her musings, turning to see Obi-Wan leaning around the shelving unit of books. “What are you doing here?”

“Trying to understand,” she gestured to the books and datapads around her. “For our mission.”

“Understand what?” He seemed almost on an even keel, his hair was clean and brushed, and his beard had been trimmed back.

“What Death Watch wants,” she adjusted her robes and picked up a book. “None of these books even mention Death Watch. That’s odd because they’ve been a credible threat to New Mandalore for years now. Ever since the duchess took power.”

“Well, that is odd that they aren’t mentioned in any of the history tomes,” Obi-Wan took a seat on the table, “but I fought Death Watch years ago, back when I was only a padawan. They hunted Satine and me to the ends of the galaxy it felt like. They are extremely dangerous.”

“I understand, Master,” Ahsoka stared at the murals on the wall, people sitting around in chairs wasn’t usually what artists liked to depict. “But what’s odd is that there’s…gaps in this history. Sections in the last few years that I didn’t even find. I looked at the census data, and it shouldn’t be like this. I mean, Mandalore had a lot of people before all of the clans were exiled right?”

“Correct.”

“Then why is the census data the same? It doesn’t change much after the Great Exile? That’s odd, and then there’s this whole thing with the Separatists. Duchess Satine is super neutral, right? She doesn’t mess with anyone, and then suddenly there’s news of the Separatists aligning with her?”

“You think that there’s a plot?”

“I think something suspicious, Master. There’s something really creepy about Mandalore. It’s all…too.” She glanced at him. Humans like Obi-Wan might not see what was so odd about Mandalore. He might not understand. “Odd, do you know where else I might be able to get information?”

“Not on Mandalore,” Obi-Wan said, “this is the most extensive data collection on Mandalore.”

“Huh.” Ahsoka stared down at her books. “So…the most extensive data collection on Mandalore doesn’t even mention their most dangerous threat?”

“Ahsoka,” Obi-Wan sighed, he handed her a data chip. “These are the clans in the sector that are suspected of having ties to Death Watch.”

The list of surviving clans was much longer than Ahsoka had expected, showing dozens of names and their houses and allegiances. There were some she recognized and others she didn’t.

“Which one should I visit?” She asked, and Obi-Wan frowned.

“Visit?”
“You know,” she waved the datapad at him, “to talk to. Maybe scope out some clues. If the Duchess thinks that these clans have ties to Death Watch, then maybe there are clues.”

“Ahsoka, Mandalorians who follow the old ways hate the Jedi. They would rather destroy us then help us. If you ask any of these clans for help, they might kill you before you opened your mouth to speak.”

“I agree with both of you,” Ahsoka turned, shocked to see the Duchess walk up behind them. “Master Kenobi is right, those who follow our old ways hate the Jedi, but Padawan Tano is correct. They may have some clues to Death Watch if you speak to some of these clans. No doubt that the news of Jedi interference has spread, I am sure that if one of you turn up, they will not risk anything by hurting you. If there are clues, I am sure you can find them.”

“Duchess, Ahsoka is young and still half-trained. Sending her into a den with Mandalorian warriors would be foolhardy.”

It was the sort of thing Anakin would agree with, but Ahsoka had a feeling. Something wasn’t right with Mandalore.

“Which one do you think I should visit?”

“Perhaps the one that might be the easiest to handle could be Clan Wren,” Satine tapped the name. “They just had a baby.”

“A baby?”

“Yes, they might be more amiable to you. You are a young woman.”

“Alright,” Ahsoka doesn’t want to insult the Duchess, but none of her missions have ever gone as planned. Plus, considering the woman’s own library didn’t contain references or mentions of Death Watch. “Do you have any information in here on the other clans then? Some references so I don’t accidentally insult someone?”

“Insult someone,” Duchess Satine affected polite confusion to such a degree that Ahsoka wanted to reach over and smack her. The woman was playing stupid, and at a time like this?

“Yes,” Ahsoka said shortly, feeling the shadow of Anakin over her shoulder.

“Of course,” Satine smiled faintly before gesturing to a set of shelves in the distance. “All of the customs and practices of New Mandalore have been written down.”

That wasn’t what I asked, Ahsoka thought before Satine left the Jedi. She vanished around the corner and Ahsoka bristled at the annoyance.

“Satine means well,” Obi-Wan told her, “but the remaining clans have had a difficult time ascribing to the new ways. They are unused to her peaceful ways.”

“Huh,” Ahsoka moved across the rooms to grab at the books the Duchess had mentioned before. She grabs three of them, hopefully, to have something to cross-reference. Maybe Ahsoka isn’t as good as a Jedi as she wanted to be, and maybe she did fail her mission on Onderon.

No. She didn’t fail her mission on Onderon. She had left with a 75% grade, and that was pretty damn good grade by most standards.

Jocasta Nu had made sure that every Jedi in the Temple knew how to write essays, do research,
Ahsoka might not have had the skills to save Onderon from Separatist invasion, but she could do her best for Mandalore.

Cross-referencing the data offered did not good. Every single line of information was copied in the other documents and books. The information on the cultural norms of New Mandalore was word for word in each book. Ahsoka set the books beside each other and took a deep breath as she considered what it might mean for this to be case.

Word for word was odd on any planet. Most of them had extensive copyright laws and since none of the authors of these books had bothered to add in a reference or a contributing author; Ahsoka wondered if the culture and stuff were so well known by everyone that they didn’t have to think about giving a reference.

It was odd, and none of the books mentioned how you were supposed to greet a Mandalorian warrior or a member of a warrior clan. If The Duchess was right, and Ahsoka would have to meet a woman in charge of such a clan, then she’d have to know how to greet her. The books only explained how to make and serve tea with absolute manners. How to invite guests over for dinner. How to explain something someone else doesn’t know politely. There were pages and pages having to do with greeting the Duchess, members of the Council, officers of the law, heads of state, and Jedi, but nothing to do with greeting warriors.

It wasn’t until a servant brought in dinner and a message did Ahsoka realized she’d wasted a whole day. She tore through the offered food, disgustingly vegetarian for someone who preferred bloody meat and didn’t complain. She filed her unhappiness away for later, to vent to Anakin about. He always hated when someone tried to feed her something unsuited to her palate.

“Did you find any of the information you needed?” Obi-Wan asked when she returned to their quarters with her pages of notes and a frown.

“Nothing, Master.” She itched to take her lightsaber outside and start practicing. “Nothing useful. Nothing on Death Watch, nothing on any of the Warrior Clans. They weren’t even mentioned in most of the books. I looked through a bunch of them to see if they talked about the clans and who they were loyal to. I even looked to see if there were any in the news, like a wedding or a funeral, or something! Nothing. It’s like the clans didn’t even exist on Mandalore. Except for that list, the Duchess handed me, I didn’t see anything about Clan Wren anywhere. I guess they just didn’t write them down at all.”

“New Mandalore does not agree with the old ways,” Obi-Wan chided her. Ahsoka bristled, resenting the fact that he thought she needed to be told the obvious. “The old ways aren’t acknowledged.”

“Why not?”

“Because the Duchess has worked tirelessly to bring a semblance of order to this system. She had worked hard to preserve the peace so people wouldn’t need the clans.” Something cold and unpleasant coiled in Ahsoka’s stomach. She took a subtle step away from Obi-Wan, not sure why she’d done so. “People outside the clans had miserable lives; they did not have chances at careers or love, they had to obey the ancient rules even if they were a detriment to themselves.”

“Okay,” Ahsoka took a deep breath, “when should I go see this Clan Wren?”

“You leave first thing in the morning,” Obi-Wan’s smile made her itch, and she retreated to her room.
Countess Ursa Wren was a tall sort of human with dark skin, hair, and eyes that were a violent contrast to the icy landscape of the planet around them. Her armor, gunmetal grey and painted with bright yellow, was also a bizarre contrast that made Ahsoka look a few times at her to really catch all of the details.

She was the only person in the group surrounding Ahsoka who had her helmet off.

“What does a Jedi want from Clan Wren?” Her voice was as harsh as the winter storm building around them. “What does New Mandalore want from Clan Wren?”

“Um,” Ahsoka swallowed, glancing around at the armored warriors around her. She was fast with her lightsaber and dangerous, but Mandalorians were trained from birth to fight Jedi. The fact that the war between the two groups had been over for centuries meant nothing. “I was sent on behalf of Duchess Satine and the Jedi Order,” Ahsoka began. Weapons whirred to life, but the woman’s sharp gaze tightened and she held up a hand. “I am here to speak to you,” she nodded to the countess, “on my behalf on a piece of information.”

Krownest was a terrible place for humans to live, and if Ahsoka hadn’t been ordered to leave her ship, she wouldn’t have ventured out either.

“If you are here to gauge Clan Wren’s loyalty to the Duchess,” the woman spat in the snow, her gimlet gaze never letting up from Ahsoka’s, “that is what Clan Wren thinks of the usurper.”

“Erm,” Ahsoka had really expected more political sidestepping and dancing. A few false assurances that the clan was loyal to the Duchess and even more lying about their allegiance with Death Watch. “Alright.”

“And what about your search for information?” It was so damn cold outside that Ahsoka didn’t care if she looked stupid, she pulled her cloak over her head and shivered. “Clan Wren will not tolerate a Jedi in the ancestral home.”

“Rude,” Ahsoka muttered to herself. How the human was managing on not covering her head, she wouldn’t understand. Humans were a little less sensitive to the cold because of their hair, but still. “I searched the archives for information on the ancient Mandalorian history. I didn’t find anything useful or informative.”

“What was your question?” Countess Wren made no move, but her eyes were still sharper.

“Where does Death Watch come from? Why is it attacking the Duchess? Why isn’t there a mention of them in any of the official history of Mandalore?”

“New Mandalore,” the woman lifted a hand to her armored chest. “New Mandalore’s history does not include the warriors or clans. It is ashamed of its past, and its history. They would rather pretend that we,” she gestured to the armored people around them. Ahsoka continued to shiver as the driving snow seemed to cling to her robes. “Still, Countess Wren hadn’t put on her helmet. “Do not exist. That we are part of the ancient past and that it is shameful to carry on our traditions and customs. Tell me, Jedi, did you see anyone who looked like us?” One by one the Mandalorians reached up to remove their helmets. They were as dark as the countess, some darker and a few lighter, aliens mixed in as well; and not a single one of them was white with blond hair and blue eyes. “Death Watch exists because we wish to exist because we will not be the note in a history book that dismisses us as violent and primitive animals. Our history is ours.” Finally, the human jammed her helmet back onto her head, and the rest of the clan followed suit.

Ahsoka jumped back as the first stun bolt jumped out at her, but she wasn’t quick enough to avoid
the second shot that sent her reeling into the snow.

“I don’t think that it matters so much that we conquer New Mandalore,” Poda slid into the Count’s office, “so long as we unite the outer clans and the ones that were supposedly banned from the planet. Unite those, get rid of the soldiers of New Mandalore, and the populace won’t be able to resist outside invasion. We keep our droids off the planet so they can’t claim Separatist interference, and go about our merry way.”

“You,” Count Dooku looked up and winced when Poda’s frown turned flat and considering. The medical droid slathering bacta over his shoulders and back paused as Poda took a step forward. “Have come at a very inopportune time.”

“What happened?” She demanded, circling around his desk and eyeing the various injuries he’d collected. “Did he do this to you?”

“It does not matter,” Yan stiffened as she reached out to touch him. She withdrew her hand, glowering.

“I will tie him to his bed and set it on fire!” She exclaimed, whirling around and stomping a foot. “Where is that bastard?”

“Poda,” Dooku shook his head as she whipped around, eyes glaring daggers at him. “It is.”

“It. Is. What?” She seethed, taking short steps toward him until she nearly towered over him. “If you saw Skywalker with the same injuries after a meeting with the Jedi Council you know what you’d say! If you saw Ahsoka with those injuries after a meeting with the Jedi Council, you’d burn it to the ground!”

“Poda.”

“What?”

“How is the situation on Mandalore?” His stern gaze warned her of the consequences if she pushed.

“Going well,” Poda glowered but sat down, “Obi-Wan and the Duchess are on Concordia, but we received a message from Pre Vizsla that the Wren Clan got a visit from Ahsoka. Apparently, they stunned her and had her locked in the dungeon.”

“A dungeon?”

“An actual dungeon,” Poda confirmed, holding up a holo of a stunned Ahsoka chained to a wall. “Old, but functional for Jedi. Her powers will be muted while she’s in there, but the Clan isn’t going to hurt her until they have the Duchess deposed of.”

“We can’t let them murder Ahoska,” Dooku answered, “you’ll have to go get her.”

“She could break out?”

“Surrounded by some of the most dangerous warriors in the galaxy? All hell bent on destroying the Jedi? No, even Ahsoka is not that reckless.”

“She is, actually, but we will get her out of there? Clan Wren isn’t going to let you waltz in and pick up a dangerous guest.”
“If I play the family card,” Dooku hissed through his teeth as the droid pressed down on a sensitive spot, “she might.”

“Countess Wren understands how Mandalore works and she doesn’t much care about the outside galaxy. The fact they didn’t gun Ahsoka down where she stood is a miracle in and of itself.”

“Everyone knows that trying to command Mandalorians goes poorly,” Dooku chuckled through his pain, “we can only give them the tools to overthrow the Duchess and hope they don’t turn them on us.”

“So where is Master Kenobi?” Pre Vizsla watched the Duchess give a half-hearted smile.

“He is meditating,” she answered, and years of being a politician didn’t stack up against Vizsla’s years of running two governments. She was lying, and she was doing a terrible job of it. She reached up to her ear to fiddle with her earring. “You’ve dealt with the Jedi before as well, Governor, what is your assessment of Master Kenobi?”

“I must admit that I am uncomfortable with him being in our system,” he admitted honestly. “Master Kenobi’s recent spotlight in the Corellian High Court is concerning. Being accused of war crimes is no small matter. That, and his prison break and his unwillingness to return to submit to the court system,” Pre Vizsla shook his head with mock worry. “it does not look good, Duchess.”

“I agree,” though she looked loathe to admit it.

“How can he proclaim to uphold the laws of the Republic when he has refused to do so in recent history. The evidence is against him, Duchess.”

“I am afraid the Master Kenobi is a Jedi, and while I do not harbor the same ill-will for the Jedi as others might, but I still do not like the accusations of war crimes. He has been the rules before but to this extent…”

“If the Separatists are truly backing Death Watch,” Vizsla sighed, “then they may have a death warrant out for Master Kenobi. He might not be safe anywhere on Mandalore or even in the sector.”

“I understand,” Duchess Satine seemed to stare at the horizon behind him. “Mandalore is making great strides towards progress.” Vizsla it down on his tongue to keep from disagreeing. “Our people are safe, and Mandalore is finally free to be neutral, free from Republic rule and Separatist rule. I am afraid, however, that we may be in an even more precarious situation because of our neutrality.

“Mandalore will defend itself, Duchess. However,” Vizsla tried to keep from grinning as a thought occurred. “If the Separatists invade, helping Death Watch, then perhaps we will be in trouble. New Mandalore does not have warriors, and even if we have our own droid armies, I doubt that that will make any difference to Death Watch. Furthermore, the remaining clan will no doubt be totally apathetic about the fate of New Mandalore and would ally themselves with Death Watch. There would also be the trouble with the Republic. With their forces stretched thin enough, I don’t think they would come to our assistance. You have already been rather disdainful of the Republic.”

“The Republic has many problems,” the Duchess agreed, looking pinched and weary. Vizsla almost felt sorry for her, but not enough to tell her that Death Watch was set to capture Obi-Wan and had already captured Ahsoka Tano. He didn’t feel bad enough to tell her that she was about to steal her throne and invade Mandalore himself. “And I do not agree with how the Republic is shielding the Jedi from the consequences of their actions.”
“Of course,” Pre Vizsla nodded, “I agree.”

Obi-Wan dangled above the pit of machinery, holding onto the overhead containers with as much strength as he possessed. The bars were creaking ominously, sounding like they were going to snap in a second. The mine wasn’t just operational; it also held the underground headquarters of Death Watch, angry members that were pursuing him through the mines.

“Satine,” he hissed into his earpiece, hoping that the mountain hadn’t cut the connection or that she hadn’t been attacked. “Satine!” Shouting approached, and Obi-Wan clenched his jaw as Mandalorian poured into the room, weapons at the ready. He glanced down, counting the numbers and sighed mentally at the count.

He was out-numbered, but no out-classed.

“Search the area, keep the exit door sealed. The Jedi does not escape!”

Obi-Wan tightened his grip on the metal bar, it creaked under his hands, and as a collective, the warriors tilted their helmets back to catch sight of Obi-Wan dangling above their heads.

“Good evening,” he said jovially, and let go. Hig lightsaber was lit the moment he landed on top of the junk pile, redirecting blaster bolt and stun shots with relative ease. He flipped off the container a moment later, seizing one warrior with the force and showing his backward. Another followed, and Obi-Wan whirled his lightsaber around to cut the arm off another warrior. He miscalculated and gave a shout of surprise as the saber met the vambrace, and bright red sparks erupted between them. Mandalorian Iron, one of the only metals in the galaxy capable of withstanding a lightsaber. Obi-Wan glowered into the blank mask, snarling as they knocked his blade to the side. A moment later he reeled to the side, not having anticipated the sucker-punch to his jaw. Mandalorians were heavily armored, and this one had seen fit to add a pair of brass knuckles to their suit. Brass knuckles that released a violent electrical charge when they made contact. He collapsed backward, seeing stars and starships circling over his head as his saber was kicked away, and he saw nothing else but the bright blue flash of a stun bolt before everything went dark.

Ahsoka woke up to the uncomfortable sensation that someone was staring at her. Feeling sick and dehydrated, she forced her eyes open and took in her surroundings.

A prison cell, great.

“Ow,” she grumbled as she sat up, taking in the sight of a man standing just outside the prison cell. “Hi?”

“Good evening, Miss Tano,” he wasn’t dressed like a warrior, but one could never really tell on Mandalore.

“Who are you?” She rubbed her eyes clear of gunk as the chains on her wrists rattled.

“I am Count Wren,” he nodded, “Alrich Wren, and I was hoping to speak to you.”

“About what?”

“About your trip to Krownest mostly,” he answered, “you see, you asked my wife why Death Watch would exist when the Duchess claims that Mandalore was peaceful and happy.”
“Um,” Ahsoka could really use a drink of water. “I guess.”

“Well, each clan hires an artist to depict the history of the clan. Before I married Countess Wren, I was Clan Wren’s historian.”

“Okay?” Ahsoka smacked lips, trying to get some moisture. Stun shots hurt like hell, and always made her feel gross.

“If you would like,” he seemed conflicted for a moment, “if you give your word that you will be have I will give you a proper, and factually accurate reason why Death Watch exists.”

“Why would you do that?” Ahsoka wondered, but her interest was piqued. “I’m a Jedi.”

“You are, but history is for all, and you seem very polite.”

“I,” she took a deep breath, “the archives the Duchess had weren’t accurate. They didn’t have any information on the clans.”

“I’m not surprised,” the Count answered, “the Duchess has been trying to erase the old Mandalorian ways for years now.”

“Really?”

“Really,” he clapped his hands, “if you give me your word that you will behave, I will let you out, and I will answer your question.”

“That’s a lot to offer me,” Ahsoka pointed out, and the Count looked gleeful, almost excited. “Alright, I give my word that I’m not a danger to Clan Wren, and I’ll behave.”

“Excellent, you can join us for breakfast.” He unlocked the cell, and Ahsoka held very still as he unhooked her chains. “Come, come, come.” He excitement buoyed them to the upstairs and into the mess. Mandalorians of all ages turned to stare at them, expression approaching shock.

“Where are the others?” Ahsoka didn’t see any of the Mandalorians who had unmasked themselves at her kidnapping.

“Off,” the count waved a hand. “Breakfast, and then the archives!” The other members of Clan Wren were watching her with undisguised dislike, glowering at her until she hunched her shoulders inward and pulled her cloak tighter around her body.

She sat across from Count Wren and watched him pile food onto his plate, and then hers. He pushed it over and saw he’d taken the time to add extra pieces of meat.

“Your question is an interesting one, and since you’re the first person to ask it actually. I have taken the time to assemble the necessary information to outline the answer. My wife is not so pleased to have a Jedi in the ancestral home of the Wrens, but if you have given your word to behave I am sure she will not be so suspicious; however, you’ll find that the answer isn’t as straight-forward as you’d like.”

“It usually never is,” Ahsoka prodded at her breakfast, “why did you go through the effort of doing any of this?”

“I am a historian,” the Count explained after taking a moment to swallow his mouthful of food. “The Clan Historians must record history as accurately as possible, even the history we do not want to admit to. Politics, as the clan believes, should never be attached to understanding history. They are
facts; we have to understand the who, the why, the when, the how, and the what. When we’ve assembled the facts,” he stabbed another forkful of meat, “we look at the feelings of the time. That’s what the paintings are for.”

“Alright,” Ahsoka ripped into her breakfast, almost enjoying how grossed out the man was. “Then why am I still alive? Mandalorian clans don’t like Jedi. You hate us.”

“We do,” he agreed easily, “but if you’re willing to learn, the way the others haven’t, then it might be worth the risk of letting you live.”

“It might not if my master decides to come rescue me.”

“Master Kenobi is busy elsewhere.”

“Not him,” Ahsoka swallowed the last of the meat, “Anakin Skywalker is my teacher.”

“I see,” the count gave her a curious look, “not your master?”

“He told me he doesn’t like being called master. Anakin’s fine the way he is.”

“So you say,” Count Alrich stared at her as if seeing something new. “So you say.”

Duchess Satine forced herself not to let her legs shake as she waited for Obi-Wan to return. Her meeting with Pre Vizsla was stretching too far, and their conversation had turned from politics to idle chit-chat almost an hour ago.

“Where did you say Master Kenobi was meditating?” He asked, there was a flare of irritation in his eyes.

“I’m not sure,” Satine admitted, “it seems he has been gone an awfully long time. Perhaps we should,” she jerked around as a knock sounded at the door. “Perhaps that’s him now.”

“Oh,” the door slid open. Four Mandalorian warriors stepped through, their armor embossed with the sigil of Death Watch and their respective clans. Satine stood, knocking her chair back. She heard Pre Vizsla stand as well. “I don’t think so, Duchess.”

“What is the meaning of this?” She glanced between Vizsla and the warriors, looking for an escape. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing too difficult to understand, Duchess Satine,” the governor pulled a blaster from his desk, aiming it at her, “simple a coup.”

“You,” the pieces fell into place, “Death Watch! You’re allied with Death Watch! You’re the reason the rumors of the Separatists started!”

“Very clever, Duchess.”

“Where is Master Kenobi?” She back away from the soldiers, only to find them strategically placed around the room. She was in their sights. “What have you done with him?”

“There is no need to worry about your precious Jedi,” Vizsla laughed, “he won’t be so difficult to deal with after today.”

“This is treason!” Satine exclaimed she straightened up despite her terror. She’d faced down these
people before, and she wasn’t afraid.

“Treason is relative,” Vizsla waved a lazy hand, smirking.

“The Republic will stop you. They are debating on a bill right now, on whether or not to send troops to Mandalore. Without me to stop them this sector will be crawling with Republic clone troopers within the day.”

“No, they won’t,” Pre Vizsla smiled as one of the warriors produced a set of handcuffs, holding them out to the Duchess. “And the Jedi won’t come to rescue you either. You will never use their authority to subjugate the people of Mandalore again. You will never use the Republic as your sponsor to enforce your ideas on the people of Mandalore. You and your cohorts will be imprisoned and set for trial within the week.”

“The people of Mandalore will not stand for this!”

“We already are,” Vizsla waved to the warriors behind her, smiling unpleasantly as they snapped the cuffs around her wrists. “And you’ve already pacified the remaining people on our homeworld. It shouldn’t be too difficult to install a new government. You are fortunate that you are being arrested. There was a discussion of murdering you outright. It certainly would make the transition more easy for us, but we didn’t want to martyr you to your cause.”

“You will not succeed, Pre Vizsla,” Satine exclaimed as the soldiers formed ranks around her. Her entire system! Her planet! The people of Mandalore! They would be in danger if Death Watch took over. “You cannot do this!”

“I can,” Pre Vizsla gave an absolutely loathsome smile as she was yanked away. “I already have.”

Padme didn’t think that she’d get a golden opportunity to show the disfavor of Naboo on the Jedi so soon after returning from the sabbatical. Anakin had left early, leaving a cold bed and an empty hole in her heart. Still, he had retrieved Ahsoka and then she’d been sent out on a mission soon after returning.

A mission that had gone south quickly.

Now Ahsoka and Obi-Wan were captured. Duchess Satine was in prison, along with the Council of Mandalore, and several other people. In a matter of days, Pre Vizsla had executed a near bloodless coup that had landed him control of Mandalore. With the loyalty of the remaining clans backing him, his control was solid.

“This is unprecedented!” Chancellor Palpatine exclaimed, for the first time in a long time he seemed genuinely surprised. “Master Kenobi, captured. Duchess Satine held for trial, under suspicion of treason, sentient rights violations, genocide! This is ridiculous.”

“It is absolutely ridiculous,” Master Windu spoke up, “Duchess Satine is a consummate pacifist. She’d never do any of what they’re claiming that she’s done. The Jedi have dealt with Mandalore, and we can again.”

“What do you propose, Master Jedi.” The Chancellor asked curiously, and Padme felt an overwhelming urge to reach over to Windu’s neck and wring it.

“Retrieving Master Kenobi and the Duchess from prison first. Passing this proposal to send troops to the Mandalore sector would give us the manpower to fight Death Watch.”
Given Mandalore’s past with the Jedi, this wouldn’t go the way Windu probably wanted. It would only open a second front of a war that the Republic didn’t need to be funding in the first place. The Mandalorian Clans would never let the Republic take their sector, not with Jedi at the head of their military forces.

“It could work, but retrieving Master Kenobi might not be so easy.” Palpatine seemed to consider his options, “would Skywalker be able to do it?”

“Skywalker?” The Jedi master frowned some and shook his head. “No, his attachment to Kenobi aside, he failed his last mission to retrieve Kenobi. Obi-Wan spent a few months in prison when we needed him on the war front.”

Padme bristled, ignoring the curious look that the chancellor gave her.

“It would require several more orders of clones,” Senator Burtoni interjected. “Not cheap, Master Jedi, and since the appropriations bill required did not pass,” she gave Padme a sneering glare, “I do not think the Republic has the funds for such an operation.”

“Senator Burtoni is right,” Padme agreed,” and the Kamino senator gaped at her. “How can we claim to do good for the galaxy when we only speak in languages of violence, not diplomacy. Mandalore is a neutral sector of space, they have been uninvolved in the Republic for generations. It would only stir up anti-Republic sentiment among Mandalorians. Furthermore,” she tried to look as Demure as possible. “The Jedi Order and Mandalore do not have very agreeable history. Mandalore will unit under Pre Vizsla and any invasion will be deeply costly to the Republic and the Jedi Order. If he has managed to take over the sector, as the reports have suggested, the wisest course of action may be to negotiate with this new Mandalorian government.”

“And leave Mandalore under the rule of a tyrant?” Mace Windu demanded.

“Why should that bother you this time?” Padme asked, and there were several sharp intakes of breath. Palpatine was probably staring at her. “Master Jedi, Duchess Satine is my friend; but.”

“You would place her life below those of.”

“Curious,” Padme felt her words coil from her mouth, like smoke rising from a bonfire. Windu blinked in surprise, “how you would angle for my attachment to Duchess Satine, while as a Jedi you disavow them.” The room was almost breathless with silence. “I do not hold any one person's life over the continuation and health of the Republic and the lives of a hundreds of thousands of clones in battle, even Duchess Satine.”

“Well,” Burtoni seemed to be looking at Padme in a new light, but she hadn’t moved her gaze from Windu’s. “That seems reasonable.”

“We cannot afford to buy more clones. We cannot afford to send them into a battle they could not hope to win.”

“My dear,” Palpatine interjected, “perhaps you are being too hard on Master Windu.”

“If I recall,” she still stared calmly at the Jedi, “from my history class. The Jedi-Mandalorian war did not end so well.”

“That was then; this is now.”

“Our priority needs to be on the Republic,” Padme pointed out, quickly losing her patience. “Not on a system that has not had anything to do with the Republic in generations.”
“But Master Kenobi.”

“It is possible,” she overrode the chancellor, speaking over him to be heard, “that if we negotiate with Pre Vizsla that they may return Master Kenobi and Padawan Tano.”

“And what if they ally with the Separatist? The Separatists are not an officially recognized government; it would qualify as negotiating with terrorists. Death Watch was classified as a terrorist organization.”

“Death Watch was never added to the list of suspected terrorist organizations,” Padme reminded Windu, “Duchess Satine specifically refused to do so to keep the image of Mandalores peace. We must negotiate with them.”

“Absolutely not, they’ll execute Kenobi and Tano in the holo-net, live for everyone to see.”

“They might not if we speak to them first.”

“That is not an acceptable course of action!”

“Simply because of the Jedi’s past with Mandalore it does not mean the Republic will fund a blood feud between the two. There are enough lives disrupted and endangered by this war as it is.”

“Pre Vizsla is a tyrant and a murderer.”

“Who has taken over Mandalore by right of conquest, which is perfectly acceptable on Mandalore.”

“Not in the Republic.”

“If the ethics of the Republic applied to every system the Hutt clans would never have been recognized as a legal entity, and their slave trading would have been put to a halt! Furthermore, the Republic would never have bought the Clones in the first place! We cannot be the hypocrites in this situation Master Jedi.” Senator Burtoni looked positively gleeful at the mounting argument. Padme cut off the Jedi with a wave of her hand and turned to the Chancellor.

“I cannot go to Mandalore, my friendship with the Duchess is too well known. I believe that we should send Senator Corellia. He is offensive to Mandalore, but for much better reasons.”

“Corellians and Mandalorians do not get along very well.”

“No, but of the systems connected to the Republic, the Corellians are the most independent. Retaining a sense of self that many others have lost. Senator Corellia will manage I am sure of it.”

“That does seem like the wisest course of action,” Palpatine agreed and glanced between Padme and Windu. “I will speak to Senator Corellia; perhaps a deal can be made for the Jedi.”

As soon as Padme was out of the meeting she called Anakin, through Artoo, to arrange a discreet meeting. He appeared at their usual meeting spot with a smile that faded as soon as Padme turned around.

“What’s wrong?”

“Ahsoka’s been captured by Mandalorian Warriors,” she blurted out. Anakin reeled back in shock, “what’s more; Duchess Satine has been overthrown by Pre Vizsla.”

“Why haven’t we heard of this yet? Why hasn’t anyone told me?”
“They’re trying to keep under wraps as much as possible,” Padme said quietly and held onto Anakin as he tilted his head back and gave a breathy sigh. “Ani, I’ve argued that Senator Corellia should go to the Mandalore system to try and get her back.”

“Why not you?”

“My friendship with Satine is too well known,” she reminded him gently, “but he is a good man, and I know he’ll get her back.”

“What about Obi-Wan?”

“I don’t know, but Satine is set for trial. Or so Pre Vizsla says, I don’t know about Obi-Wan. They may decide to send him back to the Separatists.”

“Alright,” Anakin looked deeply conflicted. “But what about the Separatists?”

“I assume they were involved in the funding,” Padme sighed, “keeping the clans alive until they could strike back, but I am not sure. Ani, we need to end this war before it can escalate any further. The Republic is sinking into debt; the Clone troopers are suffering so much. We have to stop this.”

“How are we going to stop a war? We’re only two people.”

“I have a friend,” Padme bit her lip, “she’s a Separatist senator, and she wants peace as much as I do.”

“You’ve been in contact with the enemy? Padme, we’re at war!”

“Anakin! Mina is a good person and did as she thought needed. She’s from Onderon, and if we can open peace talks, perhaps we could end this war!”

“I,” Anakin shook his head, “it could work. I don’t know. But what if Senator Corellia doesn’t get Ahsoka out?”

“Then we’ll find a new way, Ani. I promise you that we won’t leave her behind.” She reached up to press a hand to his cheek; he looked down at her with the same broken-hearted expression he wore when he was about to leave for an engagement. “I’m sorry, Ani.”

“This isn’t your fault,” he moved his head, kissing the inside of her wrist. Padme flushed hotly but didn’t move. “They were talking today; we’re low on troops and soldiers. The number of clones we have isn’t enough to keep fighting this war, and they want to order more.”

“No,” Padme declared, “no more clones. My queen has expressly ordered me to fight against it. We cannot allow the purchase of clone to continue. What we’ve been working for means nothing if Clone soldier are continually enslaved by the Republic.”

“And Zygerria.” Anakin interjected, “I got a message saying that Zygerria is the one that’s responsible for trafficking clones. Their queen is trying to bring the Golden Age of Slavery around again on the outer rim. She’s doing it by selling those who have a natural inclination to obey.” Anakin spat out the words, furious. “I don’t know how to stop them from where I am.”

“I don’t know either, Ani,” Padme retrieved her arms from her husband’s hands. Anakin let her go, smiling. “We can only do so much from our positions. Our next course of action needs to be to stop this war.”

“Right,” Anakin sighed, leaning into her with a desperation that always hurt. “I love you, Padme.”
“I love you, Ani.”

Ahsoka was pretty surprised when one day she was listening to Count Alrich talking about the different meaning to ancient paintings to the next being shipped off world. She thought she’d get sent away, but probably in a body bag. She didn’t expect to end up on Mandalore with Pre Vizsla staring down at her with a mocking, unpleasant smile that look like it had been dipped in oily water. She didn’t expect to see a Republic senator from Corellia waiting at the boarding ramp of his ship.

“Senator?” Ahsoka stared between the Mandalorian warriors and then the Senator who looked as calm as he could manage.

“Padawan Tano, glad you could make it.” The man held out his arms as if expecting a hug. “Get on board, and I’ll get flight clearance from our lovely hosts.” Ahsoka glanced back at the armored Vizsla and nodded before he could shoot her.

The senator joined her a moment late, giving her a tight smile as he moved toward the control room and began the launch sequence. Unlike Padme, he didn’t seem to have an extensive crew flying with him.

“What’s going on?” Ahsoka took a seat beside him, watching the landing pad drop out beneath them. “Senator, where’s Obi-Wan?”

“Don’t know,” the man answered, “don’t care. I was told you were my priority.”

“You’re a senator.”

“Yes, thank you for noticing.”

“Well, what’s going on? I’ve spent like two weeks listening to art history and politics. Suddenly I’m leaving.”

“You’re lucky,” the man responded, glancing over at her, “they wanted to execute you. I didn’t think they’d surrender you. I know they won’t give up Kenobi, but it was worth a try. Still, with Duchess Satine in prison.”

“What?”

The man threw the ship into hyperspace and finally turned to her. “Alright, let me give you a rundown. Satine has been overthrown. Pre Vizsla runs Mandalore. They are still neutral. Obi-Wan Kenobi is in prison, which is amazing because I thought he’d be dead. I was sent to negotiate with the new government a few trade deals and get you out. That’s all I know.”

“It’s only been two weeks!”

“Clans work fast,” the man answered, and he leaned back in his chair, “Padawan, I wouldn’t look too closely at it. Mandalorian politics are an absolute mess. Clan loyalties, Satine and her very questionable ethics.”

“Like how the New Mandalorian could only be white humans, and she tried to erase Mandalorian history?” Ahsoka crossed her arms. “I spent two weeks with a Count who was more than eager to share why they hated the Duchess.”

“Yeah, sure. I bet they’ve got plenty of reasons.”
“They do,” Ahsoka crossed her arms and felt a horrible swamping fear at the thought of what the Jedi would do to her when she returned. She’d failed two missions in a row, both devastating losses for the Republic. The ally of Duchess Satine and the loyalty of Onderon, they would, she hugged herself and wondered what they might do.

Would she be censured like Anakin? Would they send her to the Agri Corps? Would they throw her in prison?

She hunkered down her seat, miserable and confused.

“Kid, what’s wrong?”

“Everything,” Ahsoka refused to look at him, “this war, the galaxy. Everything is awful. I hate everything, and I’m going to be in trouble because I didn’t manage to stop Death Watch.”

“That’s stupid; you couldn’t have stopped Death Watch. There were only two of you, and you’re super. It would have taken an army stop Death Watch.”

“If I’d done a better job,” Ahsoka sighed, “I bet I could have.”

“Well, they won’t penalize you for that will they?” The senator stared at her with shock as she refused to reply. “Well,” he shook his head, “if you get kicked out you can come live on Corellia. I’ve got an extra bed in the guest room.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Why not, I’ve done worse. Look at me,” he grinned, “I’m a politician now.”

Ahsoka gave a bitter laugh, “I still can’t wrap my head around how fast they managed to take over Mandalore.”

“It happens,” the senator said, “and thankfully Pre Vizsla was basically drunk on new power. Otherwise, I don’t think he would have been generous enough to let you go.”

“Yeah,” Ahsoka had a feeling that if they had tried to kill her, Anakin would have rained holy hell from the skies and burned Pre Vizsla alive in his own armor. “Let’s hope that I get a mission as soon as I get back so no one can have the time to yell at me.”

“Here’s to hoping.”

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Poda held up her datapad, crowing with a nameless annoyance. While Dooku couldn’t figure out what the noise meant, he found it extremely annoying.

“Shut up,” he commanded irritably as he watched Pre Vizsla announce Mandalores intentions to remain neutral. “What is it?”

“That Zygarrarian queen, the crazy one! She’s just kidnapped an entire colony of togruta farmers!”

“And?” He angled his mirror in front of his face, glowering at her as he tried to finish shaving.

“If they’re getting Jedi help, who do you think they’ll be sending?”

“Oh,” Dooku set down his razor and turned to face Poda. “They wouldn’t.”
“Who better,” Poda sneered, “than a traumatized ex-slave and one of the few togruta Jedi. “

“Those bastards!” Dooku shook his head, “how fast can we get communications with that queen?”

“I’m on it already.” She smirked at him, “can’t let your grandchildren get into too much trouble without you.”

“Anakin is already volatile,” Dooku muttered as he finished his shave, “this is dangerous, even by Jedi standards.”

“You should know that the Jedi have no standards,” Poda chirped as she handed him his datapad, “they let you in.”

“Har, har,” he adjusted the towel on his shoulder and wandered into his apartment. “These damn fools. Damn idiots, the lot of them. Get the ships ready as soon as we have confirmation that the queen will meet with us. Summon Tang and the fleet; we will invade this sector and lay waste to the entire system.”

“You’d invade a whole system?”

“For Anakin? For the boy that my own son bartered in a dangerous race? For the young girl who might have lost families to this woman? Yes, we are the CIS,” Dooku reminded the woman, “it is time we remind people why we are better than the Republic, and ridding our space of slavers seems like a decent place to start.”
Zygerria

Chapter Summary

Anakin and Tang both head to Zygerria

Clone Wars Era

High General Tang, behind her mask and respirator, was grinning as widely as she could manage with her injuries. Almost bouncing where she stood, despite her of being stoic and calm at all times. It wasn’t every day that she was given such a fantastic mission.

An easy mission almost. To invade Zygerria, to seize control of the system and oust Queen Miraj Scintel with as much prejudice as possible. Rescue the togruta farmers and destroy the already crumbling Empire.

“High General?” She swung her seat around, glaring through her goggles at the unfortunate captain who’d interrupted her gloating. Captain Keitrich was well-trained and had dealt with her often enough that her glaring meant nothing.

“What is it, Captain?” Her voice sounded harsher, and more violent through her modulator.

“We're receiving a call from Count Dooku. Would you like me to transfer it to the closest conference room?”

“Yes,” she stood up, slowly and painfully. Hating how long it took her to move now. Recovering from her wounds, received in her first war, was taking longer than she’d wanted.

“High General,” Dooku’s form wavered into existence, staring down at her. “The Zygerrians have sought an alliance with the CIS many times in the past. Our communications with them have always been…form, and abrupt. When you speak to the Queen, approach her with the impression that we might be willing to ally. Send your best spies into the city to assess the situation. I trust you will manage?”

“You should have no concerns, Count.” Tang coughed, the hacking noise echoing around the room as her chest protested the jarring motion. “I will manage this invasion well.”

“The priority is the safe return of the togruta farmers that have been taken captive. I fear that Jedi will arrive and attempt to thwart your mission; as they think it is to sign a treaty with the queen. Do not kill them, capture them if they need assistance.”

“Aye,” Tang wanted to tuck her arms behind her back, but the injuries in her arms prevented it. “I will manage, Count Dooku.”

“Of course, High General. When it comes to it, kill the slavers.”

“I will.” The call disconnected, and Tang sat slowly, considering her options.

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“Who did you say called?” Queen Miraj Scintel lifted her head from her pillows, eyeballing the guard standing beside a serving slave.

“High General Tang, your majesty, of the Confederacy of Independent Systems.” He answered, and she hummed thoughtfully as she picked through the food on the tray offered.

“What he say he wanted?”

“He wanted to speak, your majesty. That was all the message said.”

“That is interesting,” Miraj waved the food away, disgusted. She finally sat up and stood. Slaves rushed from the corners, carrying her clothes and helping her get ready. “Tang? Tang? A CIS man, a High General. We have wanted to speak to Count Dooku. This might be the step in the right direction.”

“Yes, your majesty.” The guard stepped to the side as she walked by. “How should we respond?”

“Have a room set up for High General Tang. We want to keep him here as long as possible. Make him comfortable, invite him down. Get the kitchen slaves cooking. When he gets here, I want a party. Show to wealth and beauty of Zygerria. Get these things cleaned up. Get the palace sparkling. I want only the best food in the galaxy for them to eat.”

Tang stared at the approaching planet, getting larger and larger in the viewport. There was a message behind the ship she was riding in, and the ships flanking her — all enormous, armed to the teeth, and loaded with organic and droid soldiers.

The information on her datapad vanished as she turned it off. Invading and conquering Zygerria was going to be difficult. The entire economy was based on slavery and criminal activity. Fortunately, it was her job to conquer, not fix up the mess she left.

“High General,” Captain Kietrich stepped to her side, “we’ve received clearance to land and are being directed to a landing pad. I’ve had your things sent ahead, and the rooms we’re staying in searched for listening devices. They’ve found dozens, as well as video cameras.”

“Very good,” Tang nodded, and Kietrich stepped into her line of sight. He was older than her by 12 years, Corellian, and a bit of a stiff. Still, he was a dedicated captain, well-trained, and with enough snark to keep her entertained. “What else?”

“Nothing, sir. The steward of the palace has asked for your preferences.”

“Preferences?” Tang paused, “what?”

“For your evening company.” Kietrich’s mouth twisted, disgusted. “Should I tell them you have no preferences?”

“No, our mission is specific to Zygerria. Tell them I enjoy the company of Togrutas. The gender of irrelevant.”

“Yes, sir,” he sighed a bit, which Tang graciously ignored. She activated her datapad again. “I want my food prepared as normal.”

“Yes, sir. Anything else?”
“Have the agents landed?”

“Yes, sir. They’re landing and are due to check in in a few hours. We’ve repurposed a few of the satellites to keep our communications and transmissions secret. I’ll update you as soon as their reports come in.”

“Excellent.” She stood, adjusting the robes and over the medical equipment. Her chest spasmed, and she dropped back onto her chair, signing as her lungs ached.

“Sir?” Kietrich touched her shoulder gently, and Tang took several careful breathes of the mix of air and medicine.

“Nothing to worry about,” Tang answered, tapping her knee as she counted patiently through the pain. Her lungs didn’t hurt as much as they had when she’d inhaled several lung-fulls of poison gas. The injuries from the explosion had been healed, her legs healing in weeks, and her eyes eventually opening to give her the view of the galaxy again.

Still, it had only been a year and a half since that fateful afternoon. She hadn’t received medical treatment for anything besides her lungs in the weeks following.

“Sir, are you sure? Should I get the med-droid?”

“No,” Tang waved him off, “get the details ironed out with the Zygerrians and get twenty datapads with information on one of the invasions going on right now. Choose one that they’re broadcasting. Get a lot of flimsi work and file folders. Get me several recordings of broadcasts of whatever invasion you choose, and dozens of holos of battle-droids attacking. Draft a few of the ensigns, get them nicer uniforms, and have them sent down with me.”

“Yes, sir. We’ll be arriving in a few minutes.”

“Good,” Tang stood painfully and began walking toward the hatchway. “I want everything ready and everyone quiet. We agree to nothing; we give them nothing. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

Their arrival on Zygerria was exactly what Tang had been expecting. Crowds of people were gathered outside the landing pad, cheering excitedly and yelling. CIS flags were waved alongside the flags of Zygerria. Slaves, wearing skimpy outfits, flanked by soldiers and guards, danced in place. It was a welcome worthy of a king, and the food floating around smelled delicious.

“Welcome High General Tang!” A tall Zygerrian approached, wealthy-looking and smugly grinning. “We’re pleased to have you visit our home!”

“The pleasure is mine,” Tang lied, staring at the outstretched hand and didn’t reach back.

“I am Diraj Lidel; I’m the steward of the most beautiful queen Miraj Scintel. I’m also the Master of Ceremonies.”

“Well done,” Tang watched him a moment longer. “I do not want to keep the Queen waiting. Let us get going?”

“Of course,” he clapped his hands together, visibly uncomfortable but valiantly trying to pull through. “This way, please. We have all the entertainment you could ask for? You prefer Togruatas, correct?”
“Generally,” Tang said, glancing at Kietrich, who was preoccupied with being disgusted with everything.

“We just got a brand-new shipment in of Togrutas. Farmers, all of them hard-workers and very fit. We’re putting them through their orientation, but when we’re done, we’d be glad to offer the CIS a discount.”

“A discount? How generous.”

“Perhaps a free taste?” The man smiled sickeningly. Tang grimaced beneath her mask, grateful for its presence.

“I am here for business,” Tang answered, “not pleasure.”

“I understand, but there’s no reason we can’t do both.”

“Maybe,” Tang lied as she and her staff climbed into the speeder. “I trust that the Queen is in excellent health?”

“Oh, yes, she is doing very well. You know. If you’re not in the market for Togruatas, we have a deal with the Nightsisters. Nightbrothers make excellent bodyguards and soldiers as well as assassins. There are a few in next year’s batch that are just brilliant. They’ll make fine additions to anyone’s black operations force.”

“Perhaps.” It was strange to Tang, to hear about slavery in such clinical, business-like terms. Her planet didn’t practice slavery, only war. Slavery was supposed to be history; it was something like an ugly stain in the past. It wasn’t supposed to be here and now.

“Of course, we have a fine selection of dancers. If you’re partial to that. A few truly exceptional artists,” he winked, “we pay them with exposure.”

“I have very...specific tastes,” Tang answered, which meant she had no tastes at all. The idea of company was sickening, the idea of bringing anyone into bed with her made her stomach cramp.

“I see,” The Zygerrian waved at the adoring crowds. “It takes all kinds to make a galaxy, High General. “

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“Anakin?” He looked up at the call of his name, watching Ahsoka settle into her seat.

“Yes?”

“This missing colony, you don’t think that someone could have really kidnapped everyone, do you?”

“A planet like Kiros, without fighters and without any weapons, it could happen.”

“But they took hundreds of people,” Ahsoka adjusted her vambraces, “why?”

“If we’re right, and I’m afraid that we are, the slavers are going for strong people. Farmers and the like, to keep something running. Strong slaves are worth a lot of money.”

“Oh,” she leaned back in her chair. “I guess that makes sense.”

“It’s good business,” Anakin muttered bitterly, “with a war going on, I bet they didn’t even consider they would be noticed.”
“If the war is going on, why are they sending us? It is because we’re embarrassing?”

“I don’t know, but I put money on that being the case.” Anakin pursed his lips, “why do you ask?”

“Just, something Bariss said to me before we left. It was…strange. She was acting strangely. Ever since that mission on Geonosis, she’s been acting weird.”

“That mission where Luminara left her to die?”

“Yeah,” the togruta teenager shrugged. “I got a question.”

“Okay?” He pulled the hyperspace lever, throwing them out of the planet’s atmosphere. “What is it?”

“Why did you…or I mean. Why didn’t Master Luminara… That mission. Why did,” she bit her lip, “why didn’t she try to find us? You did your best to…find us, but she didn’t even try? I don’t understand why she didn’t try. Why did you? That whole mission was just super strange.”

“Ahsoka. I didn’t give up finding you or write you off for dead because I knew there were still things I could do to find you. It wasn’t about attachments; it was about doing the most before you were doomed to die. It was doing my best for you. Luminara, she’s a good Jedi, but she doesn’t understand that there’s a difference between being detached and being apathetic.”

“You saved us. I knew that you’d never give up on me. Barriss…she was so ready to die and just give up because the mission was completed. I don’t understand.”

“Ahsoka,” Anakin reached over, taking her hand. “It isn’t.”

“I knew that you would come for me,” Ahsoka said, “I always know that you’re going to come for me.”

“Always,” he promised, “but we’ve got a mission. You need to get dressed.”

“Right,” she retreated to the back of the ship to change. Since they wouldn’t be arriving at Zygerria any time soon, she settled in for a nap and woke up to Anakin cursing vividly in a language she didn’t understand.

“What is it?”

“Make sure that you’ve mucked up your montrals,” he ordered, rising from his seat. Ahsoka blinked, Anakin must have gotten changed while she’d slept. He looked…different. He looked dangerous like he could kill everyone around them with a glare. He’d also taken time to spike his hair up.

“We’ve got CIS present.”

“Why are the Separatists here?” She asked, leaning past him to glance out the viewport. “That’s Tang!”

“Damn,” he drummed his fingers on the chair, “we’re still keeping low, but we might have trouble. If Scintel is thinking of joining with the CIS, then we could be in big trouble. We’re going to need to find a bigger ship too, to fit everyone onboard. AT least it isn’t Dooku.”

“Right,” Ahsoka frowned, “are we going to talk about Dooku?”

“How he’s….basically been acting weird. I mean, I got captured, and he just acted like a…grandpa. And what about the whole…thing? We didn’t tell the Council, but I think we should talk about it.”
“We’re not talking about it,” he covered his eyes, climbing back into the pilot's seat, muttering. “It isn’t worth it.”

“But what does he want? Don’t you think he’s acting strange?”

“He is acting very strange,” Anakin agreed, “but I don’t know why? I don’t know what his angle is and I don’t want to think about it.”

“Don’t you think it’s important?”

“Of course it's important, but I don’t know what he wants. He’s….been so strange…”

“I agree.”

“And don’t you think it’s weird that a Sith Lord and a guy who is leading the opposing army is wanting to be so…close?”

“I don’t actually want to think about it,” Anakin told her blankly, “there’s stuff I can’t tell you about, Snips. Things I can’t tell anyone.”

“I think I understand.”

“That’s enough for me;” he told her, “but when we get on planet, remember to stay by my side. Don’t accept drinks from anyone. Don’t eat food you haven’t seen prepared yourself. Don’t go anywhere with a stranger.”

“I can handle myself, Skyguy.”

“Yeah, under most circumstances I’d believe you, Snips, but you’ve never seen anything like this. This is something else. We can’t break the farmers out of prison if we’re trying to break you out of prison too.”

“Stay low, don’t get kidnapped, and stay close.” She nodded seriously, “I can do that.”

“Good, because the last thing we need to do is break out of prison again.”

“That one wasn’t hardly my fault,” she told him, “I was surrounded by a whole clan of Mandalorians.”

“Hmmm, still don’t know why you were hanging around so many Mandalorian warriors.”

“I was doing research,” Ashoka told him, “into Mandalore and Duchess Satine. I thought it was really strange that that whole planet was full of white humans.”

“Yeah?”

“I didn’t see any aliens or humans of different colors. I saw…white humans and that’s it and it was creepy. So, I looked in to the history, and the history was all strange. Like it had been edited before, like was edited now. I know what historical revision looks like, so I decided to go talk to some of the remaining clans. Clan Wren was pretty obliging, even if they did stun me and kidnap me.”

“And help depose the ruler of Mandalore and put their own crazy person in charge.”

“I guess, but she kicked entire clans of people off the planet. I saw their historical records, Skyguy. I talked to Count Wren, he was there when they started exiling the clans. He said that the droids and soldiers hurt a lot of people, a lot of people went to prison for protesting it. She wanted to make
Mandalore all white humans. Not only that, she did it with the backing of the Jedi!”

“Hmm,” Anakin kept his eyes focused on the ship control board, but he was clearly listening. The clenching of his jaw showed it.

“So, I went to people who might have an answer and...I got kidnapped, but I learned a whole lot. Maybe they had a point?”

“Huh,” Anakin nodded slowly, “they overthrew their government.”

“Yeah, but...I think they should have.”

“Don’t say that around any of the other masters,” Anakin warned her sternly, “that’s practically treason.”

“But Mandalore wasn’t a part of the Republic. If the master’s get to have political opinions then why can’t I?”

“Because they’re going to be making the decisions,” Anakin told her, “because they choose who goes where and which padawan goes with which master.”

“But look at this planet, Skyguy! They might want to overthrow their government.”

“This is a plant of slaves and slavers, Snips. That’s different!

“How is it different? If the clans of Mandalore were persecuted and they wanted to be free of someone who literally exiled every single warrior, why not? It’s not like this place is part of the Republic either!”

“Snips,” Anakin tightened his grips on the controls, his frown was more pronounced. “Do you think the Separatists have a reason?”

“They’re our enemies,” she crossed her arms over her chest, “and I’ve been captured a lot by Dooku and Grievous. I’d never stop fighting them.”

“Right,” he shook his head, “don’t get political down here, Snips. We don’t want to invite any attention. Remember, we’re here for the farmers.”

“Right, the farmers,” she nodded to herself. “I got it.”

#$#$#$#

“We plan to revive the glory of Zygerria through enormous sales and auctions,” Miraj Scintel did her best to loom over the short separatist. “Our allies within the Hutt Clans and Black Sun are keen on helping and buying.”

“Zygerria has a certain beauty,” Tang admitted, leaning a little out of the speeder to glance at the streets below. The beauty was certainly nonexistent. “But I can see the bones of it’s former heights.” She smiled to herself as the queen’s eyes twitched briefly, ears flattening against her head for a moment. “The count has expressed interest in the potential work-force, Queen Scintel.”

“Provided that there is fair compensation for the sale, the work-force can be limitless. You know, we have an excellent trade line of clones. Very obedient, hard-working, and they come with pre-planted slave chips.”

“Pre-planted?” Tang felt her smile curve downward, while her bitter glee at the hypocritical Republic
“Oh, yes. We also do a proper medical scan when we start trading a new species. Their chips are in their heads, they explode when they have the proper signal. It is very convenient.”

“I can imagine,” Tang said slowly. Of the clones she’d captured, none of them had exploded randomly. Commanders had died before surrendering information, some had self-terminated under command of their Jedi, but none had had their head blown up. “We have a fair number of clone prisoners of our own, but there is always a need for a work force. How many would you say you have?”

“A fair number, High General Tang. They are expensive though; and given the Separatists recent money troubles I can’t imagine that Dooku would pay for products he already has access to.”

“Perhaps,” something twisted in her stomach, she thought of Kietrich’s hatred for slavers and wondered if he was rubbing off on her. “What other sorts of hard-workers do you have?”

“Ah,” Miraj smiled, beautiful and horrible all at once, “we have a new shipment of farmers. They happen to be of your favorite entertainment, High General. Togruta farmers, all of them in excellent health. Plenty for breeding purposes as well.”

That, Tang thought, actually made her sick. She could and never would claim to be a saint, or that she bathed herself in morality ever morning; but she was never this sick. Was this how she sounded? So callous and wretched, so depraved that it no longer registered that she’d become a monster?

“You must understand,” Tang said slowly, noticing a few details that had escaped her before. Tired women, human and alien alike; sitting on stoops, holding pipes and cigarettes between bony fingers. Each of them looking as if they’d had a moon dropped on them. Children, haunted and guant, avoided looking at anyone for long while they ran between the houses and up and down the streets. Some of them carrying packages and leading pack animals. The Zygarrians among them, walked like Kings among their miserable subjects. Looking well-fed and cheerful, their happiness on the backs of other sufferings. “That previous dealings with the Republic.” She doubted that the Republic had ever paid attention to this planet before. “Will be frowned upon.”

“The Republic does not pay any attention to Zygerria!” Miraj laughed, a tinkling noise that must have taken her a while to perfect. “A required investment for a planet such at this one is to have a senator. Thankfully, Senator Taa is very understanding to our way of life. He ensures us a good supply of twi’lek dancers and workers.” Tang made a mental note to have Taa murdered. “Do not worry, High General, there is nothing that Zygerria has done that could draw the attention of the Republic.”

“I certainly hope not,” Tang lied. She would enjoy tearing this entire planet down and shooting Scintel in her stupidly coifed face.

Ahsoka poked at the bed a few minutes before edging away and glancing back at her master. Anakin didn’t seem to have as many problems. He set his bag on his bed and began pulling his intel reports from one of the pockets.

“This place is gross.”

“Yep,” Anakin nodded, “but it’s cheap, and the landlord isn’t going to snoop. This is as close to the markets as we can get without it being a brothel.”
“Gross,” they both paused as a knock came at the door. “Did we invite anyone along?”

“No,” Anakin held a blaster up and waved for her to duck behind the door with a saber at the ready. Holding his blaster just out of sight, he cracked the door. “Hello?”

“You’re both idiots,” the woman said, and she shoved her way past Anakin and into the room. Her bright eyes focused on their packs and then on them.

“Who the hell are you?” Anakin demanded, and she offered a low bow.

“Greetings, Mr. Skywalker. You may call me Box.” She fished something out of her pocket and handed him a business card. Anakin frowned, accepting it and turning it over in his hand. “You may not know what I do.”

“I do, what the hell are you doing on Zygerria?”

“What’s going on?” Ahsoka muttered, but she was ignored.

“Working on some intel that came over the wire a few weeks ago, Mr. Skywalker. I was a little surprised to see you walking down the tree, but not that surprised when I truly consider it.” She took a breath. Her words came out in a rush, tripping over one another to get out. “I understand that you are here for a mission for the Jedi, but I really need your help.”

“Skyguy?” Anakin waved her quiet, glowering at the slight woman in front of her.

“What sort of help?”

“My contact within the palace hasn’t made contact in about a week, Mr. Skywalker. I don’t know if he’s been killed or if he’s been captured.”

“Who are you here for?”

“There’s a….clone troopers, Mr. Skywalker. I’m here to liberate some clone troopers.”

“There are clone troopers slaves?” Ahsoka demanded and Box snorted, she flipped her goggles a few times before shaking her head.

“All clone troopers are slaves,” Box told her, “but some of them are prisoners of Zygerria.”

“Clone troopers aren’t.”

“We’re here for togruta farmers,” Anakin told Box, “do you have any information on them?”

“I do,” Box glanced at their beds, “I also have my own hidey-hole. You’ll have to leave the padawan.”

“I am not leaving Ahsoka,” Anakin told the woman. Confused, Ahsoka glanced between them. The answers she was hoping for never came. “You can’t expect it to be safe enough for her here. This planet will eat her alive.”

“Sir, this is a secret.”

“That you ruined when you barged into my hotel room and didn’t bother to wait until she was gone or I was alone.”

Box frowned at Anakin but didn’t seem too put out. “Fine,” she turned to Ahsoka. “You need to
be…discreet, Miss Tano.”

“I’m a Jedi, I can be discreet.”

“More discreet than that. What happens on this planet you cannot report back to your masters, ever. What I say, what you see, what happens, must remain an absolute secret. You may back out now, Miss Tano, but going forward even the Jedi masters cannot know.”

“I’ll help,” Ahsoka squared her shoulders, “I can help, Anakin, what’s going on?”

“I,” Anakin shrugged, “Box is an agent for…someone, who helps liberate slaves.”

“Ok,” Ahsoka frowned, “there have to be a lot of those, Skyguy.”

“There really aren’t,” Box told her, “but on this planet, mentioning anything like that can get you killed. Mr. Skywalker.”

“Please, I have an alias,” Anakin told her, “you can call me Donnert. She’s Sida.”

“Donnert and Sida, perfect,” Box clapped her hands together. “Do you want to rest up or get started?”

“I think we should get started,” Anakin glanced at Ahsoka, “we’ll pick something up at the markets, alright?”

“Fine,” Ahsoka grumbled for show, “but you’re buying.”

“Absolutely,” he reached over to give her hood an affectionate tug. “Let’s go, Box.”

They were in a tiny apartment across the street from the palace entrance, Ahsoka and Anakin munching on meat pies, watching the crowds of droids, guards, and slaves move around it.

“My contact is a human male, five feet eight inches, he’s dark skinned. He goes by Kin on Zygerria. The problem,” Box handed a snipers scope to Anakin, “is that this is his first mission off his home planet. There’s a great deal he doesn’t know, but so far, he’s been blending without problems. I don’t know how or why he lost contact with me.”

“Hmm,” Anakin focused the scope on the tall windows, it was impossible to see anyone through the windows, so he turned his attention to the crowds. “Does he have a routine he’s supposed to follow?”

“He’s supposed to come through the west entrance, cross the courtyard and then go in through that door.” She pointed to a small door, set in the buildings shadow. “Wait, there he is. Look, the tall man with.”

“Holy kriff,” Anakin trained the scope on the operative, his eyes widening as he watched the man cross the courtyard. When he was gone, Anakin pressed his hand against his forehead, gasping. Box and Ahsoka were looking at him strangely.

“Do you?” Box stared at him, tilting her head to the side, “do you know how he is?”

“That’s my brother,” Anakin covered his mouth and stepped away from the window. “That’s my brother.”

“Ah,” Box scuffed her boot against the ground as Ahsoka gaped, “I see.”
Tang almost didn’t notice the man standing in the corner of her living room until she was walking to her bedroom with the sweet dream of pulling off her disguise and letting the medical droid assist her. He wasn’t one of her men. His robes were long and threadbare, and his eyes were focused on the floor in front of him. He seemed to be waiting for someone.

“Do you need something?” Tang demanded, turning her head slightly to catch Kietrich’s attention. The captain glanced at the stranger and shrugged.

“I am here to serve at your pleasure, High General.” The man bowed, his long black hair spilled over his shoulders.

“I see,” Tang lied, but figured that Scintel either wanted to butter her up or spy on her. “What sort of pleasure?”

“Anything you might desire, High General.”

“Hmm,” Tang stared up at him, and it finally dawned on her that he wasn’t that much older than she was. Maybe a few years, if that. He might be physically young, but the tiredness in his eyes and the slump to his shoulders, combined with the world-weary expression showed that he had aged at an unnatural pace. “Nothing for the moment.”

He offered a shallow bow as Kietrich approached.

“Sir, your chamber is ready and the medical droid is standing by.”

“Very good,” Tang hauled herself to her feet, hating how old she felt even though she was still young. “Only come get me if it is an emergency.”

“Yes, sir.” The captain nodded as she hobbled into her hyperbaric chamber and was sealed inside.

Kitster watched the Separatist general vanish into the other room and eyed the lean captain to his left. Kietrich, he thought his name was, stood very still for several seconds. His attention wavered between the closed door his general had vanished through and the datapad sitting on the table. Finally, he shook himself and spoke.

“Would you like a cup of tea?”

“I am here to serve at the pleasure of the High General,” Kitster answered, but he was pleasantly surprised that someone had bothered to offer him a drink. It was fairly obvious that he was a slave in the palace. If not a slave, then at least a servant. No one paid attention to either.

“The High General interned his room for the evening. I am fairly certain that he would not begrudge us sharing some tea.”

“Very well,” this might be the in that Kitster was looking for. The soldiers and agents that the Separatists had brought with them weren’t the usual people he would have expected. They were strange, oddly intense and seemed to focus on everything in the palace. He’d watched a few soldiers tracking the guard’s movements under the guise of having a walk. If there was a Separatist plot about, it would be wisest to head it off at the beginning before it could interfere with his plans.

“Actually, I do prepare the High General’s tea sometimes. Could you please tell me show me to the
kitchens and the like so I’ll know where to go?”

“Certainly,” Kitster bowed again and led the captain from the suite designated for the guests. As soon as they were in the public areas of the palace, a steward set upon them. His bright eyes sparkling with excitement and greed.

“Captain Kietrich,” Kitster kept his eyes on the floor, while the separatist had to survive his scrutiny. “How is the High General’s stay?”

“I believe it is going well. He has not said anything otherwise.”

“Excellent. Excellent. Captain, is there anything we can do to make your stay more comfortable. Some companions you might enjoy?”

“Ah,” Kietrich looked visibly uncomfortable, “I am afraid that I am on duty at the moment. Such indulgences are against military regulations.”

“Well, when you’re off duty you never know.” The steward winked. “We might be able to find something suited to your tastes.”

“Perhaps at another time,” Kietrich said politely, “I have duties for the High General to attend to.”

“You military types need a break,” the steward threw his arm over his shoulders, smirking. “You all work too hard.”

“We have to work hard, there is a war to be won.”

“Doesn’t matter, look, Captain Kietrich. I can show you all the best spots on the planet. Show you exactly what we have to offer the CIS.” That Kitster could tell, was an angle. Miraj wanted her empire to rise again, but she’d need help doing it. She’d need money and power and ships, and the support of people willing to look the other way. He also recognized that Kietrich wasn’t the sort of person to look the other way. He vibrated with visible anger and tension under the attentions of the steward. When he accepted, his voice was calm and smooth in a way that his hands were not.

“I suppose a few minutes wouldn’t hurt.”

“Do you have all night? I know a few really great places.”

“Yes, I do actually. So long as the High General does not know I’m going temporarily AWOL,” Kietrich sighed, “he might actually kill me. But I have errands to run for him first.”

“No problem, Captain, we can get you back before daddy knows you’ve been missing. You,” he waved Kitster closer, “look at him, he can run your errands for you.”

“I don’t know.” Kietrich wavered, and Kitster applauded him. “He has very specific instructions.”

“You can read right?” Kitster nodded and finally, Kietrich seemed to bend. Whatever mission he was one for the High General, it wasn’t running errands. No doubt he was angling to use this trip out of the palace with the steward to forward said mission. He handed a slip of flimsy over to Kitster.

“Here you go, please don’t mix up the teas. He hates it when the teas get mixed up.” They were gone before Kitster had a chance to speak further. For a moment he waited, staring down at the flimsy and came to the stunning but logical conclusion that the CIS was here to invade. It wasn’t an insane assumption now that he thought more about it There were too many soldiers for just a visit. Kietrich was acting strangely. For man that seemed to upright and honorable, to be engaging in
activities that a slaver like was probably a cover.

He glanced down at the instruction written down on the flimsi and sighed. It was a meet-up between one of their agents, and he was the go-between. How ingenious.

Showing off the orders at the gate ensured that he was let out of the palace grounds without being blown up, and into the market area not far away. He was two steps from entering the tea shop when he caught sight of a man in a mechanics outfit examining a piece at a nearby booth. A tall man, he had the beginnings of an impressive beard, cracked spectacles over his eyes, and a glove over his right hand. Beside him was a teenager togruta dressed in oversized overalls, wearing a heavy coat, and both were weighed down with several bags.

“Don’t you have enough engine parts?”

“Engine parts are good,” the man said, “but I’m looking for a specific part. We aren’t about to fix that old thing with the wrong model, kiddo. It’ll blow us out of the sky and across three star systems.”

“Urgh,” the teenager whined, draping herself dramatically over his arm. “Come on! We’ve been here for hours! Can’t get go get something to eat?”

“In a minute,” the man laughed, patting her montrals in a distinctly parental way. “You’re getting so snippy these days.”

“We’ve been here forever though!” The girl complained, straightening as the man put the part back onto the table. He nodded to the stall keeper and approached Kitster. “We have to pick up some tea, Sida.”

“Then we’ll get some food, Donnert?”

“Yep.” Kitster stepped into the tea shop, having caught their glances his direction. He waited only a few minutes before they stepped in as well. To his surprise, instead of trying to speak to him, they bought what they wanted and left. It meant that they were too experienced to try and hold a clandestine meeting in a place like this. It also meant that they were going to be contacting him when he did step out.

“You should hurry up,” the shopkeeper didn’t looked twice at him. “You’re going to be late for the dinner in the palace.”

“I understand,” Kitster ignored their smirk.

“Gotta say, this is the first time I’ve ever seen a palace slave here. Usually, they go to shops with booze.”

“Tea is a popular drink in many places in the palace,” Kitster told him as he set the packages on the table. “Gnat is a fan of some of the spicier flavors.”

“Right,” the man began to tally the costs. “Gnat, strange name.”

“Strange man.”

“Yeah.” While packaging the tea the man scoffed. “Crazy too, but I’m willing to try anything.”

“Thank you for your time,” Kitster hurried outside, rushing to see if the two strangers were still around. They weren’t, but he yelped as he was brushed past with such force that he fell to the
“I'm sorry about that!” The man exclaimed, hauling Kitster upright with one strong arm and brushing him down with almost excessive force. “Are you alright?”

“Geez, Donnert, be careful.” Kitster blinked away his confusion and stared at the man holding him. He had bright blue eyes, the likes of which he’d only ever seen once before. A name he’d half-forgotten rose to his lips and he had to bite his tongue to keep from blurting it out.

Anakin.

“I’m really sorry about that,” Anakin said, and he helped Kitster stand upright. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” Kitster managed despite the shock, “thank you.”

“Here,” the young togruta handed him his bag of teas. “Sorry, he’s usually pretty clumsy.”

“Hey!” Anakin frowned her direction and rolled his eyes. “But I really am sorry about that,” he slung a heavy arm over his shoulder, “let me make it up to you.”

“There’s no need. Really.”

“Sure there is! That tea looked expensive, and I think I spilled some. Let’s go refill.” Kitster was steered, protesting back into the tea shop. The man behind the counter shrugged and pointed them toward the back. As soon as they were locked in the storage room, Anakin switched his hold from impersonal to brotherly. Sweeping him into a tight hug and lifting him a few inches from the ground.

“Is it really you?” Anakin demanded, still shaking and holding his brother tightly. “Kitster?”

Kitster replied, tracing the unfamiliar planes of Anakin’s face. The young junk rat he’d known at nine had become a tall, swarthy man, a scar over one eye, and an eternities worth of pain in his eyes. There was joy too, and it was currently lighting up his face. He paused, watching the confusion mount in Anakin’s eyes as he listened but did not understand.

“I’m sorry,” he set him back on his feet, stepping back and crossing his arms over his chest. The motions were so automatic, so sudden. Kitster watched his brother fold in on himself within second. “I’m sorry. I don’t understand anymore. I.”

“Hey, Skyguy?” The young girl reached around the stacks of boxes to pat his arm. “Skyguy, are you alright?”

“I’m…” Anakin glanced at her and then at Kitster. “I’m fine, Snips. I just…”

Kitster tried again, and Anakin shrugged helplessly.

“I’m sorry.”

“How did you forget?”

“I don’t think,” the two exchanged a series of significant glances. “I don’t think now is the time,” the girl piped up. “Sorry to say, Skyguy, but we’re on a schedule.”

“Right,” Anakin shook his head, “Kitster, we met with your contact. They thought you’d been captured.”

“No, there is a Separatist general in the palace.”
“Tang, I know him.”

“I was assigned to entertain them. I haven’t had the chance to make the drop-off.”

“We’re here to help.” Kitster nodded, passing over the datastick.

“Ani,” he ignored the girls amused snorting. “Aren’t you a?”

“Yes, I’m here for some togruta prisoners. We’re supposed to be breaking them out.”

“Ani,” Kitster tried and failed to come to terms with how much his brother had changed. “Ani, Tang is here to invade.”

“What?” He jerked his head, blinking rapidly. “Say what?”

“Tang is not here to make a deal with the queen,” Kitster repeated. “Tang is here to invade.”

“How could you?”

“The actions of the captain. He is acting oddly, the soldiers they bought down as well. I’ve spotted several ships with droids that have been ‘refueling’ for several days now. I know Tang has taken several meetings with the count.”

“No one notices a slave,” Anakin mutter bitterly, and Kitster nodded. “But…” He closed his eyes. “What happens if the CIS takes Zygerria?”

“They get a lot of people to work for them,” the girl put in. Sida? Kitster wasn’t sure what her real name was. “A lot of money and ships.”

“If they use the resources they find here.”

“I don’t know if Tang is inclined to enforce the queen’s laws, but I don’t understand that if they were going to be allies, why they wouldn’t let her manage her own planet. If they’re invading, like I suspect, the might.” It was too much for Kitster to say out loud, but he an Anakin exchanged a heavy glance. He watched Anakin raise a hand to clutch at his side, his lips become a thin white line as he thought.

“It would be too easy for Dooku to keep the slave system in place,” Anakin muttered, and he turned away from them. “He’s at war. He needs money. He needs to save money.”

They were silent until Anakin shook himself.

“We need to focus on our mission,” the girl said very quietly. “I’m sorry, but those kidnapped farmers are our priority.”

“The Jedi cannot spare an ounce of compassion for the slaves, can they?” Kitster demanded, blinding hot fury racing down his spine. “Hundreds of years of slavery, all of this and you cannot focus on people who need your help?”

“It isn’t like that!” The girl exclaimed. “We can’t defeat Tang on our own. We’re only two Jedi! We can’t do the impossible.”

“The limits of Jedi abilities apparently include the inability to look beyond your weapon and orders,” he hissed. Anakin hadn’t moved, so Kitster kept his eyes on the girl. “You’ll do any orders that you’re given. Do you have a transmitter too?”
“No!” Anakin jolted around, “I don’t have a transmitter. It was removed!”

“What are you doing here, Anakin?” Kitster demanded, furious. The joy of seeing his long-lost brother had vanished the moment he realized his brother was truly lost. “What does any of this matter to you? You are like the Jedi that stole you away. Taking what they wanted because they wanted a tool!”

“We can’t get the Council to help!” the girl exclaimed. “We can’t because all the masters are focused on someone else and other missions!”

“The masters,” he said flatly, watching Anakin’s tan face pale. “Your masters, Anakin. Your masters and their orders and your mission. Like every other Jedi!”

“Kitster,” Anakin took a step forward, reaching out grab his sleeve. Kitster yanked himself away, furious. “Kitster, please. It isn’t like that. The Jedi and the Republic can.”

“Help?” He spat, “help the same way the helped us as children? When were bought and sold like tools? When were used and beaten for failure? When you were forced to race one of the most dangerous sports in existence? When my owner beat me within an inch of my life and threw me to die in a sandstorm? That Republic? Those Jedi? The Jedi with a war criminal on trial? The Jedi who took you away and made you forget everything that made Anakin Skywalker?”

“Kitster! Please!”

He was too far gone, too angry now, he trembled with rage and fury as Anakin shook. His voice wavered beneath the hundreds of emotions fighting for control.

Kitster stepped back toward the door as the confusion mounted on Anakin’s face.

His voice cracked, “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Kitster. Please don’t go.”

“Finish your mission, Anakin,” the words spilled over pale lips, “finish it and leave.”

“I can help, Kitster. I can help you.”

“Your student said that you couldn’t, Anakin. What can two Jedi do to help a planet of slaves?” He was through the door and out of the shop with the needed tea before he could see his reaction.

In the silence that followed the man’s departure, Ahsoka blinked a few times both confused and angry. She opened her mouth, turning to voice her opinion when she caught sight of her master collapsing to his knees. Both hands pressed over his mouth, as tears spilled from his eyes.

“Master!” She hissed, rushing to his side, only to have him violently pull away. Ahsoka paused as he gaped at her, chest rising and falling rapidly. “Are you alright? Do you need me to fight him? I thought he was your brother?”

“He is my brother,” he whispered, “he is my brother.”

“Then why would he?” The words stuck in her throat as Anakin bent double, thumping his forehead against his knees as an agonizing keen rose from his chest. “Hey!”

“He is my brother!” Anakin cried, straightening up but swaying from side to side. “He is my brother and I…I’ve become a master.”

“You’ve been my master for a while,” Ahsoka answered, confused. “What’s wrong, Skyguy?”
Something had happened, and something horrible had just hurt her master. That man, his supposed brother, had done something. She wasn’t even sure what had happened or what it meant. “Anakin?” This time he didn’t flinch when she touched his shoulder. Instead, he staggered upright, using her shoulders to steady himself until he was standing.

“We need to go,” he muttered, “we need to get out of here.”

“But…”

“Come on, Snips,” the defeated tone was only worsened when they stepped out onto the street. It seemed like he couldn’t look at anything properly. He pulled his coat hood over his head and pushed through the busy crowds until they’d returned to the safe house.

“What was that?” She demanded, ignoring how Box stared at them both. “I thought he was your brother!”

“He is my brother!” Anakin exclaimed. “He is my brother.” He dropped onto the bed, burying his face in his hands like he wasn’t able to look at them.

“Then why did he yell at you? What’ going on?”

“It doesn’t….it doesn’t concern you, Snips.”

“But he.”

“Ahsoka!” He straightened, voice hardening, “just let it go, alright?”

“But he…."

“Here’s the data stick that your agent got,” Anakin tossed it across the room, “how soon can we get the information on the togruta prisoners?”

“Pretty soon,” Box answered, catching the data stick carefully. “What went wrong with the meetup?”

“Nothing,” he shook his head, “nothing happened. We have the information. The agent is fine. Apparently, he’s serving the CIS general Tang.”

“A very dangerous man.”

“He believes that Tang is here to invade.”

“Invade, not make a deal or a treaty?”

“He thinks its to invade and I’d….I’d trust him.”

“If the Separatists here to invade, that might be a good thing.”

“Why? They’ll just have slaves to do all the work?”

“Exactly, but they aren’t familiar with the slave trade and they aren’t used to keeping slaves. They are a government and a military organization. This would be so new and peculiar that helping the local population will be much easier.”

“Is that a risk you’re willing to take?”
“It might have to be. Miraj has a stranglehold on the planet. She rules through terror and violence. I’ve seen other CIS conquered worlds, they’re easier to dislodge than a slaving culture.”

“That could work, getting rid of the evil queen and Dooku all at once.” Ahsoka nodded, “Skyguy, come on. Our mission is to get those farmers out of here. Not anything else.”

“That’s the problem!” Anakin snapped, “why isn’t our mission to save the planet? Why is our mission just to those farmers? Why weren’t we given a fleet to conquer the whole planet? Why weren’t we given any clone troopers to help? A few hundred out of hundreds of thousands of people suffering and we’re only helping those who make the Republic look good.” He bowed his head, “it doesn’t even matter.”

“It does matter! They’re my people, Master! My people and I can’t just leave them here!”

“And what about the rest of the people in prison here? What about the rest of the slaves, Snips? Don’t they matter too?”

“Sure they do! But our mission is for the farmers, Master. They’re who we’re here to save. You have to keep your eye on the mission!”


“Mr. Skywalker?” Box tilted her head to the side. “Are you?”

“I’m fine,” he said brusquely. “I’m going to meditate. Snips, help Box.” With that, he stood and marched into the small refresher and closed the door with a snap.

Box and Ahsoka exchanged a series of shrugs, both equally confused about what had happened.

Kitster didn’t have a chance to drop the tea off in the High Generals suite and run. As soon as he entered, unfamiliar soldiers frog-marched him into one of the bedrooms and searched him for listening devices. Far from reacting the way he ought, he held still as the memory of Anakin’s heartbroken expression floated to the forefront of his mind every time he closed his eyes. The betrayal was something he’d never expected from his brother.

They’d dreamed of going off and then coming back to free the slaves. They would free the slaves of Tatooine and then the rest in the galaxy.

But Anakin had been taken by the Jedi and had become a master. He had a girl-slaves now, a young togruta girl. How could he claim that he was here to save slaves when he had one obeying his every command? How could he rescue Togruta farmers when he had a togruta slave?

“Listen up,” he was shaken from his daze when one of the soldiers held up a strip of dark cloth. “The High General wants to talk to you, but you aren’t allowed to see him.”

“I saw him before.”

“Yeah, we know,” the man rolled his eyes, “we’re not arguing with our general. You need to put this on.”

“Very well,” Kitster was faced with Anakin’s teary eyes as he closed his, and tied the blindfold. “Lead the way.”
“Alright, come on.” Instead of pushing and shoving him as they had before, the CIS soldiers led him across the suite and into the room he’d been banned from. It was warm and smelled like chemicals. There was a hissing sound, steady and rhythmic, coming from the middle of the room. “Sir, the man you wanted to speak to.”

“Leave us,” the voice was shallow and tired, but firm. Kitster waited until he heard the soldiers before speaking up.

“You’re here to invade.”

“I could be,” Tang muttered, “how was your trip to the market?”

“I was knocked into the wall and the tea was spilled. I had to go back and get more.”

“That’s fine.”

“I am not an agent of the queen,” Kitster told him firmly. “Which is what you will ask.”

“Not an agent of the queen, but you act oddly. An agent of someone then. Probably a liberating arm of radicals, who would love to see the queen deposed.”

Kitster said nothing.

“Which is exactly what I want.”

“You are here to invade and take her place. I have nothing to say to you.”

“Yes you do, because I’m under orders to destroy the ruling class of Zygerria with extreme prejudice. I’m here to kill the queen and get rid of every parasite who obeys her.”

“I cannot do anything,” he told him, “I am only a slave.”

“No one pays attention to slaves.”

“That’s the point,” Tang said, “I need a network of people and spies.”

“To do your dirty work only to allow myself to be a slave to the Separatists?”

“No, as much as I think it is a waste of resources, I’m here on orders.”

“Orders?”

“I was ordered to kill Scintel and her toadies, sir.” Kitster pursed his lips when Tang addressed him formally. “I’m here to break up the markets, open the cages, and burn those who enable the slave trade. If you wish to hear the orders, I can play them for you.”

“Do it,” Kitster demanded, his heart thudding in his chest. He heard a device start up and an old man order Tang to do exactly what he’d told him. Destroy Scintel, destroy their ships, short out the transmitters. When the message played to an end, Kitster took a deep breath.

“As you can see, or hear, rather. I am under orders to accomplish exactly that.”

“You are too presumptuous, Tang,” Kitster hissed, and he didn’t need to see him to know that the military man was taken aback. “You…you are an outsider!”

“I have weapons and ships and soldiers? What better way to conquer a planet?”
"You want to end a war that has been going on for thousands of wars?"

"There’s no need to be dramatic." Tang scoffed, "this isn’t."

"If you attack Zygerria with ships and droids, there will be a genocide! Scintel would rather kill every single slave on the planet than let anyone else control them. It doesn’t matter if she’ll lose her empire. She would burn it down herself before giving to an invading force."

"That makes no sense,” Tang said flatly.

"It doesn’t have to! It is the way of a slaver, Tang! How can you think or even assume that you’re capable of conquering anything if you don’t even know what they’re capable of? You are doing this because of orders, not because you have any interest in helping anyone!"

"It does mean something,” Tang muttered, “but I have more than enough experience and expertise to handle this. I only need.”

"No, we won’t and cannot accept your help if you will command every part of this. You will get more people killed than you will save.”

"I can do this,” he growled, voice echoing strangely around the room. “I have conquered planets before. I have deposed rulers and queens and councils and armies. They are all the same.”

"Maybe they are, but slavers are not. You’ll kill us all. You are an outsider to the fight, Tang.”

"How? What do you know about running a military campaign?"

"What do you know about back alley surgeries? About a bomb in your body that someone could set off at any point for any reason? What do you know about every move being watched and monitored for any hint of disobedience? Being sold in a market? Being locked in a cage as a child? Watching mothers and daughters being separated? Watching kidnapped children being injected with transmitters?"

"It is.”

"Not the same!” Kitster snapped, he thought of Anakin’s betrayal. How he would know how to stop the Zygerrian empire but had chosen not to. He loved Anakin, but he’d become a stranger. He had become a master. “It isn’t the same.” His chest ached and he reached to cover his heart. “It isn’t the same.”

"If it isn’t or not, I can still help!”

"If you want to help?” Kitster said eventually, once their rising tempers had gotten that chance to cool. “If you want to follow orders, and do it right, I will only agree on one condition.”

"What is that?"

"Let me see you?"

"What?"

"Let me see you, and I will connect you to the underground on Zygerria.”

"No.”

"No?”
“No. I am covered for a reason. I don’t let anyone see for a reason. Fight your revolution then, and I’ll be gone in the morning.”

“You won’t let me see you, so you abandon the orders you love? A secret.”

“I would rather die than let anyone see me,” Tang muttered, “you may think of me as a monster for only caring about my orders, but a little pathetic; but if you see me you won’t be able to think of me as anything other than a monster.”

“Then you may help, but on our terms,” Kitster decided, and Tang gasped.

“You said.”

“You know the value of a secret,” he told him, “you just have to learn the value of listening.”

“I can listen fine,” he grumbled, “but I almost see your point. You may give your input on that battle plans.”

“I will give input on everything, along with a few others.”

“No, these are confidential military secrets.”

“This is our lives, Tang. I’m not going to let you play the holy outsider.”

“I am not playing the holy outsider!” Tang protested, “I am here to help.”

“Then help on our terms, not yours. You may look at us as some pathetic, ignorant state of people; but we aren’t.”

“It is a planet of slaves and slavers. Do you really think?” Tang sighed deeply. “Fine, we’ll do this the idiot Republic way, democratically.”

First, I need the location of some kidnapped togruta farmers.”

“Why?” Tang sounded immediately suspicious.

“That is my secret to keep.”

“Hmph, I know where they are and how to get them out. I’ll have Kietrich assemble the information when he arrives back. That was what he was sent to retrieve.” The general seemed to pause. “If there is a third-party,” she scoffed, “we could manage to arrange a way for them to smuggle the farmers off the planet.”

“That will work.”

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What had he become? A monster who committed the same crimes as Watto? When had he only focused on the missions? Saving a few only because he’d been ordered instead of trying to stop the problems that had victimized them in the first place.

When had he lost his home. Anakin covered his mouth, casting his mind for the words and language of his childhood. Words muttered in the dark and in half-silence. A secret, and a promise with his mother. He couldn’t understand his own brother! Kitster had pushed him away, furious and betrayed.

It was what he’d deserved, Anakin squeezed his eyes shut, pressing his mouth to his knees to quiet
the crying. He’d turned his back on his brother and the memory of his mother to follow orders and obey masters. To bow and kneel to the same people who’d bet him in a race.

How had he not seen it so clearly before? How had he not seen the person he was becoming before? A Jedi was a good thing for a Jedi to be, but Anakin? He wasn’t a Jedi.

He was a slave.

Transmitter removed or not.

How could he have betrayed his brother?

Anakin cried into his knees, shoulder shaking as ice-cold realization swamped him, pulling him under into a riptide of depression and horror.

There were hundreds and thousands of slaves on this planet and a former-slave had been sent to get only a few? They were togruta and they sent Ahsoka? Hadn’t they even considered how it would affect them?

No, Anakin concluded as he tried to stem the tears leaking from his eyes. They hadn’t considered it, because it would never have occurred to them. They were so…detached. This was the sort of thoughtless cruelty they were good at.

His thoughts were interrupted again as the timer he wore went off, reminding him to take his medication. He brushed his face clear and dug around for it, hoping that he might feel better. There wasn’t anything that would magically make him feel less awful, and he knew that. He also wanted a way to feel like less of a traitor

He couldn’t help him anymore even if he wanted to. Kitster wouldn’t accept it. He wouldn’t be trusted. He wouldn’t be wanted.

“Hey, Donnert,” Box slapped the door, “you need to get out there.”

“What do you need?” Anakin splashed some water over his face before opening the door. He couldn’t hide how his chest hitched when he took a deep breath.

“Why did I just get a message that none of my contacts were willing to meet with you?”

None of the contacts would meet with him? No one who worked with Kitster would allow him near any information or vital tools.

“I,” Anakin swallowed hard and then shook his head. “It is because I am a Jedi,” he said honestly. “My brother won’t…they won’t…I’m a Jedi.”

“Then they should want your help,” she shook her head. Anakin shrugged, he understood their reasoning. He understood it and hated himself for it.

“They don’t.”

“So?” Box shifted a bit, “fine, they don’t want your help. But what can we do about the clone troopers?”

“I honestly don’t know, Box,” Anakin admitted. “Even if we can get them off the planet there isn’t anywhere to take them.”

“There is. If I rescue the farmers, then you can take the clones.”
“I don’t want to take the clones back to the Republic,” Anakin said automatically, and Box scowled.

“We can trade ships. You bring the farmers back and I take the clones to an undisclosed location.”

“That could work, the farmers will probably want to go to the Republic. This mission is about speed, Box, I have to get back to requisition troops and ships to stop Tang and.”

“The Republic won’t liberate Zygerria,” Box told him gently.

“You don’t know that!”

“I do because I’ve been at this for the last few years. I’ve seen the length the Republic has gone to avoid dealing with the slavery problem, Donnert. I know you know it too. In the middle of a war, do you really think that the Republic will send ships and soldiers to a place like this? It isn’t a problem for them.”

“If the CIS invades, it is!” Anakin protested.

“It’s Tang. Even if you get back in time, do you think that you’ll manage to take the planet from him? No Republic or Jedi commander has managed to re-take a planet that Tang has conquered. You need to focus on your mission,” she ordered and Anakin repressed the surge of hateful fury that rose with horrifying swiftness.

“My mission?”

“Your mission, Donnert. One mission at a time.”

“These people.” He seethed, “need help. My brother needs help!”

“Your brother made is pretty damn clear that he doesn’t want your help. You’ll never be able to help Zygerria as a Jedi.”

And that was the kicker wasn’t it. He never would be able to help people like Kitster and the people he’d seen in cages as a Jedi.

He would always be shackled by the Jedi and their orders, and never be able to help.

“Fine,” he spat, hating how he’d surrendered so easily. “We do if your way. How are we doing this?”

“You and your student only need to be at the space-port on time. We’ll handle the rest and get the ship out of there and then do a cross-docking maneuver before taking off for Republic space.”

“That’s all? I can do so much more!”

“That’s all they want you to do. Sometimes you don’t need to be the grand hero sweeping in to save the day. The small things are important too.”

“Very small,” he muttered.

“And we need to make sure that this doesn’t mess up the other plans in motion.”

“Other plans?”

“You’re not that important yet,” Box gave him a cursory look-over, “just be ready to go whenever.”
Tang watched Kietrich stumble into her suite around 5 in the morning. She couldn’t smell anything through her mask, but she was pretty sure that he was as drunk as drunk could reasonably get without being dead.

He also ignored all pretense of command structure and collapsed onto the bed with a groan. “I hate everyone,” he turned over and groped for his canteen still sitting on the bedside table.

“How much did you drink?”

“Too much,” he muttered and took a long drink. When he pulled his canteen from his mouth, water spilled down his chin and onto his mused shirt. “I found them, sir.”

“Where?”

“Not too far from here. They have a set of cages designed to get locked into the cargo holds of ships. Not the insides of ships, outside. They have life support and that’s it. Made for quick discharge if there’s authorities around. Since there haven’t been any authorities around in a while, it isn’t something they do often.”

“Then they shouldn’t be too difficult to steal. I simply have to make the request in the morning for the Togruta slaves.”

“He was so awful,” Kietrich said after a broken minute. “So sleazy and evil it was almost a joke. He was so intent on getting me drunk.”

“You are drunk,” Tang reminded him, but her captain waved her off.

“He wanted these girls and guys to dance on me. I didn’t want them to. I didn’t want to keep drinking. He said things,” Kietrich shuddered, “he said so many awful things, sir. I can’t ever imagine wanting to do anything that he does.”

“Drink your water and go to sleep,” she ordered and didn’t bother to check on him again until morning when she re-emerged to find him still passed out and snoring.

Deciding to leave him to it, Tang met Miraj Scintel for breakfast.

“A message came from my commanders,” Tang told her, “Dooku wants capable, strong, and healthy people. A few hundred for our industrial farms. How many of those can I get?”

“Farmers?” Miraj glanced up her plate of smoked fish and watched Tang with a gleeful and predatory glint in her eyes. “A few hundred. Those don’t come cheap.”

“Nothing worth buying ever does,” Tang answered, “our farms are usually manned by droids but droid production is down because we’re putting droid building materials and engineers on the problems of building more battle-droids. We need farmers.”

“Your battle droids are most impressive, High General. I might even be willing to negotiate a discount.”

“That would be much appreciated,” Tang glanced around, noticing just how on edge the slaves of the house were. Too many of them were watching with heavy eyes. She refused to show any nervousness, not that Miraj would be able to tell if she did. She would take great pleasure in killing her or leaving her to the hordes of people to kill. “This is a matter of some urgency.”
“Urgency?”

“Crop production can’t stop.” Tang reminded her, “and we’re at war. Decisions to make or break a planet or a deal can happen within a second.”

“Then we have a deal,” Miraj looked absolutely beguiled at the thought of the cash she would be rolling in. Tang hoped that the operatives were in place because she had a dozen ion cannons waiting to take out the entire planet for a few hours. “Tell me, would you like us to chip them or for you to chip them yourselves?”

“There’s no need to chip them at all,” Tang laughed.

“Oh, why not?”

“Our farming colonies and our prison planets are all designed the same way. They have little to no technology, only enough to support the industry on the planet. No ships enter or leave unless they have clearance codes. Escape is virtually impossible. Besides, we need to the food to not be poisoned. No point in encouraging hate when we don’t have to.”

“As you wish,” Miraj acquised easily, “once the credits are mine, I truly don’t care what you do with them.”

“I don’t care particularly either,” Tang said, “but when the negotiators arrive.”

“Negotiators?”

“Yes, count Dooku thinks that Zygerria is impressive enough to offer a treaty to.” That was an absolute lie. “We could use such an operation in the Confederacy.”

“That is wonderful news!”

“Yes, isn’t it?” Tang wished she could eat. Her last meal had been hours before her infuriating confrontation with the spy. She still didn’t have a good name for him. Not to mention she was putting too much faith in him and his agents. Still, if they got them out on time to get out of her way then she didn’t care what happened. She watched Miraj call for a datapad with the necessary details. Their transaction was short and sweet. The credits the queen thought she was getting, would bounce like a bad check. Disappearing in a few days after in her bank account. Still, she felt her stomach turn as she considered the idea of exchanging money for people. Which had sickened her years ago and still made her nauseous.

“I sense, High General, that this is the beginning of a lucrative partnership.”

“Agreed.” Tang nodded slowly and hoped that everything was going right on the other end.

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The deal happened faster than Anakin had through possible. It was clear that Kitster and his agents could move faster and more quietly than any other agent in the galaxy. Because half-way through his trouble sleep, Box kicked his cot.

“It’s go time.” He was up and dressed before he could form a proper argument.

“Already?” He asked as he shook Ahsoka awake. “We only just came up with the plan.”

“I know, but your brother is already ready to go. They’re loading the crates onto the ships now.”
“What about the clones?”

“They’re getting the clones too. The clones know how to manage an escape. They’re very well coordinated.”

“Yeah,” Anakin handed a sleepy Ahsoka her jacket, helping her get it on as she yawned. “Ok, Snips. Nice and easy, alright. No sudden moves, no fights.”

“You two need to be here,” she handed over a slip of flimsi, “in fifteen minutes. That’s when the cargo ship is scheduled for liftoff.”

“Are you sure we don’t have to do anything else?” Ahsoka asked, “this feels way too easy.”

“Easy for you maybe,” Box retorted, “but I’ve haven’t slept in about 3 days. I have agents moving all over the underground to get this ready. I don’t know exactly if it can go well, but depending on your timing and the timing of both of the other agents…you should be in the clear.”

“Got it,” Anakin memorized the address and ushered Ahsoka from the small apartment.

Their mission was to get the togruta farmers home safe and sound. It did not specify how or who could help. The Council wouldn't get too upset when they succeeded.

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Kitster sat beside the passed-out captain and watched a ship rise in the distance. He knew it was Anakin flying that ship. His lost brother who he had probably hurt when he’d turned him away. As the ship lifted toward the sky; Kitster bowed his head as he considered what could happen if he told the Jedi about the situation on Zygerria.

Would he tell them that there were already agents on the planet? Would he tell them that Kitster and the others were planning? Would he ask them to stop the separatist's invasion? Did he forget how to keep secrets? Did he care enough to keep the secrets?

“Wuz…at?” He turned around to watch Captain Kietrich cough a few times and stumble into a seating position. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing.” Only his brother was completing his mission. Nothing but his mission. He had lost the meaning of what it meant to be free, of what it meant to be alive. He wanted to bring Anakin back, to let him fight and plot alongside him, but he couldn’t trust him anymore. “Go back to sleep.”

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Dooku honestly didn’t mind that Anakin had left Zygerria without causing a huge scene and absolute chaos. He didn’t mind that Tang had apparently undermind his authority and revealed the planned invasion to peoples unknown that she wouldn’t even begin to tell him about.

He also didn’t mind that Anakin would be lauded as a hero for his rescue of the kidnapped farmers. Or the fact that Obi-Wan was still languishing in prison.

He minded the fact that Sidious was still breathing down his neck to hand the Republic their victories. That he was going to allow the war to be fought as a sham.

It wasn’t going to happen. He had already begun making plans to set his master aside and rise as his own Sith. A Dark Lord of his own making.

The ice-chips and cubes clicked together as he set his glass on the table. The holo showed Zygerria
and the ships waiting around it. An invasion of a different source ready to take place.

“If Tang is occupied,” Grievous rasped from behind him, “then where will I go?”

“You will be fortifying our lines, General Grievous,” Dooku told him, “ensure that no Republic ship can make it through. Buffer up security, make sure that even smugglers feel the squeeze. We’re changing the codes. Ventress,” the woman turned toward him, an ugly scowl on her face. “There are several informants, assassins, and spies that need to be eliminated. I trust you will manage this?”

“It will be my genuine pleasure,” Ventress hissed, she tossed her lightsaber in the air. He thought that might be a little dramatic, but he wasn’t going to complain.

“Excellent, it is time to make the Confederacy a genuine force to be reckoned with.”
Chapter Summary

Boba Fett has a mission to kill Mace Windu

No sooner had they returned to Coruscant both Ahsoka and Anakin were separated. Anakin ordered to the Star Destroyer Endurance with Mace Windu. He wasn’t sure what he was supposed to be doing. Ever since his evaluation and his new failure on Zygerria the Jedi master was being particularly cold and bitter.

Not that he could blame, he thought as he watched the cadet’s practice on the targets, he had failed, and he kept failing. He couldn’t seem to do anything right at the moment. Technically he hadn’t failed at Zygerria, but the council meeting that had followed once they realized that the Separatists were there to make a deal had been….explosive to say the least.

Most of the cadets seemed excited, which only managed to make Anakin feel physically sick. One cadet, in particular, kept getting signaled out. His hair was a little longer, and the force around him seemed to bruise and cry but was built up with the same stern rigidity that the other clones were — however, the older clones, not the younger ones.

He watched silently as the shooting practice continued, turning away and wondering what he had become. His brother wanted nothing to do with him, which was more devastating the more he thought about it.

He only managed about half an afternoon of moping, when, late into the ships night-cycle, it exploded. Rushing to the bridge, he saw both Killian and Windu arguing.

“What the hell happened?” He stormed across the bridge, ignoring Windu’s look of surprise at his sudden appearance.

“An assassin!” Killian shouted, “they’ve crippled the main reactor!

“Assassins?” The ship lurched horribly, “fine; we need to get the cadets out of here! The ship’s going down!”

Over the klaxon, Killian argued. “I not abandoning my ship!”

“We don’t have time for that sort of sentiment,” Anakin snarled, the Force writhed around the ship, and he knew it was doomed. “This ship isn’t going to make a solid landing, Admiral Killian. Get to the escape pods.”

“Skywalker, get the cadets to the escape pods,” Windu ordered, “order a blanket evacuation.”

“Right,” he rushed to the communication channel.

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Boba Fett glanced at the ceiling as he rushed down the hall. “This is General Skywalker, make your way immediately to the escape pods. This ship is going down! Troopers, protect the cadet. This is an
order for a general evacuation.”

Destroying the reactor was exactly what he wanted. His attempt to assassinate Windu had failed, and the only way to cover his tracks was to escape. It was entirely accidental when he got caught up in a group of cadets escaping.

“Groups of four, groups of four, take pods one and two. Rendezvous coordinates with the other pods at a safe distance from the cruiser. See you at rendezvous Mark 6.” They climbed obediently into their pods, and Boba felt sick and bitter when the clone trooper looked seriously at them. “This is the moment, men. Make it yours.” An ugly thought welled up as the pod was jettisoned, and he slammed the button to destroy a flap.

Panic ensued, but just out the viewport, he could see a hint of Slave 1. He waited alongside the other clones as the hatch opened and Aurra Sing stepped through, looking as menacing and evil as usual. “Well, you boys look lost. Job well done, Boba.”

The praise should have made him feel good, or proud like when his dad used to praise him. Except it only made him feel sick.

“His name’s not Boba,” another cadet stepped up, “he’s Lucky.”

“Lucky?” Sing laughed, “that’s a good one.” The other cadets muttered, surprise sweeping through the room. “I wasn’t expecting you to bring friends along.”

“You’re with her?” The betrayal almost stung.

“I couldn’t help it, Aurra,” he said, definitely not whining. “What are you going to do with them?”

“What do you think?”

“Let them go?”

“They’re living witnesses, honey.”

“That was never part of the plan!” He exclaimed, “I just wanted to kill the Jedi that murdered my father.”

“Well, that will have to wait. Grow up. You’ll get your revenge in time.” The others stared at him. He could feel their anger burning in the back of his throat. “Now get on board. We have to get out of here. Or, you can stay with your friends.” She waved frantically, “who I’m going to jettison into the unknown. That would be poetic.

He closed his eyes, torn and turned slightly. “I’m sorry.” He stepped through the airlock.

“Traitor,” someone hissed, and the door hissed shut behind them.

“Do it,” Sing hissed in his ear, and Boba slapped the release button before he could talk himself out of it.

Anakin scanned the surroundings with the Force and with radar. A pod was missing, and the cadets were either dead or dying. He couldn’t help but worry, and his fingers drummed nervously against the stick as Artoo whistled at him.

“I know, Artoo,” he replied, “I’m worried too. They could be anywhere.” He paused and felt
something terrified and scared. Several somethings and they were clustered closer together.
Switching on his searchlight, he followed it until the small pod appeared in his viewport. “Master
Windu, I’ve found them! I can’t raise them on the comms. I think their communications unit is
damaged!” He maneuvered his ship, so he wasn’t blinding the young clones, and waved. They
waved back, looking unimaginably serious.

He almost managed a grin this time.

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Admiral Killian and the two clone troopers didn’t come around for several minutes after they were
stunned and tied up. They seemed alright, besides a few dents and scratches, and Boba wondered
why they had bothered going down with the ship in the first place. They were the only surviving
crewmembers, which was fitting because the bridge was the most heavily fortified area on a star
destroyer.

He only wanted to kill Windu. To get revenge on the man who murdered his father. He hadn’t meant
to hurt so many other people. He really hadn’t. The other kids, the ones who looked just like him
The clone troopers, the men who had faces that he’d grow into.

Clones were everywhere; they patrolled the streets and the skies. They were all one and the same.
All of them by-products of Jango Fett and he was…one of them. They called each other brother.
What he a brother? There were so many of them and only one of him.

“Boba?” Aurra’s voice echoed from behind him, and he turned to see a replica of his father’s helmet.
“The explosives are all set. Take a look, honey.” She held the underside of the helmet his way, and
he noted the professional work. “It’ll set off all of them when the Jedi pick it up.”

“It’s good work,” he said, and wondered what his father would think. What Jango would think.

“It is good to work,” she smirked and tugged on his sleeve. “I have to say. I thought I’d lose you in a
mix of the other babies. Might end up bringing the wrong one home.”

“I have the longest hair,” Boba shoved her hand away, furious. “You can’t get me mixed up.”

“I don’t know. You seemed so comfortable with your little brothers,” she started up the remains of
the star destroyer, Boba hot on her heels.

“They aren’t my brothers!” He snapped, “I’m the only one like me!”

“You’re identical to millions of other people roaming the galaxy,” she gestured at the smokey sky,
and the burning remains of the ship.

“But they aren’t my brothers!” Boba shouted. “I’m not their brother!”

“You’re all one in the same,” she waved him off, ignoring his protests and he stewed, furiously.

They weren’t his siblings, and they weren’t like him. They didn’t deserve to call Jango ‘Father’.
They didn’t deserve to call him brother. No one else had been held up by Jango. No one else had
been tucked into bed by him, being told the stories of Mandalore and its days of glory and the wars
with the Jedi. The other clones had been cuddled when they’d come down with the Kamino bug.
None of them had helped him repair Slave 1, fix his armor, or watch him prepare a meal. None of the
other clones had listened to him on the comm, wishing him goodnight when he was half a galaxy
away or had the old recordings of his father training him.
Boba Fett was Jango’s only son. None of the other clones counted.

If Aurra was confused as to why he wasn’t arguing still, she didn’t say anything. They set up the explosive of the trap in the remains of the bridge and retreated just in time for the prisoners to wake up.

All three of them gaped at the sight of Boba standing beside the bounty hunters. He was glad that they’d take the time to gag them because he wasn’t sure he’d be able to handle the accusations of betrayal right now.

It wasn’t a betrayal. This was just business.

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“None of this is making any sense,” Anakin surveyed the damage, “there would have been a command crew left onboard to try and land this ship. Admiral Killian and at least three navigational officers.”

“Commander Pond stayed as well,” they spread out, each searching the damaged portions of the ships until a beep from Artoo pulled him over.

“What did you find, little guy?” He was drawn up painfully short by the sight of a dead trooper. His limbs were splayed at awkward angles. “Oh.” Mace pushed past him and rolled him onto his back. There was a mangled hole in his chest.

“This man didn’t die in the crash,” Mace said, “he was executed.” He nodded to another body. “They both were. We know the assassins were after me. Perhaps they returned to the crash to look for my body. We need to get the bridge to look for Admiral Killian and the others. Send the droids to scan for any survivors down here. Maybe the killer missed one.”

Artoo beeped unhappily at him, and Anakin patted his dome. “I know there’s a lot of interference, but do your best.”

“Skywalker!” Mace shouted, and he grimaced as he straightened. Together they made it to the bridge, finding it as damaged and ruined as much as the rest of the ship — no sign of Killian or any troopers that weren’t dead. “He’s dead, executed like the others.”

“I don’t see any sign of Admiral Killian,” Anakin looked around and felt nauseous.

“Right,” Mace activated his communicator. “Captain, there’s no sign of life anywhere. I’m afraid Admiral Killian and Commander Ponds are lost. Take the survivors back to the hospital station. We’ll meet you there. Mace out.”

Anakin glanced around some more, his attention caught by a helmet sitting, perfectly intact, on the edge of a twisted beam. Blue, black, and silver, “is that a Mandalorian helmet?” He asked, moving closer. They were rare off of Mandalore, and if there were members of Death Watch trying to kill Windu, then they were all in trouble. “What is that doing here?”

“Clone Cadets,” he heard Mace mutter, and then the Force shivered. “Jango Fett. Anakin set his hands on the helmet, intrigued and intent on finding clues. “Boba? ANAKIN! NO! DROP IT!” Something strong curled around Anakin, yanking him back and pulling him under cover as the bridge exploded around them.

For several minutes there was nothing but pain and terror. His entire body protesting the strain and the weight of the beams on top of him. He shook his head to trying and clear the ringing that
bounced around his rattled brain.

“Oh, Force!” It was a miracle; his prosthetic was still intact. He heard beeping and glanced up to see Artoo staring down at him, buzzing. The droid rolled forward, buzzing some more. A second later the remainder of the bridge rattled, threatening to collapse even further. “Artoo! Don’t! I’m afraid the rest of the bridge will collapse. I need you to go back to the fighters and call the temple for help. Do you understand?” His ever faithful friend wooed. “Go on, Artoo. Go get help.” The world flickered around him, and he passed out.

He didn’t wake up until Mace Windu shouted his name.

“Skywalker! Skywalker!”

“Huh?” He couldn’t move, only managing to tilt his head a bit. “What?”

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah, except I can’t move,” he slurred, “but don’t worry. Artoo is getting help.” He watched Mace try to lift the beams off with the Force, only yo cause more rattling and an enormous chunk of the bridge to fall inward. The Jedi Master pushed it away, only one had free.

“Skywalker?”

“Yeah?”

Explosions rattled around them, the rest of the ship disintegrating. Mace coughed a few times and sighed. After a moment the remains of the helmet rushed to his hands.

“Who’s helmet is that anyway?”

“It belongs to a bounty hunter I killed on Geonosis, Jango Fett.”

“You mean the clone template?”

“Yes, strangely enough, he had a son. Or at least, a clone he regarded as a son. His name is Boba Fett.”

“I remember now, Obi-Wan listed him in his report.”

“Boba was on Geonosis when he watched as I killed his father.”

“That would complicate things.” There was a note of regret in the Jedi Master’s voice as he stared at the helmet. The rumbling and explosions got louder.

“Your droid seems to have failed in delivering the message.”

“Artoo will come through!” Anakin strained to hear the rumble to drop ships. “He will.” The pain flooded his mind, and Anakin’s vision whitened out. Several million sensations flooded his brain, worsening and stacking on each other. He could almost feel Ahsoka. Smoke flooded the bridge, and he could almost see the next few minutes of both Mace and Anakin being crushed and their lungs inhaling toxic fumes until the cause of their death was confused.

The next thing he knew, he was seized by strong arms, and the beams were moving. In a few furious, terrifying minutes the world became unstable around them, and he could feel himself falling.

“Master?” He eyes shot open to see Ahsoka, Plo Koon, and a dozen clone troopers. “Master!”
“Ahsoka?” He smiled weakly.

“Some pretty serious burns,” she smacked his leg, “but nothing a night in the bacta tank can’t fix. “

“Ow,” he hissed as pain radiated up his spine, “ow.”

“Sorry.”

Mace sat up, “come here droid.” Artoo rolled over, beeping. “I can see why your master trusts you, little one, good job.” Anakin refused to admit to feeling jealous of Artoo when he rolled back to Anakin.

“Huh, that’s definitely more praise than I ever get.” He let his hand fall off the stretcher, patting ARtoo when he rolled by.

“Hmm,” Mace glowered at him and laid back down.

Several Days Later

Boba Fett considered the old weequay that Aurra had just finished making out. It was a little gross, considering the fact that Aurra had just helped him space a clone trooper and had a ship full of hostages, and the fact that Hondo was so much older than she was

Hondo was considering him right back. “Not mine, I take it?”

What did that mean?

“No, part of my crew,” Aurra pulled him forward, her grip on his shoulder almost too tight. “He’s Jango’s son.” She emphasized the last word.

“Ohh,” Hondo considered him some more, now almost pitying. Boba looked away, glowering.

“Yes, yes,” Hondo knelt in front of him. “Sorry about your father. He was a friend and an honorable man.”

Cassis growled, and Aurra scoffed, “and this is Cassis. He’s getting off here.”

Boba glowered down at the dirt below his feet, ignoring when the adult spoke more and how Hondo seemed to laugh so carelessly. It was only after Cassis and Aurra started after the laughing pirate, did he follow. Getting a drink in a pirates lair probably wasn’t the smartest. Boba jerked away from the fighting bugs and followed them through the door.

There were dozens of people wandering between tables and hanging out at the bar. Women and men of all species dancing on top of tables and beside a band on a stage. Smoke, acrid and scented mixed through the air. And he was amazed. Sure, he knew that this stuff existed, but Jango had never let him see it. He reached mindlessly for the cup, glowering when Aurra knocked his hand away.

“No, Boba,” she picked it up and sipped. He crossed his arms, glowering.

“So,” Hondo said, “I hear there’s a down Republic cruiser on Vanquor. You’re handiwork?”

“I’d never take credit for that,” she smirked, “but we saw it. Crawling with Republic troops. I’d steer clear of it for a while.”

“I appreciate the advice,” Hondo finished off the last of his drink and turned to Boba. “So, Boba, what is it like working with Aurra?”
“It’s alright, I guess.” He swallowed hard, trying to avoid coughing in the terrible air. “Um, hard, like you said.”

“Yes, yes! That reminds me of a job we pulled! Do you remember that?” Hondo asked, waving at Aurra. She blinked, coming back to herself, clearly not have been listening.

“Oh, yes. Excuse me.” She pulled her blaster from her pocket and turned toward their former partner. “Cassis!”

He turned around, and Aurra put a blaster bolt dead in the center of his heart. Silence fell over the bar, Boba gasped, inching back and staring. No preamble, no remorse, Aurra smirked and tucked her blaster back into her holster. Laughter erupted a moment later.

“Hey, hey! Someone scrape that guy off the floor!” He turned back to his drink, chuckling. Boba gaped at them, horror welling up in his chest. There was nothing honorable about that! That was cold-blooded murder!

“We’ve uncovered evidence of Aurra Sing on Florrum,” Ahsoka glanced at the council members and then at her master. Anakin was dressed, not in his battle armor, but in the regular robes that they wore around the temple. She hadn’t seen him look this soft and relaxed since his evaluation. Remember it made her lips purse and she scowled at the floor. “Along with Hondo Ohnaka and Boba Fett.”

“Good,” Mace Windu straightened up a bit, wincing. For all of his mastery, he seemed to have a much worse reaction to lesser injuries. It was Anakin who had suffered more broken bones and a severe concussion, but he was standing up. “Thank you for your work, Master Plo Koon.”

“The hostages will need to be rescued,” Obi-Wan said, ignoring Anakin and Ahsoka completely and focusing on Windu. “And while they demand you to be there, I would advise against it.”

“Agreed,” Mundi said, “Plo Koon, I am sure you can succeed in capturing Boba Fett as well as freeing the hostages.”

“Yes,” Plo set a hand on her shoulder, “we can certainly do this. I believe it would be best for you both to rest and recover.”

“I hate to sit this one out,” Mace nodded, “but the boy has nearly killed me a few times. I’d rather not risk this again.”

“Hmmm,” Yoda considered them, “revenge against the Jedi…concerning this is. More dislike and hate for us. Contain this, Master Plo Koon, quickly.”

“You know, young Boba,” Hondo’s voice seemed to come from nowhere. Shocking the young clone from his brooding. He nearly fell off the roof, only to be held down by Hondo’s grip on his shirt. “Ah, sorry to startle you. I hope you’re alright.”

“I’m fine,” he shook of Hondo’s hand and brushed down his jacket. “What do you want?”

“The stars of Florrum are beautiful,” Hondo said, ignoring him and staring at the sky. “We aren’t like
those big planets. Not enough pollution in the air to ruin our view.”

“What do you want, Hondo?”

“Your father,” Boba crossed his arms, scowling. “Was the most fearsome bounty hunter of his time. In the galaxy, he was known and feared! No one crossed him!”

“The Jedi did,” Baba answered, scowling. “Mace Windu murdered him!”

“Yes,” Hondo paused, humming. “He did kill him. A terrible tragedy, criminals and pirates across the galaxy lost their greatest member!”

“What do you want?” He demanded, and the pirate nodded.

“When your father worked with people like Sing.” He said slowly, “he knew there were many things they could do for each other. Still, my young friend, he knew that he was himself and that no one was going to make him change.”

“So?” Jango hadn’t really discussed what had happened on some of his jobs, but there were some he’d returned from and spent an entire evening just holding Boba.

“Don’t let Sing turn you into something you aren’t ready to be,” Hondo told him plainly. “You have the opportunity to be the greatest of us all, and you could be like her, but you do not want to be. You want to be Boba Fett, son of Jango Fett.”

“I am Boba Fett,” he said crossly, “son of Jango Fett. No one is going to ever change that. I’m going to kill the Jedi that killed my father and then.”

“And then?”

“And then what?”

“Exactly? What are you going to do? Where will you go next? What will you do next? Will you go live peacefully? Will you go fight?”

“I… I don’t know. I have to kill him first.”

“Huh,” Hondo made a noise of agreement and seemed noncommittal. “Then you have something to think about.”

“Hey!” Both turned around to see Aurra smirking at them, holding a string of things that looked like military ranks. “Come on! I’ve got the hostages set up. It’s time to send a holo to the Jedi.”

“Right,” Boba stood, glowering at the older man and following Sing toward Slave 1. “Let’s do this.”

“Master Plo,” Ahsoka turned her chair away from the viewport, turning to Kel-dor, “I have a question.”

“Very well,” he waved her ahead, and she coughed into her fist first. “What would you like to ask?”

“Do you think… do you think that Anakin is a good master?”

“Anakin?”
“A good teacher too?” She asked earnestly when he seemed surprised, “the last few months have been horrible! Everything’s gone wrong! Ever since he was kidnapped by the pirates when they were trying to pick up Dooku! He spent weeks in prison! Weeks in prison! He was hurt! They… YOU hurt him too! You’re the council! You’re supposed to help people! Supposed to help Jedi! And you just hurt him! It isn’t fair! He’s been trying and working so hard! He is a good teacher!”

“Ahsoka.”

“He is! I’m lightyears ahead of most of my clan-mates! I’m already a commander! I gone on a lot of successful missions! He talks to me! He listens to me! Sometimes he gets angry, but that’s not even bad! He’s just!”

“Ahsoka!”

“And he takes me out places too! We went to a museum not too long ago! I mean! I wasn’t even supposed to be his padawan! I was about to wash out! He wasn’t given any of the lessons on how to teach!”

“AHSOKA!” This time, instead of just yelling, he made the force amplify his intent. The end result was akin to a shout in her brain. Ahsoka fell silent, a little stunned. “It seems,” he continued placidly, “that you have already made up your mind.”

“Well!” She gestured hopelessly.

“Your master seems to be well versed in many respects, but he fails in many others.” He paused when Ahsoka turned away, glaring at the screens. “If he were truly great then he would not have been Evaluated.”

“He did a good job!” She shouted, “you guys took it out on him! You just don’t want to admit that you suck!”

“Ahsoka!”

“Listen to me! I watched it! I know what happened! The council didn’t want to admit to its failure! You just wanted to go ahead and blame it all on him! Because the council doesn’t like him!”

“Ahsoka,” Plo folded his hand on his lap, “that is not the case.”

“Yeah right,” she rolled her eyes, “he trusted the council and they…you pinned the blame on him! I bet that if someone hadn’t tried to kill Master Windu, then you would have evaluated me for what happened on Mandalore!”

“No, Little ‘Soka, no we.”

“Yeah, you would!” She stomped her foot against the metal floor. “How could I have stopped that whole thing! I was there with Master Kenobi! If anyone should be evaluated, it should be him! He’s the one who has been arrested! He’s the real criminal! He lost Mandalore!”

“Ahsoka.” He tried to sit up but fell back when she turned a scowl on him.

“One reason! I want one good reason why you evaluated my master! A real reason!”

Plo Loon shook his head and stood up, he left the cockpit, and Ahsoka glowered balefully at the star-lines as she tried not to cry.
Hondo watched the approaching Jedi ship and grimaced. Sing and Boba had left already, taking their hostages away. He hoped that they had left Florrum, but they probably hadn’t. Sing was going to try and get him back for not helping with the entire mess.

There was only so much he could do, really only so much he wanted to do. He was a great believer in the idea that people built their own futures.

He only mustered up a weak smile when the kel-dor and his favorite Jedi padawan stepped down from the ship.

“Welcome!” He boasted, and the ship was quiet. “Welcome, my friends, back to my home.” Unlike in times past, Tano did not speak. She only glowered at him and then at the surrounding landscape. It was emptier than usual, as his regulars had chosen to wait in the privacy and safety of their ships. “I assume you are after my young friends?”

“You are correct,” Plo Koon stared at him keenly. Their past interactions hadn’t been very peaceful, or bloodless.

“They are inside, waiting,” Hondo fell into step beside him.

“You’re being helpful.” Master Plo Koon observed, not without a touch of wry humor. Hondo almost smirked too.

“That is so you know that I have nothing to do with this.”

“You’ve taken hostages before,” Ahsoka told him, “you’ve taken my master hostage.” Hondo chuckled and shrugged when she set a threatening hand down on her lightsaber.

“I am in the business of good business.” He told her, “revenger is never good business.”

“I’ll bet.” Ahsoka griped.

Anakin waited as the scanner beeped one last time and withdrew. Dr. Bant leaned over him, and prodded his torso. “You are almost fully recovered, Knight Skywalker,” she told him, and straightened. “But I’d like to keep you around the temple a few more days for observation.”

“Observation?” He propped himself up on his elbow, and watched as Master Bant bustled to the work station. “For what?”

“For observation, Knight Skywalker,” she said testily, and he swallowed hard as he remembered that she was an old friend of Obi-Wan’s. “That is all. You’re off duty at the moment.” Which meant he wanted to visit his wife. “And recovering from nearly being crushed by a star destroyer.”

“Well, yes.”

“Daily check-ups,” she told him, “sleep, recover, and don’t forget to eat regular and proper amounts.”

“Yes, Master Bant,” he swung his legs of the observation table and squinted his eyes shut against the glare of bright white, lights It was too bright in here, like always. Plain, surgical white that gave him headache everytime he visited. He wanted to vomit. “I’ll be back tomorrow.” She didn’t give him an
answer, and Anakin staggered back toward his quarters.

They were a bit stale from having been empty for so long. His tools and trinkets all gathering dust in his absence. He brushed off his pillow, turning it over. The blankets were likewise dusty, but he snapped them a few times to clear them out enough to sleep in. Under them, he found a few missing tools. And for some reason, a letter.

Genuine paper, the stuff made from wood pulp and in clean pressed sheets that were so expensive and extravagant that Padme hardly ever bought them. He paused and took off his boots and most of his clothes before sliding into bed and sighing a little bit as he felt the stresses and worries of the day melt away a bit. He would rather be sleeping with his wife.

Once wrapped in a cocoon of blankets, Anakin turned it over and blinked a few times to see that it was from Captain Rex.

Captain Rex who had been captured when Anakin had. The messy campaign on the mining colony that had ended in such disaster, honestly until this point, Anakin hadn’t had a second to think about. His faithful, ever-present captain was a POW. Though, judging by the paper, pretty well taken care of.

“General Skywalker,” it began, “we’re alright here. I know that you must be worried, but you don’t need to be.”

He hadn’t actually been worried, and now he felt a bit guilty.

“There isn’t much I can tell you without the censors chopping up my letter, but the weather’s fair here. Plenty of space for all of us. I’m the representative for all of my brothers. The seppies tend to leave us alone, as long as we’re out of sight and out of mind. Kix is here too, getting some real doctor information. So far there have been about 43 escape attempts this month and we’re all hoping that one of them might work.” Here a red pen had scribbled in the margins of the page, sloppy and slanted handwriting that took him a moment to read. “None of them will.” Anakin scowled and continued reading. Rex didn’t say much, besides wishing him well and hoping that the case around Obi-Wan would clear up soon.

Rex wasn’t going to try and escape. His attention would be on his brothers and making sure that the Separatists didn’t mistreat them. There were thousands of captured clones. Anakin had seen CIS holos and the reports from the council. Videos and pictures of the de-armored soldiers being lead off in neat rows to transport ships. The fight had changed for Rex had changed, and Anakin was a little relieved.

So far, with his own experiences with the Separatists, they did treat prisoners well. POW’s at least, and he’d been one for a while. Obi-Wan was a different matter, he’d been sent to the Citadel, a prisoner designed for for Jedi.

He was pulled from his musing when his comm unit beeped. It was a number he recognized too. From the chancellor’s office, and it was probably Palpatine calling.

“Not today,” he let the beeping run off until the call was automatically disconnected. He didn’t care enough to try. Anakin rolled over, sneezing violently when he pulled the dusty blankets over his head. He ignored the next several attempts to reach him, eventually turning the entire thing off.

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Aurra Sing was waiting in the bar, sipping lazily from a mug and watching them through half-lidded eyes. Boba was standing beside her, a blaster in his hands and scowling furiously.

“Where’s Windu?” He demanded, scanning the space behind him.

“He’s not coming,” Ahsoka told him, lifting her saber. “End of the line.”

“I don’t think so, sweetie.” Aurra still hadn’t bothered to look at her. “Because you’re still going to pay us.”

“We have the other hostages,” Boba announced, tensing with his blaster.

“And I’m going to kill them if you don’t pay us.” Sing turned around, casually waving drink. Ahsoka’s blood boiled. “I’m prepared to kill you, and the hostages to get what Boba wants.”

“You are not!” She shouted, and chaos descended as Boba fired, reflexively pulling the trigger when Ahsoka’s saber blazed to life. To her surprise, Sing didn’t stick around. She fired off a few shots, and sprang for the back door in the confusion.

Ahsoka gave chase, propelled by her hatred for the bounty hunter and the fear for the hostages. She didn’t turn around to see Boba firing at Plo Koon.

Bolts the experienced Jedi-Master blocked with ease, until Boba skittered around the room. He’d been trained by the best bounty hunter in the galaxy, and lasted longer against the Jedi than most. It wasn’t too soon that Plo yanked his blaster away with the Force, and dragged the yelling ten-year-old across the bar and into his arms.

“AURRA! HELP!” But she was already gone, pursued through door by Ahsoka. “AURRA! DON’T LEAVE ME!” He stilled against the Jedi when the door swung open and shut by the breeze with no sign of his partner. “NOOOOOO!”

“The hostages!” Plo knelt down, whirling the young clone around in a practice motion as he a knelt in front of him. “Where are they?” Boba stared at the ground, looking numb. “If you do not tell us where they are, they are going to die! Innocent men!”

“She left me,” Boba whispered, unable to look at the Jedi. The blaster fell from nerveless fingers. “She left me.”

“Boba! The hostages!” Plo shook him again, and Boba wagged his head from side to side.

“I won’t tell you!” He cried. “I won’t!” He couldn’t help it as the Jedi stood, and pulled him from the bar. Outside, Hondo and several compatriots were lounging around and smoking. Plo spoke before he could.

“He will not reveal the location of the hostages. I thought you might talk some sense into him.”

Boba felt his heart stutter as Hondo’s expression turned sympathetic and horribly understanding. It made Boba want to punch him in the face.


“Why should I help anyone?” Boba shouted, yanking himself away from Boba. “I don’t have anyone!”
“It is the honorable thing to do, young Boba. It is what your father would have wanted.”

“You don’t know that!” Boba shrieked, “he’s dead! The Jedi killed him!”

“Boba,” for the first time Hondo’s voice was stern. “Tell him.”

Anakin hadn’t formally been invited to meet the returning Jedi; as if that ever stopped him. He hung back, watching as they disembarked. The small, disheveled clone from the week previous was being escorted by four troopers and Ahsoka. He looked small, only 10, and overwhelmed. There were no tear-tracks down his face though, even as he stared out at the temple the the surrounding city.

He was strong, and Anakin wondered what the hell they were going to do.

The group halted as Mace Windu approached, and then knelt in front of Boba. A moment of silence passed before the boy spoke up.

“I see now that I’ve done terrible things. But you started when you murdered my father!” The cold expression didn’t belong there, “I’ll never forgive you!”

Mace only stared at him, humming a bit before standing upright. “Take him away,” he ordered, and the troopers started forward. Mace glanced at Anakin. “Thoughts?”

“It’s good to see him put away,” Anakin lied, watching the ten-year-old be escorted away. He intercepted Ahsoka before she could leave, tucking her into his side and draping part of his cloak over her. “Snips.”

“Skyguy? Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” he said, watching the procession move out of view. “Listen, I need you to cover for me.”

“Okay?”

“If my comm rings and it’s the chancellor, just tell him that I’m meditating.”

“You’re avoiding calls from the chancellor?”

“Yes,” Anakin patted her shoulder, “can’t wait to hear about your mission. I’ll be back soon.” He ducked out of the way, making sure that no one was watching him, and blended in with the crowds.

Boba stared at his feet, dangling a few inches over the metal floor, and wondered what the hell had happened. None of his father’s jobs had gone wrong like this. Jango had been perfect, he had fought to the last and come home every time.

His head jerked up as the transport jolted.

“What the?” A trooper stood as the door opened and a tall mercenary stepped through. He was fast and dangerous and managed to beat the clones down in a few minutes. Boba jerked away as the mercenary, his face was covered with black cloth, knelt in front of him and began to undo his chain.

“Who are you?”

“I owe your father a favor,” the man replied, and the chains fell away. He pulled Boba out of the
“You used to work with him?”

“I was,” the man paused, looking out of the door and it turned out to be at the traffic of the city. They were in mid-flight, thousands of meters above any solid surface. Boba yelped, holding onto the stranger as he leaped. They were mid-air for several breathless seconds, and then he was falling neatly into an open cockpit airspeeder. “I knew his work, not him.” They took off, sliding neatly into traffic as the cover began to whirr and slide over the speeder. It was the perfect escape. The man didn’t move the mask, and Boba glowered at him.

“Why would you help me?”

“You deserve better,” he answered, and the ship ducked out of traffic and between to buildings too close together. He parked on an open slot. “Look natural, kid.”

Boba knew how to do this. He climbed out and slipped his hand into the man’s as they hurried down the walk. Screaming sirens and wailing alarms followed a moment later.

“Did you steal that speeder?”

“Had to,” the mercenary answered, “no time. Come on!” Clone troopers appeared past the corner. Boba yelped as he was swept into long, strong arms. He clung to his rescuer as he jumped the gap between buildings, from one walkway to the other. Never before had he felt so small, even comparing this to the vague memories he had of being carted around like a toddler by some of the Kamino doctors. That mind-baffling ratio between kamino and human child had been weird, but understandable. They were different species, humans were smaller than Kamino, and they had always held in a vaguely clinical way. This mercenary was clutching him, holding him flush against a firm torso, and in the way that reminded Boba of his father. The way Jango would hold him when he was scared. He was safe.

Instinct overran every other sense. So instead of fighting back, or yelling, he held onto the stranger and let him run through the bowels of the city-planet until they were far down enough that even artificial light was hard to come by.

“Shhh.” Boba held his breath as the man ducked behind an enormous container and crouched down. He was still holding tightly to the clone, but was watching the section of the alley still visible. Clattering and shouting of clone troopers approached, and Boba buried his face against the man’s shoulder as he shook with breathless fear. “It’s okay.

He didn’t reply. He couldn’t reply for fear the troopers would find them. It wasn’t until the troopers passed did he feel safe enough to lift his head.

“Are they gone?”

“They’ll be back,” the strange promised, “be we’ll be far from here.”

“Where are we going? How did you know my dad? How did you know me?” He slid to the ground and grimaced at the gross sensation of stepping on muck. These walkways were older, not grates but solid duracrete. Shabby doors lined it, some business looking closed down, and ugly. Boba had never seen any place look so grimy and gross.

“I’m only here to help, Boba.” The stranger answered, but held his hand out for Boba to take. “I have friends who will get you off-planet and somewhere safe.”
“Where is safe?” Boba inched closer as they passed an old rodian sitting on a small box with a little disposable cup in front of him. The strange stopped in front of him.

“Is he in?”

“Hmm?” The rodian didn’t bother looking up, he seemed asleep. Credits dropped into the cup, and vanished almost as quickly. “He’s in.

“Thanks.” Boba stared at him, and then at the grimy interior of the building. It was a rundown mess, and sitting at the table was a man he didn’t recognize.

“What do you want?”

“I need him to be taken off-planet. Under the radar, no documents, no nothing.”

“Hmm,” the person straightened, and it was another weequay. “That’s expensive.”

“I’m calling in a favor,” the mercenary said, “he owes me.”

“Hmmmmm,” the weequay stared at Boba for a long minute before finally nodding. “Okay. Who is calling in the favor?” Boba jerked away as the man set a hand over his eyes. There was a muttered conversation, and the gloved hand fell away.

“You work for Hondo?” Boba asked, and the weequay shrugged.

“I’m a contractor pilot.” He grinned at the stranger, “but not as a good as a pilot as some.”

“I don’t…” Boba glanced up, the stranger knelt and he could see himself reflected back in the black glasses he wore. He still couldn’t see any details. “What’s going on?”

“You’ll be safe, Boba. You might want to take a break from bounty hunting.”

“But who are you? Why are you helping me?”

“I,” the mercenary paused, “they were going to take you to prison...Boba. Supermax prison. You’re ten! I...I may have been fighting your father and cohorts….a lot, but you don’t deserve it.”

“Supermax?”

“Yes,” the man nodded. “I’ve...let a lot of things slid...and I’ve things I’m not proud of, but I think if I’d let you go there then.” Boba could only stare, and he swallowed.

“I want revenge,” Boba hissed, “they murdered my father! They deserve it. They should be dead.”

“Vengeance is for another day,” the man told him, “when you can fight a Jedi properly.”

“Sing was going to help me!”

“Sing was going to betray you. She didn’t care about you, Boba. She isn’t that kind of person. You were bait!”

“I want to kill Mace Windu.”

“So do I,” the man admitted, “but another day.”

Boba simmered, and then jerked out a furious nod. “Where am I going?”
“I...can’t tell you that. It’s safe though. Don’t worry, if you don’t like then they’ll send you somewhere you will.”

“Okay,” Boba glanced at the weequay. The pilot grinned.

“I knew your father too! Good friends! Don’t worry about me, little Fett.”

“I have to go,” the mercenary stood with the same unnatural sort of grace he’d displayed the whole day. “Be safe, Boba.” He was out the door in a second, and Boba wasn’t sure what had happened.

Four days later he was meeting with Count Dooku and wondering how it had happened.